The Impact of social media on the Socialization of Left-behind Children in China

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Abstract. With the rapid development of the new media era, the influence of media on children becomes more and more obvious in the process of socialization. Growing up in this context, left-behind children have also become one of the main groups using social media, with the characteristics of high frequency of use and different preferences. Through reviewing previous research, this paper aims to understand the use of social media in daily life of left-behind children, analyze its impact on the socialization of left-behind children, explore the underlying reasons, and summarize the relationship between the use of social media and media literacy of left-behind children. When left-behind children have high media literacy, they do not have excessive dependence and tend to browse beneficial social media content; while when their media literacy is low, they will have a high sense of dependence on media and contact with bad social media content. Socialization process of left-behind children in China is subject to many restrictions and challenges. Social media is an important way for left-behind children to communicate with the outside world, obtain information and establish social relationships. Therefore, studying the impact of social media on the socialization of left-behind children can help future research explore how to better use social media to promote the socialization process of left-behind children, and provide a basis for formulating relevant policies and measures. Future studies should cover different regions and combine quantitative and qualitative methods to better understand the process of socialization of left-behind children.

Keywords: Left-behind children, social media, socialization.

1. Introduction

With the increasing scale of left-behind children in rural areas, the socialization of left-behind children has attracted social and academic attention. In the current new media environment, new media such as computers and mobile phones have had various impacts on the lives of left-behind children. In particular, social media has an important impact on the lives of left-behind children and plays an important role in the socialization process of left-behind children.

Socialization is a process in which individuals learn and master knowledge, skills, norms, values, and other social behavior patterns and personality characteristics in a specific social and cultural environment, adapt to society, actively play a role in society, and create a new culture [1]. During the growth stage of children, the socialization process plays a fundamental role in their self-concept cognition and value shaping. Therefore, it is of great practical significance to analyze the characteristics, impact and reasons of left-behind children using social media. There are relatively few academic studies on the use of new media, especially social media use, and the socialization of left-behind children. The discussion on the relationship between social media and socialization of left behind children is not deep enough.

This article will focus on analyzing how social media affects the socialization of left-behind children. The socialization of children mainly focuses on the discussion of parent-child relationship, peer relationship and personal concepts in interpersonal relationships. Firstly, it analyzes the characteristics and current situation of left-behind children's use of social media, discusses the influence of social media on the socialization process of left-behind children and the factors affecting the socialization of left-behind children, and puts forward corresponding countermeasures.

2. Characteristics and Current Situation of Left-behind Children's Use of Social Media

2.1. High Frequency of Social Media Use

Cell phones are provided to left-behind children to maintain contact with their parents. However, due to insufficient parental supervision, they lack self-control and judgment, and can be easily influenced by various information and temptations on social media, which leads to excessive use of time. Yao and Ji mentioned in a survey of 77 left-behind adolescents aged 15-17 in a high school in Jilin Province that all of students possessed at least one cell phone, 71.23% frequently used and watched social platforms such as Tiktok and Kuaishou. Additionally, during non-school hours, the average daily use of cell phones exceeded 8 hours [2]. Due to the absence of parental guidance and care, left-behind children may resort to social media to seek comfort and attention through interaction and entertainment content.

2.2. Different Preferences for Social Media Use

Due to the rise of self-media, social media platforms have diversified their content to cater to a diverse range of audiences. Left-behind children have varying requirements and interests when using social media. According to a survey conducted by Hu, 25.2% of left-behind children opted for socializing using interactive software, writing journals, and making friends; 20.9% searched for study-related information and materials while 19.6% preferred to play online games [3]. Social media is increasingly becoming a popular means of communication, interaction, and leisure for rural left-behind children.

The socialization level of rural left-behind children is substantially affected by their learning and social preferences, while their entertainment preferences have a minimal impact [4]. A preference for learning through social media can enhance the dissemination of information, expand learning opportunities, and compensate to some degree for the inadequate rural educational resources, thereby fostering the socialization development of left-behind children and facilitating their integration into society. Social preference can assist children left behind in their development of social skills, reducing loneliness, while also fulfilling part of the family socialization function during communication with parents online. Moreover, it enhances the socialization abilities of the children when they interact and communicate with their peers and family members.

3. The Effect of Social Media on the Socialization Process of Left-behind Children

Children's socialization relies on two primary sources: care and education provided by the family, and education and management within the school system [4]. The family represents an essential environmental factor in the socialization process. The internalization of socially acceptable moral and behavioral norms through parental guidance is a critical factor in the family's role in an individual's socialization [5]. As left-behind children's parents typically work outside the home for extended periods, it is challenging to provide them with adequate support and guidance, often resulting in a lack of parental attention, supervision, and reduced family socialization. The use of cell phones, particularly social media, partially fulfills the role of family socialization. Furthermore, there is a close relationship between rural educational resources and the socialization of left-behind children. In comparison with urban areas, rural regions have inadequate educational resources, encompassing insufficient schools, teaching equipment, and teachers. Consequently, it becomes challenging to offer quality educational resources for left-behind children. The substantial gap in the supply and worth of educational resources could negatively affect the socialization of left-behind children.

The use of social media plays an increasingly important role in the socialization of left-behind children, which can make up for the lack of education of families and schools to a certain extent, and has a very important impact on the socialization of left-behind children in terms of personal concepts

and interpersonal relationships. Nevertheless, social media has some shortcomings. For instance, it is difficult to discern true information from misinformation on social media, which can easily manipulate left-behind children. Furthermore, social interactions on social media frequently occur in a virtual setting, which may deny left-behind children the opportunity for in-person communication with real people. As a result, social media cannot fully substitute for families' and schools' educational role and face-to-face interpersonal communication in real life. Proper guidance is essential for social media use. The influence of social media on the socialization of left-behind children is mainly reflected in the following three aspects.

3.1. Self-concept

Without self-concept, an individual cannot complete a true socialization process [6]. Self-concept clarity has been defined as the degree to which an individual has a clear, confident and stable identity [7]. Social media's editability features enable left-behind children to create more varied and enriched images on the platform. They can edit their personal details, backgrounds, and avatars to express their personalities and improve their self-concept and self-identity. Furthermore, anonymous social media interaction allows left-behind children to express themselves more openly. Receiving positive feedback on their demonstrations of personalities, experiences, and feelings through anonymity can increase their confidence to showcase their unique traits and attributes. The act of left-behind children presenting themselves on social media can facilitate the formation and growth of self-concept, which, in turn, can improve their understanding of themselves and boost their self-esteem, contributing to their integration and development in society.

3.2. Interpersonal Relationship

Besides the family, peers are the most influential group in a child's socialization [5]. In face-to-face interaction, left-behind children can establish friendships and learn to build trust, which helps in socialization. However, left-behind children find it challenging to form close relationships with peers due to the lack of self-confidence in social interactions outside the online world, potentially resulting in behavioral violence and personality deviations [8].

Conversely, social media provides a range of benefits that facilitate requesting and providing social support [7]. Through text, pictures, videos, and other features, social media provides left-behind children with the ability to interact with online friends anytime and anywhere, which has the potential to help them regulate their emotions and stress levels. The anonymity of social media offers left-behind children a good communication environment. They can choose not to disclose their identities and discuss sensitive issues they would otherwise feel uncomfortable discussing face-to-face, which improves their social experience and promotes their socialization process.

While social media offers a new way of socializing, it poses risks like cyber violence and cyber bullying, which may harm left-behind children to varying degrees in the virtual space. Furthermore, excessive reliance on virtual socialization may cause a dearth of real interpersonal skills. Left-behind children who prioritize meeting their needs on social media and shift their focus from offline to online social circles, may become overly dependent on social media, thus avoiding real-life social interactions. This can negatively impact their socialization [2]. It is clear that social media cannot be the sole means of communication between people.

3.3. Undesirable Content Induces Transgressive Behavior: Tobacco and Alcohol Use

Undesirable content on social media platforms influences the transgressive behavior of left-behind children. According to the study conducted by Wu et al., social media exposure is directly linked to tobacco and alcohol use among Chinese left-behind children [9]. Due to the uneven quality of content on social media and the lack of parental supervision and entertainment, left-behind children are at a higher risk of being exposed to harmful information. Social media can also provide access to information on tobacco and alcohol products, thereby increasing the chances of left-behind children being exposed to them. For instance, advertisements or content on social media may associate alcohol

and tobacco use with "coolness" or "sophistication," leading left-behind children to desire these products to gain acceptance or to satisfy their self-image.

4. Factors Affecting the Relationship between Them

The process of socialization involves the alteration of a person's standards, abilities, motivations, attitudes, and actions to those deemed desirable and appropriate for their current and future roles in any given culture [8]. This is especially important in childhood, a period critical to the overall growth and development of every human. Childhood is a crucial time for gender distinction, the emergence of independence, and the formation of healthy relationships. Children today live in a time of fast advancement in the Internet and other media. In light of this, the media has varied degrees of positive and negative influence on how socialization of modern left-behind children occurs.

4.1. Needs Fulfillment

Left-behind Children have their own sense of autonomy, a habit of utilizing the media, and a fascination with media communication. However, they are unable to use the media to gain important information; instead, the majority of the left behind use the media solely to satisfy their own demands [2]. Cell phones, laptops, and other media are the companion items that left-behind youngsters spend the most time with outside of school in this era of rapid development in information and communication technology since they live in township areas without recreational facilities. Children who are left behind frequently lack care and supervision because their parents are absent for extended periods of time, which prevents them from having any control over how much time they spend on digital media. The majority of left-behind children's attention will migrate from offline to online when they are overly reliant on media. This allows them to escape from issues in real life and in school, express their personalities, and decompress.

4.2. Media Literacy and Media Exposure Behavior

The media exposure behavior of left-behind children has a negative effect on their learning attitudes and motivation, while media literacy preference has positive effects on learning attitudes, motivation, and ability [1]. Media literacy is the ability of an individual or group to use and understand media effectively in modern society. Key aspects of media literacy include media recognition skills, and critical thinking. One of the factors influencing the relationship between the two is the satisfaction of the personal needs of the left-behind children. However, the inappropriate media exposure behavior of the left-behind children has seriously affected their learning behavior and life state, resulting in the emergence of a social phenomenon known as "Internet addiction", and it can be found that the media exposure behavior affects the learning socialization of children. Children who are left behind experience media in a positive rather than passive way, and their level of media literacy has an impact on how they develop their own skills. Childhood is an important time for the development of personal character and literacy, and when students have high levels of media literacy, they avoid becoming overly dependent and browse content that is beneficial to their attitudes, motivation, and ability to learn. As a result, their preferences for media exposure will have a positive impact on their learning. In contrast, students who score poorly on media literacy assessments will become overly dependent on media and will be exposed to inferior social media content. Based on the above analysis, media exposure behavior and media literacy have been identified as the main factors affecting the socialization of learning of left-behind children in the mass media environment.

5. Suggestion for Using Social Media

Left-behind children, when faced with the digital media environment, have limited means of acquiring information and might resort to irrational imitation [2]. With the rapid development of the new media era, whether urban left-behind children can access the media is no longer a problem, but

media use has become a new issue that needs urgent attention [10]. no longer a problem, but media use has become a new issue that needs urgent attention. They may also have a poor imagination, a weak sense of responsibility, weak media production skills, and limited awareness of personal privacy protection while acquiring, judging, and applying information. As most left-behind children are raised by their grandparents, they might lack care and discipline, resulting in media misuse and the inability to obtain useful information. The use of media by left-behind children has a significant impact on their socialization process. Therefore, it is necessary to help left-behind children recognize and use media correctly at both social and family levels.

5.1. Influence of Schools on the Use of Media by Left-behind Children

Media use can be affected by students' level of media literacy [2]. Left-behind children spend a considerable amount of time in school, which provides them with an essential platform to acquire knowledge and improve their media literacy. For left-behind children, school offers one of the few opportunities to enhance their media literacy. Most schools ban cell phones from their campus to prevent excessive media dependency and to alleviate the pressure of schoolwork. However, this overly restrictive approach is not the most effective way to improve students' media literacy. Schools should focus on promoting media literacy education through cross-disciplinary efforts led by media education specialists, who can design and lead curricula, and organize lectures and courses. Similarly, schools should organize various activities to engage students and foster a conducive environment for developing media literacy skills [2].

5.2. The influence of the Family on the Use of Media by Left-behind Children

The absence of love and care for the left-behind children has numerous adverse consequences. To left-behind children, the media serves only as a form of spiritual consolation in their solitary lives. Certain left-behind children develop a reliance on media since they find the emotions they lack in their daily life through media. Parents or guardians of left-behind children must have a factual and accurate understanding of the media and its function, enabling them to deliver meaningful guidance to their children. Employ cognitive change to promote behavioral guidance, enhance their own awareness of media literacy, and help children acquire and utilize media with an open and inclusive perspective [2].

6. Conclusion

This paper thought and searched from different positions about the characteristics of left-behind children's use of social media, their preferences, and the impact of left-behind children's socialization. And from this, both positive and negative influences can make changes in the lives of left-behind children are understand. In summary, the socialization of left-behind children in rural areas is evolving with the growing influence of social media. While it can fill some gaps in parental and educational support, it also poses challenges such as misinformation and excessive screen time. Proper guidance is essential. Balancing the pros and cons of social media is critical to the social development of these children. And social media plays a dual role in the socialization of left-behind children. It can strengthen their self-concept, provide emotional support, and enhance their social experience. But it also poses risks, such as cyberbullying and overdependence, that can interfere with real-world social skills. Striking a balance between online and offline interactions, along with parental guidance, is critical to harnessing the benefits while managing the risks of social media in the socialization of disconnected children. Social media, especially digital devices, have a strong influence on left-behind children. They often use it for personal satisfaction due to lack of supervision, which can distract them from learning. Media literacy is crucial; it helps them use media productively, while poor media literacy can lead to problems such as "internet addiction". To improve socialization and learning, it is necessary to focus on improving media literacy among these children. As some solution, media literacy is essential for left-behind children. Schools should integrate media literacy

into their curriculum instead of banning devices altogether. Parents and guardians should understand the role of media in their children's lives and guide them responsibly. This approach empowers children to use media for both learning and emotional support, helping them to cope more effectively with their circumstances.

Investigating the impact of social media on the socialization of left-behind children in China is of great social and academic importance. For example, research can provide schools and educational institutions with insights on how to better support the social development of left-behind children, including social skills and mental health. And understanding the impact of social media on the socialization of left-behind children can help the government and NGOs better formulate relevant policies and programs to improve their quality of life and social adaptability. However, previous studies have their limitations, for example, many early studies were limited to small samples or specific regions, making it difficult to generalize to the entire population of left-behind children in China. Therefore, future studies should use larger samples, cover different regions, and combine quantitative and qualitative methods to better understand the impact of social media on the socialization of left-behind children.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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