



How does Emotional Contagion Trait Affect Well-Being: The Mediating Role of Interpersonal Trust

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In today's society of highly dynamic communication, emotional contagion has become more frequent than ever and some people are more susceptible to others' emotions in their trait levels. How does emotional contagion affect our daily life, in particular well-being? To understand this question, an empirical survey study (N = 341) was conducted to investigate whether, how, and why emotional contagion trait is related to well-being outcomes (i.e., positive affect, negative affect, and self-esteem). The results revealed that people's emotional contagion trait was positively related to interpersonal trust which was, in turn, positively related to positive affect. Unexpectedly, however, interpersonal trust was positively related to negative affect and self-esteem. Interpersonal trust played a significant mediating role in the relationship between emotional contagion trait and well-being outcomes. This study contributes to the literature by extending our understanding of emotional contagion to its trait implication for well-being. Moreover, a nuanced mediating process was identified within an interpersonal perspective of trust.

Keywords: Emotional contagion trait, Well-being, Trust, Mediating effect

1 Introduction

Emotions are innate instincts of human beings. With the rapid development of technology and the increasingly diverse means of communication, emotions can bring about unprecedented influences to human life (Zhao & Liu, 2020). Nowadays, people

live in a highly emotional society (Serrano-Puche, 2016), surrounded by a large number of events and expressions related to emotions. In this context, it is not surprising to observe emotions as a hot topic in psychological research in recent years. In particular, the emotional contagion theory (ECT) provides a theoretical perspective for us to understand how emotions spread among people. The ECT posits that there is a tendency for humans to automatically mimic the demeanor of others, leading to emotional contagion and convergence with each other (Hatfield et al., 1993a). Emotional contagion is common and relevant to everyone's life, no matter in the relationship between leaders and their teams and subordinates (e.g., Cox et al., 2021), in the use of social media platforms in times of epidemics (e.g., Lu & Hong, 2022), or in the long-term marital relationships (e.g., Mazzuca et al., 2018). Importantly, there are noteworthy trait-level differences in individuals' tendency to experience emotional contagion, that is, the trait-level susceptibility to emotional contagion (Hatfield et al., 1993b; Bhullar, 2012).

2 Literature Review

Well-being is one of the most important topics in psychological research (Ren, 2006) and few will doubt that emotions represent core elements of well-being (Fredrickson, 2000). For example, Nguyen and Fredrickson (2017) have clearly stated in their book that positive emotions play an active role in the construction of well-being. Quoidbach (2010) also pointed out that our regulation of positive emotions determines people's well-being. Thus, the building of well-being is often a dynamic process closely related to emotions.

Humans are social animals. As technological innovations continue to revolutionize, social interactions between people have become more frequent, which has led to a more frequent spread of emotions. It is not difficult to imagine that the social transmission of emotions will also affect people's well-being. Previous research has found that emotional contagion plays an important role in the establishment of well-being (Xerri et al., 2023). It has also been suggested that the mechanism of emotional contagion is a vehicle for the transmission of well-being; in other words, the occurrence of emotional contagion enhances the transmission of positive emotions and thus enhances well-being (Simpson et al., 2023). However, at the same time, does the process of emotional contagion bring about more negative emotions, thus

weakening well-being? This prompted us to think about what kind of relationship exists between people's emotional contagion trait and their well-being.

As indicated by previous studies (e.g., Wei et al., 2023a), emotional contagion is embedded in the process of social (interpersonal) interaction. Therefore, it is necessary to consider the role of emotional contagion within the framework of social interaction. Ekman (1992, p.177) also mentioned in his own study that "Emotional expressions are crucial to the development and regulation of interpersonal relationships." In particular, interpersonal trust is an important component of interpersonal relationships and a key factor in maintaining and developing deep or intimate relationships (Kruglanski & Higgins, 2007; Kriz & Fang, 2003; Thagard, 2018).

The present study proposes the following hypothesis: emotional contagion trait is positively related to interpersonal trust (Hypothesis 1, H1). By definition, interpersonal trust emphasizes the extent to which individuals trust others and is an interpersonally-oriented psychological state (Larzelere & Huston, 1980; Simpson, 2007). Previous studies found that emotional contagion can positively influence interpersonal relationships (Wei et al., 2023b) and, as suggested, promote interpersonal trust. Individuals who are high in emotional contagion trait are more capable to pick up on emotional cues from the outside world, and thus are more inclined to establish a closer psychological connection, which in turn leads to interpersonal trust. Thus, H1 was proposed in that there is a positive relationship between emotional contagion and interpersonal trust.

Well-being is a positive psychological state experienced by individuals (World Health Organization, 2021), which includes multiple emotional-cognitive elements (Tov & Diener, 2009). Several studies have recorded a positive link between interpersonal trust and well-being (e.g., Helliwell & Wang, 2010; Jovanović, 2023; Tov & Diener, 2009). In this regard, this study proposes the following hypothesis: there is a positive relationship between interpersonal trust and well-being (Hypothesis 2, H2).

In summary, this study hypothesized that emotional contagion trait positively predict interpersonal trust, which in turn enhances well-being, and that interpersonal trust mediates the relationship between emotional contagion trait and well-being (Hypothesis 3, H3).

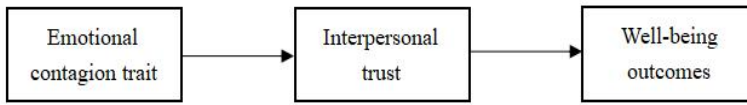


Fig. 1. Conceptual model

3 Method

3.1 Participants and Procedure

A total of 341 available cross-sectional survey data was collected from a questionnaire published on Sojump, a questionnaire website/platform in Mainland China. Participants are Chinese citizens, 48.97 percent of them are males and 51.03 percent of them are females; 55.72 percent of them are between the ages of 26 and 45; 90.62 percent of them possess university degrees or above; 82.99 percent of them are in employment; 48.09 percent of them spend more than five hours a day using the Internet. Participants first signed an informed consent form and were told that the study concerned daily experiences. In the survey, participants provided their socioeconomic information (i.e., age and gender) and then took measurements of emotional contagion trait, interpersonal trust, self-esteem and negative/positive affect. An inquiry done at the end of the survey showed that no participant surmised the actual research purpose.

3.2 Measures

Emotional Contagion Trait. Emotional contagion trait was measured by a thirteen-item scale developed and validated by Doherty (1997). A sample item is “Being with a happy person picks me up when I’m feeling down.” A 4-point Likert scale (1 “totally disagree” to 4 “totally agree”) is used. McDonald’s ω is 0.84 in the current study.

Interpersonal Trust. Interpersonal trust was measured by a nine-item scale developed and validated by Ding (2005). A sample item is “I believe that most netizens provide authentic information.” A 5-point Likert scale (1 “totally disagree” to 5 “totally agree”) is used. McDonald’s ω is 0.82 in the current study.

Self-esteem. Self-esteem was measured using eight items from a previous study Rosenberg (1979). A sample item is “I feel that I have a number of good qualities.” A 4-point Likert scale (1 “totally disagree” to 4 “totally agree”) is used. McDonald’s ω is 0.68 in the current study.

Negative/Positive Affect. Negative/positive affect was measured by a nineteen-item scale (nine items for negative affect and positive affect, respectively) developed and validated by Watson et al. (1988). A sample item for positive affect is “Proud.” A sample item for positive affect is “Upset.” A 5-point Likert scale (1 “totally disagree” to 4 “totally agree”) is used. McDonald’s ω is 0.94 for negative affect and 0.94 or positive affect, respectively, in the current study.

3.3 Statistical Analysis

Path analysis and mediation analysis were conducted for hypothesis test, using the package “lavaan” (0.6-7) at R 4.0.2.

4 Results

The correlation matrix descriptive statistics of all the measured variables are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Matrix.

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Agea	3.22	0.69	—					
2. Genderb	1.51	0.50	−.03	—				
3.Emotional contagion trait	2.71	0.44	.09	.23***	—			
4.Interpersonal trust	2.92	0.57	.03	−.11*	.32***	—		

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
5. Self-esteem	2.88	0.36	-.04	.04	-.01	-.11*	—	
6. Negative affect	2.46	0.75	.08	-.03	.23***	.27** *	-.36* **	—
7. Positive affect	3.15	0.67	-.10	.04	.30***	.26** *	.33** *	.23* **

Note. a 0 - 14 = 1, 15 - 25 = 2, 26 - 45 = 3, 46 - 60 = 4, 60 - = 5. b male = 1, female = 2. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Controlling for age and gender, path analysis (bootstrapped samples = 5000) revealed that: 1) Emotional contagion trait is positively related to interpersonal trust ($b = .48$, $p < .001$), thus supporting H1; 2) Interpersonal trust is positively related to positive affect ($b = .21$, $p = .007$), but unexpectedly, is positively related to negative affect ($b = .28$, $p < .001$) and negatively related to self-esteem ($b = -.07$, $p = .043$), thus only partially supporting H2; and 3) Interpersonal trust plays a mediating role in the relationship between emotional contagion trait and well-being outcomes including positive affect (mediating effect = .099, 95% CI = [.033, .199]), negative affect (mediating effect = .132, 95% CI = [.055, .241]), and self-esteem (mediating effect = -.035, 95% CI = [-.076, -.003]), thus supporting H3.

5 Discussion

This study investigates the relationship between emotional contagion trait and well-being, as well as the role that interpersonal trust plays in it. As revealed, there was a positive relationship between emotional contagion and interpersonal trust, supporting H1. Unexpectedly, the second hypothesis, that there is a positive correlation between interpersonal trust and well-being, was only partially confirmed: on the one hand, there was a positive correlation between interpersonal trust and both positive and negative emotions; on the other hand, interpersonal trust showed a negative correlation with self-esteem. By further reviewing the relevant existing literature, the results may imply: (1) Positive and negative emotions are not complete opposites, which is consistent with previous research (e.g., An et al., 2017;

Dejonckheere, 2020). (2) Cultural differences may have had an impact. For example, Miyamoto et al. (2014) found that Asians are more likely to perceive positive effects in negative emotions compared to Europeans and Americans. (3) The unexpected negative consequences of interpersonal trust may indicate a two-sided nature of interpersonal trust, i.e., interpersonal trust may lead to both positive and negative outcomes, depending on the specific interpersonal context (e.g., the quality of the interpersonal exchange relationship, etc.). This warrants further exploration.

Meanwhile, the hypothesis that interpersonal trust mediates the relationship between emotionally contagious traits and well-being (H3) was confirmed. This suggests that emotional contagion trait influences well-being as a process of interpersonal interaction. In other words, individuals with stronger emotionally contagious traits are more likely to trust others and reap the benefits of happiness. This then highlights the importance of understanding the process of emotional contagion from an interpersonal interaction perspective and provides new insights into how individuals develop well-being in social interactions.

This study has several theoretical implications. First, this paper expands the research regarding emotional contagion. Previous academic research on emotional contagion has focused on how it affects individuals' emotional and interpersonal interaction experiences (Herrando & Constantinides, 2021), but has lacked attention on individuals' health and well-being. By shifting the focus of research to individuals' well-being, the present study makes a theoretical contribution to expanding the research related to emotional contagion trait. Second, this study expands research regarding individual well-being. Based on the new research perspective of emotional contagion, this study explored how emotional contagion trait affects three key indicators of individual well-being, namely positive emotions, negative emotions, and self-esteem. This provides new insights for understanding individual well-being. Third, this study provides insight into the mechanisms underlying the association between emotionally contagious trait and individual well-being. By exploring the mediating role of interpersonal trust in the relationship between emotional contagion and well-being, this study provides an answer to the key question of "Why do emotionally contagious traits affect well-being" and emphasizes the importance of interpersonal interactions in the process of emotional contagion.

The practical significance of this study lies in: (1) It provides a reference for social media platforms and individuals to better handle and guide public opinion and create a healthy and positive online environment. Social media platforms and individuals

should be more alert to emotional information to avoid excessive emotional outbursts, which may lead to the transmission of false information and even the emergence of cyber violence. (2) Social media platforms should be reminded to strengthen the control of online identity authenticity. Given that emotional contagion can affect happiness through interpersonal trust, social media platforms should rationally use the real-name system of online identities to further improve the transparency and credibility of online information sources, so as to enhance the well-being of Internet users.

Some limitations in this study should be noted when generalizing its findings. First, the data collected in the current study are all from China. Thus, caution should be taken when generalizing the findings to other countries or regions. Meanwhile, future research can expand the sample scope to cover data from different countries and regions and use appropriate sample selection strategies, so as to improve the generalizability of the findings. Meanwhile, this study used a cross-sectional design, which has limitations in causal inference. Future studies could consider a longitudinal or experimental design and further test the main findings of this study.

6 Conclusion

This study explores the relationship between emotional contagion trait, interpersonal trust, and well-being. As revealed, there is a positive correlation between emotional contagion trait and interpersonal trust, indicating that individuals with stronger emotional contagion trait are more likely to trust others. Moreover, interpersonal trust mediates the relationship between emotional contagion trait and well-being, suggesting that emotional contagion trait affects well-being as a process of interpersonal interaction.

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