

# *A Study of the Influence of Social Media Utilization on Chinese Older Adults*

Jiamin Lin<sup>1,a,\*†</sup>, Lingyi Chen<sup>2,†</sup>, Zhuoyan Huang<sup>3,†</sup>, Yaxuan Wang<sup>4,†</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of psychology, Guangzhou University, Guangzhou, Guangdong, 510006, China

<sup>2</sup>Fuzhou Concord College of Sino-Canada, Fuzhou, Fujian, 350011, China

<sup>3</sup>Nansha College Preparatory Academy, Guangzhou, Guangdong, 511458, China

<sup>4</sup>Zhejiang Dongyang High School, Dongyang, Zhejiang, 322100, China

a. 13527784107@163.com

\*corresponding author

†These authors contributed equally.

**Abstract:** China is experiencing aging population, and interaction with social media as well. Social media has been regarded as an important resource and tool for assisting the elderly. Therefore, it is essential to understand how seniors use social media, including the potential advantages and drawbacks. This essay presents the findings of literature reviews on the interaction between seniors and social media. Our findings suggest that little study has been conducted on the detrimental impacts of social media on older persons, most of research efforts are focus on their mental and physical health. So, this article is important because it establishes the existing research and provides ideas for future research.

**Keywords:** social media, elderly people, well-being, negative impact, media literacy

## 1 Introduction

As the economy grows and medical care improves, the average age of life increases. According to the data of the seventh population census released in 2021, the total figure for people over 60 years old in China has reached 264.02 million, accounting for 18.70%. Besides, there are 190.64 million people over 65 years old, accounting for 13.50%. As successive generations enter retirement structural, the society will continue to face the pressure of long-term balanced development of population. In this case, changes in the population have a significant impact on the use of mass media and the image portrayed by these media.

The World Health Organization (WHO) believe healthy aging as a process of maintaining functional ability to enable well-being of the elderly [1]. Social participation is an important intervention to boost the active and healthy aging [2]. Senior adults commonly have fewer social activities, due to their limited mobility and physical ability. The less connections with friends and society contribute to their loneliness and isolations. There is general agreement that newly-developing media, represented by WeChat, have brought a positive impact on the lives of elderly people, further improving their lifestyles and communication patterns.

In recent day, media has attracted a rising attention as its features of exposing older adults to news and information. According to China internet network information center (CNNIC), users of social

network in China aged 50 and above increased from 16.9% in March 2020 to 22.8% in June 2020[3]. As seniors increase their use of social media, they can more easily connect with new people and stay informed about what's going on around them, and make comments in real time according to the content of the information. The viewing is also more convenient and faster.

Sina has launched a social media platform, namely Weibo, which divides user groups according to multiple dimensions such as user value orientation and interests. In the age distribution of users in the Weibo 2020 User Development Report, 4% of users are 50 years old or older [4]. In addition, WeChat and Alipay gradually combined with location services, mobile payment and other functions to further penetrate elderly users. With media convergence, people are not only able to access information and communication on social media platforms, but also enable entertainment activities. On the other hand, with the rapid growth and iteration of social media, most seniors are not yet media literate and may obtain harmful information through social media and become victims of harmful behavior or misuse of personal data by other users [5].

This article is dedicated to exploring the relationship between social media and older adults through the research method of literature review. Among them, it was found that previous studies were limited to WeChat, a social media, and its target audience their scope was not broad enough. More importantly, studies to date have tended to focus on the benefits of social media on the physical and mental health of senior adults, while ignoring the negative effects it may have on them. Therefore, the importance and originality of this study is that it extensively explores the effects of social media on the well-being and physical health of older adults as well as the possible negative impacts of social media, and conducts an in-depth study.

## **2 Social Media Increases Elder People's Happiness**

Happiness is like the feeling you get when you feel happy or satisfied, it is a kind of affirmation and positive attitude and feeling to the state of self-life, related things and the surrounding environment. It is also a kind of emotional experience of subjective satisfaction and identification. Happiness is not only a feeling, but also an expression, so it is possible to experience it internally or externally. The emotional support from social networks can keep elderly people functionally capable [6]. According to a research study in China, of the 100 people surveyed, 21% of the older adults used micro-blogging for leisure and entertainment, and 25% found it convenient for socializing [7].

### **2.1 Messaging and Entertainment**

The primary purpose of social media use by older adults is to stay connected with others, to be informed and to be entertained. Many elder people use the social media to obtain various information, such as health and wellness information, beautiful and delicious food, and even epidemic prevention policies that are generally concerned by the elderly. They also use the functions of information publishing, sharing, likes, and comments on social platforms to obtain information from the "circle of friends", and maintain these social relationships through interaction [8]. Social media contains many entertainment items that adequately express the feelings of older adults and simulate real-life interactions, which is considered an appropriate basis for studying social media use behaviour. Media with instant interaction and multi-functional media have the ability to communicate with real life. Instant interaction: Multifunctional media has the function of real-life communication, so older users can chat live and thus reduce the probability of misunderstanding information.

Pera argues that sharing photographs reflects and contributes to the building of a digital self and influences on subjective well-being in older group [9]. Compared to WhatsApp in the West, WeChat allows not only voice and text chatting, but also "moments" of friends and micro videos to see other friends' interests and each other's lives. The visual "moment" sharing and face-to-face video

communication with natural language can enhance the pleasant communication of the elderly [10]. From a questionnaire derived from interviews, the frequency with which older adults use information when socializing using social media, as well as their level of education, is positively correlated with their life satisfaction [11].

## 2.2 Interpersonal Relationships and Social Participant

Social media provides a channel for the elderlies whose children and friends are often not around to stay in touch, resulting in less loneliness. From Neves's a feasibility study, lots of elder people connect their family and friends by social media [12]. For example, many elderlies use WeChat and Doyin to communicate with family and friends. By paying attention to and browsing the latest life trends of relatives and friends, the elderly can deepen their understanding and communicate effectively with each other. Furthermore, Yang concluded that agree or strongly agree that social media is very convenient for about 65% of the population and found significantly less loneliness among older adults who use social media. [13].

Social engagement can have positive effects in the physical and mental health of older adults. Specifically, it leads to a stronger connection between older adults and society and a significant reduction in loneliness and social isolation among older adults, and Internet social media has been recognized as a medium that can provide opportunities for social engagement [14]. Using social media strengthens their ties to the community and increases their chances of getting involved in community activities [15]. With the sense of belonging in the community and better integrate into modern society, the prevalence of disease and the onset of depression is reduced. For example, using WeChat can help middle-aged and older people maintain a healthy mental health. Middle aged, bearing family burden, bearing heavy pressure; Old people often have no hope for the future and are not willing to try new things boldly. These two groups are often the blind spots of media attention and the most vulnerable to social marginalization. The emergence of WeChat has completely broken this situation. With its strong adaptability and rich services, WeChat has become not only a spiritual support for middle-aged and elderly people, but also a link between them and today's society [16].

## 2.3 Life Services

The significance of life services is to meet the basic needs of urban and rural residents and to improve the convenience and quality of people's lives. For the elderly, the degree of service perfection has a significant contribution to their sense of well-being.

Nowadays, some social media have launched online payment functions, allowing the elderly to realize online shopping, pay utility bills online, and the elderly do not need to bring their wallets when they travel, a cell phone can solve the problem of money transactions. It saves a lot of time wasted in queues and change, making the elderly more comfortable in their daily lives and better able to enjoy social services and rights [7].

In addition, with the rapid development of China's economy and the improvement of the social security system, the consumption concept of the elderly has also been updated, gradually changing from saving money to spending it on happiness and health, thus also triggering the booming development of online consumption. According to a survey in Suzhou, 70% of the interviewed elderly people have the experience of online consumption such as online registration for medical treatment, online shopping, online food ordering, online ticketing and online booking of travel agencies [17]. Social media has made an indelible contribution to the physical and mental health of the elderly by providing them with high speed and low-cost consumption services, promoting their desire and consumption behavior, bringing into play their sense of participation by meeting their needs for life services, enhancing their social connections, and significantly improving their sense of well-being.

### 3 Negative Impact

The impact of social media on mental health is a double-edged sword. Nowadays, the existence of social media does make the life of the elderly more colorful and change their life rhythm and living condition, but in the face of the complicated social media and mixed real and fake information, it is undeniable that if the elderly cannot reasonably handle the relationship with social media and ignore the interpersonal communication in real life, it will certainly bring certain negative effects to the elderly themselves and the society, making all kinds of contradictions come out one after another.

#### 3.1 Harmful Information

When the elderly are using the social media, it is easy to mislead them with false information. Compared with young people, the elderly is less exposed to the outside world, less flexible in using social media, and vulnerable to negative information such as fraudulent information, rumours, lottery, pop-ups etc. According to the data, about 66% of the middle-aged and elderly Internet users have received deception by remarks on the Internet; meanwhile, roughly 37% of the middle-aged and elderly Internet users have encountered it online. These data were released in the Internet Survey Report on the "Internet Situation and Risks of Middle-aged and Older People", which was jointly published by the Chinese People's Daily and Tencent together in cooperation [18]. This not only triggers financial damage to the elderly, but also affects their mental condition and family life. Especially in the post-epidemic era, a cross-sectional telephone survey revealed that relying on social media to obtain information about COVID-19-related to older adults produces more anxiety conditions, with mixed effects on attitudes and behaviors. Information on the Internet that is unverified and unverifiable or has conflicting information may have the potential to challenge social trust in information [19].

As the mobile Internet enters the era of big data, elderly people may face personal information leakage by using online payment and scanning QR codes, and many small software in WeChat are actually prepared to steal users' personal information. Not only will the information of the elderly themselves be stolen, but fraudsters will even use illegal means to steal the personal information of the elderly's children and offspring, and then disguise themselves as their children in order to gain their trust and then commit a series of fraudulent acts. Also, when older people follow a certain type of video on the web, the internet will continue to recommend more similar content to them, which will strengthen their identification with this type of information. If they accept a false message, big data will continue to push the message, giving them the illusion that everyone has this belief, and over time it will become biased and will not be easily changed.

Last but not least, because of the rampant presence of certain foreign forces and the imperfection of relevant laws. Harmful information of bloody violence and terror is widely spread in social media, such as extreme nationalistic ideas, videos related to close war, and articles with photos such as abetting crime. In the daily use of social media, the elderly has a certain chance to be exposed to such information, this can inadvertently have a very serious impact on their health, and in the more serious cases can cause heart damage.

#### 3.2 Over Usage

Prolonged use of social media can lead to negative emotions and psychological problems, such as stress, anxiety and depression. In recent years, some studies have found the heavy dependence and obsession of some elderly people on social media. For example, in the 2019 Silver Hair Crowd Insight Report released by Quest Mobile a few days ago, China's elderly Internet users spend more than 118 hours per month per capita on the mobile Internet, with an average daily online time of nearly 4 hours.

Some researchers have pointed out that long-term use of social media to read spam can make people become negative and inefficient. Nowadays, false and negative information is rampant on the

Internet, and the news exaggerated by the media can be seen everywhere, leading the elderly to panic and depression for a long time. Internet use may erode the presence of older people and diminish their real social connections, thereby damaging their social networks. As society advances and more and more people in modern society start using the internet, their communication with their families will become less and less as this will get smaller, depression and loneliness will get worse [20,21]. In addition, the "substitution effect" was demonstrated by a survey of time logs, which found a significant substitution between time spent on social activities of the century and time spent on the Internet, most notably time spent on face-to-face activities with family and friends, which is detrimental to personal social interaction [22].

### 3.3 Low Media Literacy

From the past to the present, the elderly lives in the trust of mainstream media such as TV, newspaper and radio for a long time, which makes them more likely to trust the content in the media and the habit of using the media. However, under the circumstance that media environment is highly marketized and decentralized, media quality is uneven, and fake content is difficult to distinguish, middle-aged and elderly people's media usage habits are no longer adapted to the current new media environment. Older people are more likely to judge the information they receive based on their past life experience, rather than making comparative analysis or searching for confirmation, due to their decreased physical function, memory loss and information discrimination ability. The elderly lack the necessary knowledge and judgment ability to discriminate the truth and false information in the media world and to prevent security. Such as the identification of the phishing website, the prevention of the network virus, the identification of the network fraud means, and so on, these need to learn and master [23].

In addition, in the design logic of new media, manufacturers often stick to the concept of "profit maximization" and try their best to insert a lot of business information, even misleading and bad business information, into the user interface. Such commercial pop-ups and links can easily expose the personal information of the elderly when they touch it by mistake. As for media literacy learning led by social forces, some researchers point out that "the resources for education for the elderly in China are not sufficient and balanced." At present, the main problem of media literacy communication for the elderly lies in the lack of professionalism. It is far from enough to rely only on self-learning and teaching based on social relationships among the elderly. As mentioned above, older people tend to trust the messages conveyed by media, and most of their problems with social media are attributed to their inability to use them. But young people are more clearly aware that these problems mainly come from inducing downloads of junk software and scams. This shows that the current environment for the use of new media is not friendly to the elderly. All kinds of inducible junk information fill the media environment, which makes senior adults, who are already vulnerable groups, more difficult to use new media [24].

## 4 Discussion

The use of smartphones and online social media has subtly changed the way older adults interact socially. Social media has improved the well-being of the elderly in three main ways: first, social media has brought the convenience of access to information and entertainment, making even the elderly who are not convenient to travel have more opportunities to learn about society; Second, it has increased the elderly's sense of social engagement and reduced their loneliness; third, social media has brought more convenient services, which include the ability to participate in learning, pay fees, and so on without leaving the house, which has improved the elderly's life satisfaction. Third, social media has brought more convenient services, such as participation in learning, payment of fees, etc.,



to improve their life satisfaction and quality of life. In social media, the services for the elderly and the great potential for the development of the consumer market. In the future, perhaps this will help the economy to grow rapidly and sustainably.

On the other hand, due to historical reasons, most of the elderly are not well educated and are easily misled by false information or even suffer from online fraud, which often undermines the confidence of the elderly in using cell phones and social media, and also easily causes financial damage and family disharmony, which is not conducive to the goal of active aging. In addition, the excessive use of social media and even Internet addiction among the elderly has caused the phenomenon of "sedentary" and "low-headed people", which has a significant impact on their bodies and minds.

To further exploit the effect of social media on the well-being of elder adults, this article proposes three strategies: (1) children should spend more time with senior citizens to help them use social media better; (2) strengthen the regulation of content posted on social media platforms; (3) help improve the media literacy of older adults, such as by considering a variety of types of instructional training with a strong orientation.

## 5 Conclusion

This paper demonstrated the influence of social media use among the elderly in China, as well as the role of social participation between the elderly and social media. Elder people are the world's fastest growing citizenry in China, and any effort to enhance their standard of living is critical. As a result, the goal of this paper is to investigate the impact of social media on the geriatric population in order to promote societal development.

Also, some negative influences like harmful news, long-time use and low media literacy should be noticed. Social media can easily become addictive for middle-aged and elderly people who have lots of spare time. If they don't pay attention, they will be unable to get away and spend too much time browsing social media on daily basis. Face-to-face contact is becoming less important as a result of the overuse of social media. Social media is becoming increasingly involved in a variety of fields, eventually isolating the elderly from society. It can also squander personal time that could be spent on more productive tasks and activities. Moreover, some false or negative news and information will have a very bad impact on the health of the elderly. Some platforms will steal the identity information of the elderly or sell useless goods to them. This will make the elderly depressed, irritable and even extremely tired.

In this case, future research should emphasize the drawbacks of elders' use of social media, and society should persist to provide social media support for seniors, such as media literacy enhancement, to promote critical examination of information and responsible online sharing.

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