A Study of the Impact of Social Media on Family Structure Change

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Abstract: With the rapid development of Internet technology, social media has become an indispensable part of modern society. The popularization of social media has profoundly affected all aspects of family life, and traditional family structures and interaction patterns are facing unprecedented challenges and opportunities. The impact of social media on family structure is a complex process, which not only breaks down geographical boundaries to a certain extent and creates opportunities for family members to strengthen their ties with each other, but also reduces the number of face-to-face exchanges to a certain extent, which obviously affects the mode of communication and frequency of interaction of modern families. In such a context, it is of great theoretical and practical importance to study in depth the changing family structure in the era of social media. This study aims to explore and reveal the influence of social media on family power structure, boundary function and emotional identity from different perspectives through the questionnaire method, so as to grasp the law of change of family structure in the era of social media. Through this study, it can be found that the current development of social media plays a role in reshaping and negotiating boundaries, as well as changing and balancing the power structure of Chinese families.

Keywords: Family Structure, Social Media, Border Convergence.

1.   Introduction

1.1.   Background of the Study

China's Internet users reached 1.092 billion as of December 2023, with a 77.5% Internet penetration rate, according to the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC). The country has a large social media user base, with over 1 billion people actively using platforms like WeChat, QQ, and Microblogs. These platforms' functions are becoming more and more varied, permeating every aspect of people's daily lives. Global social media users are predicted by Statista to reach 5.84 billion by 2027, having surpassed 4.74 billion in 2023. With billions of users on platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and others, international social media has a profound effect on the spread of knowledge and cross-cultural interactions. The rapid development and widespread popularity of social media make it an important entry point for understanding contemporary social change.

The emergence of social media has provided people with convenient communication tools and diversified interaction platforms, reshaping interpersonal communication and social interaction patterns. Social media has, on the one hand, removed time and location barriers, enabling people to

stay in touch with friends and family wherever they are at any time. WeChat's voice and video call features, for instance, improve the intimacy and enable family members to communicate even when they live apart. On the other hand, social media have also spawned new social network structures and interaction methods. For example, the following and retweeting mechanisms of platforms such as Weibo have made the dissemination of information faster and more widespread, facilitating the establishment and maintenance of weak relationships. However, over-reliance on social media may also lead to a reduction in offline interactions, virtualization of interpersonal relationships, and even trigger loneliness and social anxiety, e.g., some family members are addicted to mobile phones and social media, thus neglecting face-to-face communication and emotional interactions and affecting the harmony of family relationships. In addition, the dissemination of information on social media platforms is also plagued by problems such as the difficulty of distinguishing truth from falsehood and information cocooning, which may have a negative impact on users' perceptions and behaviors.

The family is the basic unit of society and carries out important social functions. The traditional family structure usually refers to the nuclear family and the extended family, and its functions are mainly reflected in socialization, emotional support and economic security. The family is the first element in the socialization of an individual. Through the interaction and education of family members, individuals are able to acquire social norms, values and behavioral patterns. Families are a vital source of support for people when they are dealing with stress and difficulties since they offer their members emotional support as well as a sense of belonging. In addition, the family also undertakes the functions of economic cooperation and resource sharing to ensure the basic needs of family members. However, with socio-economic development and changes in cultural attitudes, the traditional family structure and functions are facing many challenges, such as the accelerated process of urbanization, the increased mobility of the population, which has led to the miniaturization of the family size, and the geographic distance between family members, which has made the family structure more diversified and complex.

The effects of social media on family life have increasingly come to the attention of academics in recent years. Numerous research studies have looked at how social media affects family conflict, closeness, and communication. While some studies have shown that social media use can strengthen family cohesion and encourage communication and information sharing, others have shown that it can also weaken intimacy, cause emotional detachment in family members, and even spark arguments. There are also some research results on the impact of social media on family power structure, boundary function and emotional identity, for example, some studies found that the use of social media may change the power relationship among family members, for example, adolescents gain more discourse power by mastering online technology and information; social media may also blur the boundaries of the family, for example, family members openly share their family privacy on social media, which leading to overexposure of family information, etc.

1.2. Research Significance

The purpose of this study is to investigate how social media usage affects changes in family structure—a topic with significant theoretical and practical ramifications. The popularity of social media has led to major changes in family structure and interaction patterns at the theoretical level; nevertheless, most studies that have been done so far have relied mostly on qualitative evaluations and lack large-scale quantitative data backing. This study fills this research gap through quantitative analyses and provides a new theoretical perspective for understanding the changes in family structure in the age of social media. Practically speaking, this study aids family members in comprehending the effects of social media on family life and provides guidance on responsible social media use to support the healthy growth of family ties. Furthermore, the study's findings can serve as a resource

for family education, family policy development, and social work services—all of which are crucial for preserving social stability and harmony within families.

1.3. Research Methodology

This study used the questionnaire method as the main means of data collection. The questionnaire design followed the principles of science and systematicity and contained four parts: attitudes and perceptions of privacy boundaries on social media, realities and perceptions of family identity and emotional connection, investigation of the effects of social media on family power dynamics and basic data about the participants. 256 genuine questionnaires were gathered from the distribution of the surveys via social media sites like WeChat, QQ, Weibo, and The Little Red Book of China. Following the collection of data, this study processed and analyzed the data using chi-square testing, descriptive statistical analysis, reliability and validity tests, and other statistical techniques to guarantee the dependability and accuracy of the research findings.

1.4. Research Framework

1.4.1. Conceptual Framework

This study constructs a conceptual framework that incorporates the following key elements:

1) Changes in family structure: analyzing how social media affects changes in family structure, including power structures and boundary functions.

2) The role of social media: to explore the role that social media plays in family life and how it changes the interactions between family members.

3) Individual-family interactions: examine how individual characteristics (e.g., age, gender, education level) affect social media use and its impact on family structure.

1.4.2. Analysis Framework

1) Descriptive analysis: descriptive statistics of the questionnaire data to understand the basic situation of the respondents and their social media use habits.

2) Analysis of variance: using methods such as the chi-square test to analyze differences in social media use and changes in family structure among different groups.

Through this framework, this study aims to provide a comprehensive perspective to understand how social media shapes various aspects of modern family life.

2. Literature Review

With the rise and popularity of social media, family communication patterns and intergenerational relationships have undergone significant changes, and many scholars at home and abroad have analyzed and researched topics such as changes in family structure and intergenerational communication in this context. In his study, scholar Lan Danya has explored in depth the influence of family structure on family communication patterns, pointing out that the type of family structure - nuclear, main, and composite - has a significant influence on the internal communication mechanism, direction of information flow, and communication topics have a significant impact [1]. Lan Danya's study highlights the inherent patterns of changes in family communication patterns and provides a new perspective for understanding family communication. Scholars Li Yanwen and Wu Fei's study, on the other hand, analyzed the two-way unreconstructed relationship between the media and the family from the perspective of mediatization theory. Through field observations and in-depth interviews, they reveal the process of 'domestication' of media technologies in the family, and how family members make personalized adaptations and adjustments to media technologies through

subjective choices and use strategies [2]. This study provides insights for understanding media use and control within the family. Yang Changzheng's study focuses on the impact of relational grouping structure in digital space on the reconfiguration of audience's social identity. Through questionnaire surveys and structural equation modelling analysis, Yang Changzheng found that bridging relationship interactivity, aggregating relationship extension and linking relationship looseness negatively affect audience social identity through trustworthiness boundaries and hierarchical diagnosis. In addition, emotional support and intergroup permeability have significant positive moderating effects on audience social identity through trust boundary and hierarchical diagnosis [3]. In scholar Zhang Mengyao's study, it is more focused on the impact of family communication on intergenerational relationships in the social media era. Through questionnaire surveys and in-depth interviews, she explored how the 'double connection' of family communication promotes equality and harmony in intergenerational relationships, and how family communication in virtual space bridges the intergenerational digital divide [4]. The use of digital platforms in family communication and its particular effect on intergenerational relationships are revealed by Zhang Mengyao's research. Scholar Huang Ying, on the other hand, explored how WeChat groups reconfigure the social structure and interaction of Chinese families through empirical research, and found that WeChat groups promote egalitarian communication among family members, enhance the sense of belonging and cohesion, and also reshape the collective memory and consciousness of the family. However, the study also noted that the older generation may feel marginalized due to the digital divide, suggesting that inequalities in technological access may affect harmony and communication within families [5]. Li Yufeng and Liu Yanhong's study, on the other hand, focused on the impact of media on intimate relationships in the countryside and found that social media has, to some extent, dissolved intimacy between couples of the older generation, while acting as a reconfiguring agent for the younger generation. This change may have led to an increase in divorce and family restructuring rates in rural societies, thus disrupting the traditional ecology of family harmony. The study emphasized the role of social media in rural society and also pointed out the impact on the traditional concept of marriage [6]. In the course of the research on how online communication affects family dynamics, foreign academic Robert V. K. noted that although social media strengthens relationships, it also raises privacy concerns. They make the case for a more complex interpretation of social media's place in families, pointing out that although technology can help with communication, it can also make disputes within the family worse [7]. However, Sarah E. L.'s mixed-methods research offers a different viewpoint, showing how social media can both improve and deteriorate family ties [8].

The above studies have examined the impact of social media on family structure change from various social and psychological perspectives, but there are still some research shortcomings. For example, most of the existing studies focus on qualitative analyses and lack large-scale quantitative data support, the sample selection may have limitations in terms of geographical and cultural backgrounds, and the negative impacts of social media are not sufficiently explored. Therefore, this study will focus on the above shortcomings and endeavor to fill the current research gaps.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Data Collection and Processing

This study was conducted mainly within China, with Chinese universal families as the target population, and the questionnaire survey method was used to explore the impact of social media on the structural changes of Chinese families.

With Chinese universal families as the target group, this study was mostly carried out in China. The impact of social media on the structural changes of Chinese families was investigated using the questionnaire survey method. The questionnaire survey method is a distribution and retrieval-based

scientific empirical research technique that makes use of questionnaire scale design for data analysis. With the help of an online survey conducted through social media sites including WeChat, QQ, Weibo, and The Little Red Book, 256 valid questionnaires were collected for this study, which created a series of questions to investigate the influence of social media on changes in family structure in China. The questionnaire is divided into four sections: the first part examines people's attitudes and perceptions of social media privacy boundaries; the second part looks at people's realities and perceptions of family identity and emotional connection in the social media age; the third part investigates how social media affects the power dynamics within families; and the fourth section includes basic data about the respondents, such as gender, age, education level, and family situation.

3.2. Research Hypotheses

1) Hypothesis 1: There is a significant effect of age on social media on the change of family privacy boundaries.

2) Hypothesis 2: There is a significant effect of educational qualification on social media on the change of family emotional ties and power structure.

4. Research Results

4.1. Reliability Test

Reliability examines the consistency of the questions in the scale. In this study, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used as the reliability analysis scale, as can be seen from the above table, the value of Cronbach's alpha is 0.973.Normally, Alpha coefficient is greater than 0.9 indicates excellent reliability, 0.8-0.9 indicates good reliability, 0.7-0.8 indicates average reliability, and 0.6-0.7 indicates acceptable reliability, whereas the reliability of this questionnaire reliability is greater than 0.9, which means that the reliability of this questionnaire is excellent and can be used as a reference basis for this study (Table 1).

Table 1: Questionnaire Reliability Test.

Cronbach's α coefficient	Standardized Cronbach'sα coefficient	Number of items	Sample size
0.973	0.973	18	256

The validity was analysed using KMO and Bartlett's test, the results of the KMO test showed a value of 0.979, while the results of the Bartlett's test of sphericity showed a significance p-value of <0.001, which presents significance at the level (Table 2).

Table 2: Questionnaire Validity Test.

KMO test and Bartlett's test		
KMO value		0.979
Bartlett's test of sphericity	Approximate chi-square	4604.941
	df	171
	P	0.000***
Note: ***, **, * represent 1%, 5% and 10% significance levels, respectively.		

Overall, the reliability and validity status of this questionnaire is good, and the data of the questionnaire can better reflect the reality of the impact of social media on family power structure, boundary function, and emotional identity.

4.2. Descriptive Analysis

A total of 256 valid questionnaires were returned, of which the age distribution of respondents aged 18-54 was relatively balanced, involving members of all ages in the research subject's family unit. In addition, the gender ratio of the respondents is balanced, and the level of education is comprehensive, which on the whole meets the requirements of the research subjects in this study (Table 3).

Table 3: Descriptive analysis of the questionnaire.

Name	Options	Frequency	Percentages(%)
Age	18-24	54	21.094
	25-34	62	24.219
	35-44	60	23.438
	45-54	61	23.828
	Over 55	19	7.422
Gender	Male	119	46.484
	Female	137	53.516
academic qualifications	Primary and below	11	4.297
	Junior High School	22	8.594
	High school (including junior college/technical school)	71	27.734
	College	80	31.25
	Undergraduate	63	24.609
	Postgraduate and above	9	3.516
	Total	256	100.000

4.3. Analysis of Chi-square Tests

Table 4: Questionnaire chi-square test.

Question	X²	P
Have you ever posted content on the Internet that involves family privacy (family income, financial situation, family trivia, etc.)?	33.559	0.006***
Have you ever seen others posting private family information online?	36.909	0.002***
How do you react when you see private family information online?	35.627	0.000***
Have you discussed privacy issues on social media with your family?	29.939	0.018**
Do you feel that social media has changed your view of family privacy?	36.316	0.003***
Do you feel that social media has increased the exchange of opinions among family members?	31.584	0.011**
Do discussions or information on social media affect the outcome of family decisions?	34.425	0.005***
Do you think social media has provided new channels for family members to express their opinions?	29.371	0.022**

Note: ***, **, * represent 1%, 5% and 10% significance levels, respectively

Analyzed by chi-square test, using 'age' as the independent variable, it can be seen that the results of the selection of the above questions show high significance with this independent variable, and the research hypothesis one is established (Table 4).

Table 5: Questionnaire chi-square test.

Question	X²	P
How many times a week do you communicate with your family?	55.922	0.000***
Has online communication changed the way you resolve conflicts with your family?	34.545	0.023**
Do you think different communication channels affect family cohesion?	44.16	0.001***
Do you think social media has strengthened your emotional connection with your family?	36.774	0.012**
Do you think social media has changed the intimacy between family members?	39.195	0.006***
Have you ever posted content online that involves family privacy (family income, financial situation, family trivia, etc.)?	34.601	0.022**
Have you seen others posting content online that is private to the family?	48.478	0.000***
Have you discussed privacy issues on social media with your family?	37.067	0.011**
Do you think social media has changed your view of family privacy?	43.373	0.002***
How do you think privacy sharing on social media affects family relationships?	46.269	0.001***
What do you do when family members share too much information on social media?	38.561	0.008***
Do you think social media has affected the equality of access to information for family members?	48.72	0.000***
Do you feel that social media has increased the exchange of opinions among family members?	40.003	0.005***
Do discussions or information on social media affect the outcome of family decisions?	38.464	0.008***
Do you think social media provides new channels for family members to express their opinions?	42.926	0.002***

Note: ***, **, * represent 1%, 5% and 10% significance levels, respectively

Through the chi-square test analysis, using 'education' as the independent variable, it can be seen that the results of the selection of the above question items show high significance with the independent variable, and the research hypothesis two is established (Table 5).
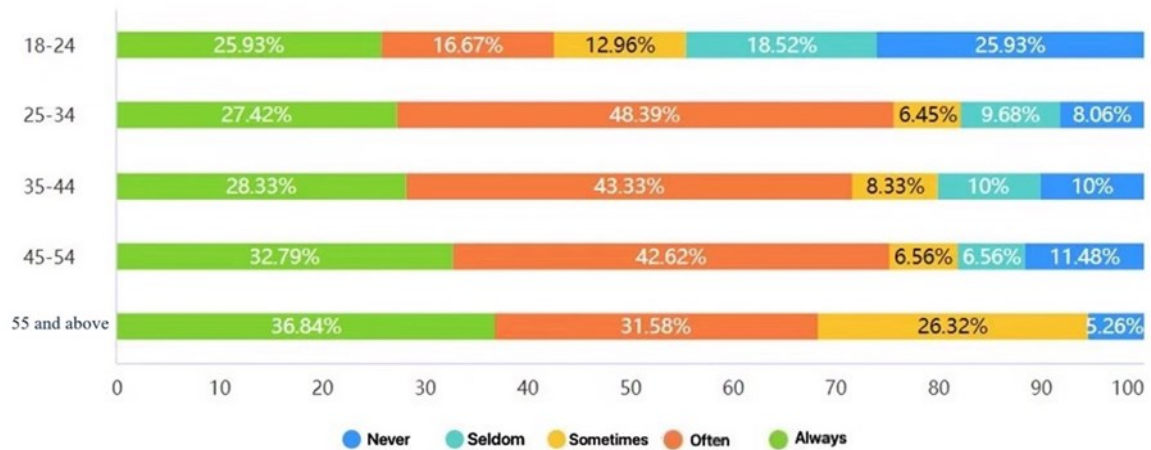
Figure 1: X=Age, Y="Have you ever posted anything online that involves family privacy?" Data collection form for options.

In the data collection with age as the independent variable and the question 'Have you ever posted content related to family privacy online?' option as the dependent variable, The age group of 25–34 has the highest percentage of content posted online about family privacy (48.39%), significantly higher than other age groups. On the other hand, the age group of 55+ has the highest percentage of posting options related to family privacy (31.58%), falling between the categories of "sometimes" and "never." The 55+ age group has the highest percentage of posting options that involve family privacy at 31.58 per cent. On the whole, the proportion of those who 'always' post content related to family privacy on the Internet shows a gradual increase as they grow older (Figure 1).
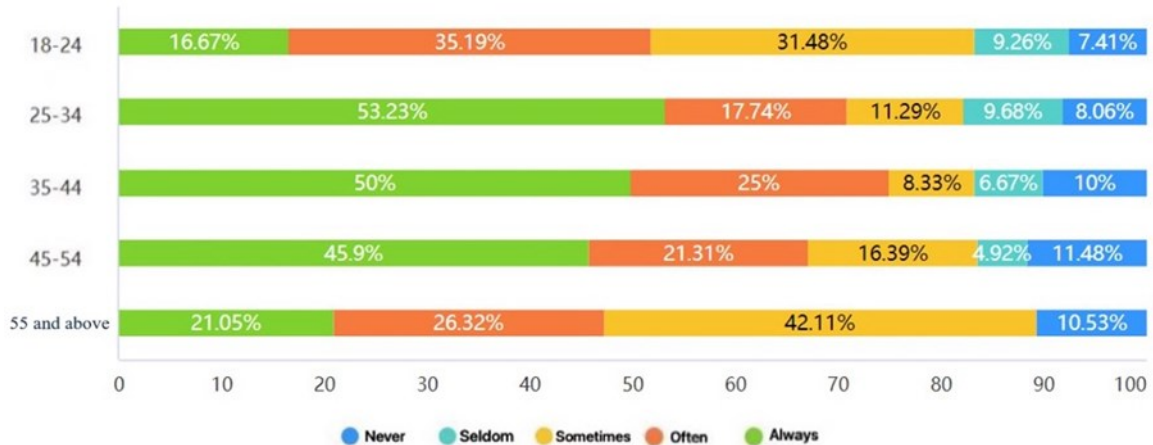

Figure 2: X=age, Y="Have you ever seen others post content online that involves family privacy?" Options Data Collection Form.

In the data collection with age as the independent variable and the question 'Do you see others posting content online that involves family privacy?' option as the dependent variable, it can be seen that the proportion of people who often and always see this type of content gradually increases with age, while the proportion of people who never and seldom see it gradually decreases. This suggests that older age groups are more likely to see others posting content involving family privacy online. Among the different age groups, the 35-44 and 25-34 age groups have a higher percentage of seeing others posting content involving family privacy frequently and always, with 75 per cent and 70.97 per cent, respectively. This shows that age is an important factor influencing individuals' ability to

see private family content posted by others online, and that individuals in the middle- and young-age groups are more likely to be exposed to this type of content on the Internet (Figure 2).
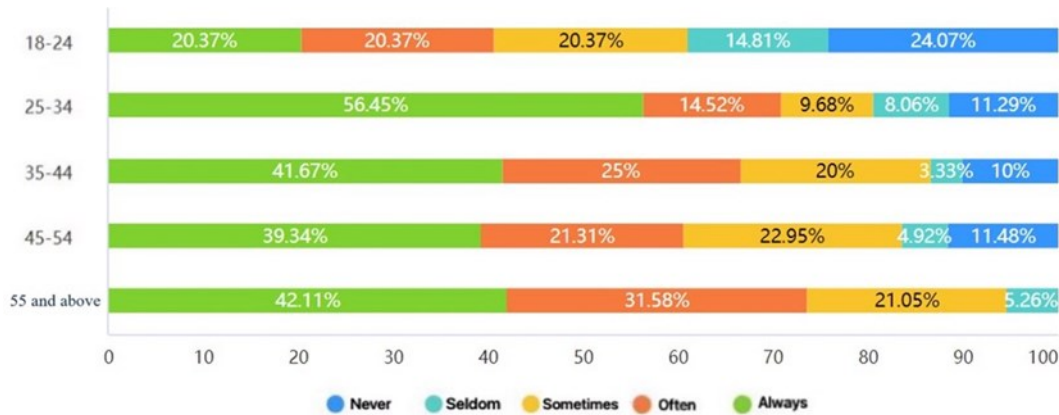

Figure 3: X=age, Y="Have you discussed privacy issues on social media with your family?" Data Collection Form for Options.

In the data collection with age as the independent variable and the question item 'Have you discussed privacy issues on social media with your family?' It can be seen that age has a certain influence on whether or not they discuss social media privacy issues with their family members, with a higher proportion of people aged 25-34 and 55+ discussing social media privacy issues with their family members 'always' and 'frequently', at 70.7 per cent respectively. The percentages of those aged 25-34 and 55+ who 'always' and 'often' discuss social media privacy with their families are higher, at 70.97 per cent and 73.69 per cent respectively (figure 3).

5. Discussion

5.1. Reshaping and Negotiating Family Boundaries

The research data show that there is a significant difference in the frequency of posting and exposure to family privacy information on social media among different age groups, indicating that social media is reshaping the concept of privacy of family members, especially the younger generation. For example, the chi-square test results show that the 25-34 age group has the highest percentage (48.39%) of posting content that involves family privacy online, as well as being more likely to be exposed to family privacy information posted by others. This echoes the concept of 'contextual collapse' proposed by Boyd, which suggests that social media blurs the boundaries between the family and public spheres, making it easier for family members to ignore privacy risks when sharing information [9].

In addition, it has been found that social media use may also lead to the blurring of family boundaries. For example, the chi-square test results showed that the group with higher education levels were more likely to believe that social media had changed their perceptions of family privacy (p<0.05). This may be due to the fact that they were exposed to more different types of family information sharing on social media, which led to new perceptions of the boundaries of family privacy.

5.2. Change and Balance in Family Power Structure

Data analyses suggest that social media use may change the power relations among family members. The results of the chi-square test showed that groups with higher levels of education were more likely to perceive social media as affecting equality of access to information among family members (p<0.001) and increasing the exchange of opinions among family members (p<0.005). This is in line

with Castells' argument that in the networked society, information and knowledge have become the new source of power. Adolescents have greater access to information and knowledge due to their greater familiarity with social media and online technologies, thus gaining more voice in family decision-making [10].

However, this power shift may also lead to intergenerational conflicts among family members. For example, the data show that a higher proportion of people over 55 years of age (73.69%) 'always' and 'often' discuss social media privacy issues with their family members, suggesting that they may need more communication and negotiation to adapt to the changes in family power structure brought about by social media. This suggests that they may need more communication and negotiation to adapt to the changes in family power structure brought about by social media.

5.3. Dual Effects of Family Emotional Connection and Coping Strategies

Data analyses show that the impact of social media on family emotional connection presents a double effect. On the one hand, the chi-square test showed that all age groups agreed that social media increased the exchange of opinions among family members ($P<0.01$) and provided new channels for family members to express their opinions ($P<0.002$). This suggests that social media can facilitate communication and bonding among family members and enhance family cohesion. On the other hand, over-reliance on social media may also lead to a reduction in offline interactions and virtualization of interpersonal relationships. For example, the data showed that some age groups perceived that social media changed the closeness between family members ($p<0.01$) and had some impact on family relationships. This is consistent with Turkle's view that excessive use of social media may lead to frustration with real-life relationships and even a sense of 'loneliness' [11].

6.   Suggestion

Firstly, media literacy education for family members should be strengthened. Enhance the cognitive and critical thinking abilities of family members, especially young people, with regard to social media, and guide them to use social media rationally to avoid becoming addicted to the virtual world of the Internet, while also guiding them to set up a correct concept of privacy and protect the security of personal and family information. In reality, all sectors of the society can actively launch media literacy education programs for members of the society of different age groups to help them understand the operation mechanism of social media, potential risks and how to use social media in a safe and rational manner.

Secondly, a positive and healthy family online culture should be built. Family members can guide them to use social media rationally and avoid over-reliance on social media that may affect family relationships by jointly setting rules for the use of social media, such as limiting the time of use and stipulating the content to be shared. For example, family members can agree not to use mobile phones during meal times or family gatherings, and encourage face-to-face communication and interaction.

Next, the application of social media in family education should also be explored. Social media can be used as a supplementary tool for family education. For example, parents can share learning resources with their children through social media platforms and interact with them to enhance parent-child relationship. For example, parents can use the educational resources on social media platforms to help their children learn new knowledge and expand their horizons.

Finally, attention is paid to the impact of social media on different types of families. Future research can expand the types of research targets and actively focus on the impact of social media on different types of families (e.g., single-parent families, restructured families, etc.), as well as the impact of social media on the mental health of family members, in order to provide references for the formulation of targeted family policies and services. For example, research can be conducted on

single-parent families to understand how social media affects parent-child relationships, family functioning and the mental health of family members in single-parent families, and to formulate corresponding family support policies and services on this basis.

7. Conclusion

This study, which has as its theme "the impact of social media on the change of family structure," uses literature and questionnaires to examine how social media affects family boundaries, power dynamics, and emotional identity in an effort to identify patterns of changing family structures in the social media era. It was discovered that social media use is changing how family members view privacy and may also affect how power dynamics and emotional bonds are formed. The conduct of this study enriches the research content of family sociology and communication, provides new perspectives for understanding the change of family structure in the age of social media, and provides references for family education, family policy making, and social work services. However, this study also suffers from the limitation of a small sample size, with the sample mainly distributed in the Guangdong area, which has certain geographical limitations, as well as relatively small inter-sample variability. Future research could expand the scope and sample size, adopt a variety of research methods, focus on the positive effects of social media, as well as pay attention to the impact of social media on the mental health of family members, with a view to gaining a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of social media on the change of family structure, and providing more targeted suggestions for building harmonious and stable family relationships. As social media continues to grow in popularity, its impact on family structure will become more and more far-reaching, and continued attention to and research on this topic will be of great theoretical and practical significance for maintaining family harmony and promoting social stability.

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