

Exploring the Impact of Smartphone Shopping on Consumer Relationships in Rural China: A Case Study of Village H

Mengyuan Zheng

School of history and culture school of ethnology, Southwest University, Chongqing 400715, PR China

Abstract: As a consumer software, mobile shopping apps are impacting the traditional rural markets in China, which have been weakening due to the loss of consumer base. This phenomenon has led to the gradual replacement of traditional rural markets by online shopping, eradicating both the consumption and social functions traditionally held by these markets. Efficient, cost-effective, and secure online shopping is gradually replacing the risky rural markets. However, this transition also entails the deconstruction of longstanding "acquaintance customer" relationships between buyers and sellers.

Keywords: Social network, smartphone, rural society.

1. Introduction

In traditional rural China, living off the land and working diligently has been the way of life for generations of farmers. However, with economic development and media evolution, influenced by both external and internal factors, this hierarchical structure of singular farmers has been diversified. For instance, in the village I surveyed, many engage in farming during the summer and working in other sectors during the winter. Non-agricultural laborers in rural areas are increasing, with more migrating to larger cities for work. Living in first and second-tier cities, they unconsciously mimic and adopt the consumption patterns of urbanites. Acting as cultural intermediaries, they bring back these new urban ways to the village, primarily imparting them to the elderly who remain at home, thus initiating a process of cultural feedback. Affordable online shopping goods align with the traditional frugal consumption views in rural areas, making smartphones widely accepted in rural society. However, with changes in consumption patterns, traditional consumption relationships in rural China are also affected.

With the increase in disposable income and the prevalence of media such as television and smartphones, information about new things continuously enters the rural landscape, stimulating rural consumption. The traditional method of local item exchange, such as market trading, can no longer satisfy the needs of people amidst globalizations. People find themselves caught in modern tensions. Transitioning offline exchanges to online platforms, where all goods circulate as information globally, money transforms into digital form exchanged in intangible space. In the context of globalization, online shopping fulfills people's consumption needs, quietly becoming a popular shopping method in Village H. The rise of online shopping in rural areas is closely linked to the widespread use of smartphones. With the explosive development of internet technology in China over the past decade, the carriers of the internet are rapidly evolving. Compared to PC platforms, smartphones are more portable and versatile. The live-streaming e-commerce model significantly lowers the threshold for online shopping, especially for elderly rural residents with limited educational levels. Video-based product presentations, providing a visual

representation, better suit their consumption habits. In this context, online shopping penetrates Village H society, impacting traditional markets. Its changes extend beyond shopping methods.

2. The Decline of Traditional Marketing-day

Since ancient times, China has been known as an agrarian society, with rural populations far outnumbering urban populations. Moreover, reducing the rural population ratio in the short term remains a considerable challenge. As the majority of the population resides in rural areas, the level of media development therein not only significantly influences the structural changes in China's rural political and economic landscape but also constitutes a pivotal aspect of the potential societal transformation in 21st-century China. With the rapid advancement of reform and modernization in China, profound changes have occurred in the traditional rural structure. According to surveys, since the 1980s, villages with outbound labor proportions ranging from 51% to 75% accounted for 17.4% nationwide. By 2022, the total number of rural migrant workers in China reached 295.62 million, exceeding half of the rural population. The significant outflow of labor has hollowed out rural areas, creating a "subjectless familiar society."

The powerful influence of smartphones covers every corner of the world, making possible what traditional mass media could not achieve. In the past, production and exchange in Village H primarily occurred in physical offline spaces, through face-to-face interactions. Market days were essential forms of production and exchange in Village H, colloquially referred to as "gathering." According to G. William Skinner in "Rural Markets and Social Structure in China," farmers' social relationships, marriages, temples, and clans depend on the market system. The market is not just an economic trading place but also a carrier of culture. Over time, the "Chang" has played a significant role in Village H society as the primary site for production and exchange activities. It is not only a physical space where various goods gather but also a public space for rural community members to interact. Besides exchanging goods, the "market" is also a hub for information exchange. However, many stall owners now lament the

decreasing number of people attending market days.

"In the past, there used to be a lot of people at the market, both buyers and sellers. But now, it's not the same. There are noticeably fewer people; they've all gone into the city. Business is slow, and we're afraid to bring in new goods."

Online consumption has taken advantage of the situation in the "subjectless society." With the hollowing out of rural areas and the aging population in towns and villages, the scale of market days has significantly diminished. During interviews, many elderly individuals reminisce about the bustling scenes of market days in their youth.

"The sellers are at their stalls from dawn till dusk. We set out before dawn, with everyone in the village, young and old, heading there. By the time we arrive, it's fully daylight. I usually start by buying a couple of oil pancakes to eat. The street is bustling with all sorts of things for sale - scissors, mirrors, soap, corn wine - these are what we usually buy. Whether you have money in your pocket or not, you go there anyway. It's just fun to be part of the hustle and bustle, you know, like to enjoy ourselves."

In the past, market days were essential social events in rural areas, with Village H revolving around market activities to form a social circle. Firstly, people would make arrangements in advance to go to the market together, typically with family members, neighbors, or friends. This practice maintained important social relationships based on kinship and locality, and during the process of traveling together, social relationships were continuously adjusted. Secondly, the market was a regional space and an important venue for residents' activities within its area. It served as a public space for various information exchanges. Within the market, residents acquired and exchanged homogenized information, which was a cultural norm. Over time, the objective conditions filled with visible and potential social interactions shaped the market into an important "conversation place." Therefore, people not only obtained the goods they needed during market days but also learned about the latest developments in their social networks. After a day at the market, even if physically tired, women would still share various true or false pieces of information with their husbands before going to bed. However, nowadays, the young labor force in the village has all gone out to work, leaving behind the elderly with lower consumption capabilities. As a result, the flow of people gradually decreases, and in a market, there may be more sellers than buyers. Simultaneously, income from employment and local township enterprises has brought stable cash flow, leading to many functions of the market being replaced by various shops in the village and township.

3. The Spread of Smartphone Shopping

With the rapid advancement of communication and media technologies, the influence of media has pervaded daily life on an unprecedented scale. New technologies have substantially diminished geographical and temporal barriers, resulting in the formation of a media landscape characterized by the widespread dissemination of information. The ways in which individuals engage with media have evolved from meeting singular informational needs to embracing more multifaceted, sensory, and aesthetic aspects of everyday consumption.

In Village H, many middle-aged and elderly residents in Group Three actively use Meituan Youxuan, thanks to the

promotional efforts of Aunt Xiao. Through referrals from acquaintances, she became a group leader for Meituan Youxuan in the area covered by Village H. Aunt Xiao has enlisted almost all the permanent residents of Group Three into her group and established the "H Shopping Group." Every day, she forwards time-limited discount items at irregular intervals, ranging from 5 RMB chicken legs to six RMB bottles of cola. Additionally, she takes advantage of Meituan Youxuan's flash sales to stock up goods for her small shop. For example, a box of milk costs 35 RMB from the distributor, but after discount on Meituan Youxuan, it only costs 30 RMB. Aunt Xiao mobilizes her acquaintances to help her place additional orders to meet her stocking needs. As a group leader, Aunt Xiao receives a commission of approximately 10% of the item price each time a member of Group Three successfully places an order.

This format is not unique to just Village H; nearby villages also have small shop owners who have become Meituan Youxuan group leaders in their respective villages. Aunt Xiao once mentioned that despite feeling her age catching up, she indulges in entertainment on Douyin occasionally. However, she still finds operating business transactions on her phone somewhat daunting. Fortunately, the Meituan Youxuan responsible person in the town guided her every step of the way, from installing the app, registering, creating groups, to receiving orders, providing comprehensive support. Of course, the most challenging aspect is not finding such a group leader but rather establishing new consumer habits. Many urban seniors are hesitant about online shopping, let alone rural elderly individuals who lack the presence of their children and have limited avenues for learning. Therefore, the most challenging step is to enable and motivate smartphone users in the village to use online shopping platforms. Local small shop owners are the ideal promoters as they are well-acquainted with people of all ages in the village and enjoy a foundation of trust with fellow villagers. Thus, when Aunt Xiao, as a group leader, established WeChat shopping groups and taught villagers step by step how to link WeChat and place orders, most villagers were willing to learn and use the platform. Firstly, because the products offered online are significantly cheaper than those in stores and markets, and secondly, Aunt Xiao's personalized "promotion" and "one-on-one teaching" created a sense of obligation among acquaintances, making it difficult to refuse. After about a year of effort, the Meituan Youxuan shopping group in Group Three of Village H has attracted over 50 members, and the Meituan delivery truck from the town, which used to come every two days, now visits daily. This transition demonstrates the acceptance of this new shopping method by the villagers.

4. The Disappearance of "Old Regulars" Due to Online Shopping:

The decline of traditional "markets" and the rise of online shopping have led to the weakening of traditional interpersonal relationships, manifested in changes in the relationships between buyers and sellers. Firstly, in traditional rural markets, consumer behavior is mostly influenced by "guanxi" (personal connections).

"When we go out to buy things or eat, we usually go to the shops owned by people we know. We often support their businesses, and in return, our relationship gets better. Generally, we get things a little cheaper than others or get some extras. It's normal, you know, the 'familiar customer

price."

In traditional markets, benefits gained from transactions vary due to "guanxi" (personal connections). "In the market, the lack of information, its scarcity, uneven distribution, and inefficiency... many ways in which markets operate can be described as an effort to reduce ignorance for some, increase it for others, or prevent some from being ignorant." Therefore, people actively establish familiar relationships between buyers and sellers to prevent the risks associated with information imbalance. Traditional Chinese rural markets are to some extent highly reliant on "guanxi" and are considered "familiar markets." However, when "guanxi" becomes a necessity, markets exhibit corresponding side effects, including distrust and fraudulent behavior among unfamiliar buyers and sellers. For example, a common trick in the market is tampering with weights and measures, known as "cheating." It is widely acknowledged in the village that unfamiliar vendors are generally avoided, as instances of underweight or shortchanging are frequent.

Utilizing mobile phone shopping effectively compensates for such characteristics of traditional rural markets. For the villagers in Village H, online shopping eliminates the need for direct negotiations between buyers and sellers. The Meituan group leader posts discount information in the WeChat shopping group, where members can directly place orders for desired items. The next day, the Meituan Youxuan delivery truck from the town delivers the goods to Aunt Xiao's small shop, where buyers can pick them up. Both the quality and quantity of goods are guaranteed, making this a preferred and secure consumption method for villagers. The risks of traditional markets and the game between buyers and sellers are resolved through online shopping. However, this also diminishes the time and effort invested in establishing familiar relationships between buyers and sellers.

The phenomenon of rural-to-urban migration, resulting in the rapid dispersion of the rural population, has considerably diluted the unique social bonds inherent in rural communities. This has led to a decline in communal gatherings and conversations within villages, with interpersonal interactions increasingly mediated through mobile phones in the digital age, primarily for information dissemination rather than exchange. Consequently, compared to urban mobile phone users, rural areas, particularly in the 1990s, have struggled to adapt to the interactive nature of mobile communication. In surveys, when asked about which transition - from landline to mobile phones or from mobile phones to smartphones - was more profoundly felt, most respondents identified the shift to smartphones as a "transformative change."

Villagers in Village H unconsciously include regular market visits as part of their local activities, forming a regional social circle. The dominant introduction of smartphone shopping challenges traditional markets based on material exchanges, gradually leading to the dissolution of social circles centered around traditional market processes. People no longer have as close contact as before. As Yan Yunxiang stated, individualization is gradually emerging in Village H.

5. Symptoms of Discomfort Caused by Smartphones

Whether it is the "mobile subject familiar society," "unfamiliar subject familiar society," "semi-familiar society," or "weakly familiar society," the exclusion of relationships

beyond blood, geographical, and ethnic ties has contributed to the closed and exclusive nature of rural social structures. Faced with newcomers or unfamiliar objects, the sense of insecurity stemming from unfamiliarity is amplified within the inherently closed and exclusive rural community. Thus, individuals utilize smartphones as tools to strengthen internal relationships and deepen ethnic identity. Whether seeking new employment opportunities or addressing life challenges, social interactions, and emotional needs, smartphones merely serve to open more doors, while the decision to alter the scope of interactions lies not with the tool itself. They construct a "secure" shell to adapt to rural changes, yet simultaneously draw boundaries, forming their own information cocoon.

However, in the new social networks of electronic cyberspace, the degree of participation and modes of practice have changed, leading to new implications of social inequality in social interactions. In Village H, illiteracy due to lack of education preventing smartphone usage and economic constraints hindering access to smartphones and broadband services are prevalent. Whether gazing longingly at smartphones or squatting under neighboring walls to access Wi-Fi, fundamentally, electronic networks constitute relational and embedded resources, or in other words, a form of social capital. In the era of globalization and digitization, underdeveloped societies and marginalized groups are at risk of being excluded from these networks, exacerbating social and interpersonal inequalities.

The generally lower level of education prevalent in rural areas determines the limited ability of elderly individuals to learn and master smart devices. Moreover, facing new technologies, rural seniors often lack the confidence and understanding required for learning. Even if rural elderly individuals possess smartphones, the absence of their children, who may be working elsewhere, to guide them on how to use these devices regularly, coupled with the fact that their peers also lack digital skills, creates a dilemma where they find themselves unable to seek adequate guidance. Consequently, they struggle to deepen their usage and proficiency in new media platforms. In rural areas, support mechanisms tailored for the elderly are still insufficient. Despite a strong desire to use smartphones, the absence of guidance often leaves elderly individuals stumbling along the path of smartphone usage.

The information environment in rural areas is often harsh, particularly with the rampant dissemination of questionable content by the health product industry targeting elderly users. This industry's tactics effectively brainwash elderly users, leading them to unquestioningly believe in such content while disregarding other information sources. Furthermore, elderly users typically possess low levels of media literacy, have limited channels for accessing information, and lack both a sense of vigilance and the ability to discern. Lastly, the younger generation often lacks patience when dealing with elderly users. It's crucial to acknowledge that the younger generation generally has a higher level of education compared to the elderly. Therefore, we should exhibit greater patience and employ methods that are more accessible to them when educating them about media literacy.

Rural elderly individuals encounter numerous challenges when faced with smartphones, often perceived as a double-edged sword. These difficulties stem from their low cultural literacy and limited understanding. Consequently, they feel deeply powerless when confronted with smartphones. In the absence of proper guidance, rural elderly individuals not only fail to enjoy the conveniences offered by smartphones but also

experience anxiety due to information disparities.

In the backdrop of smartphones becoming indispensable tools in social production and daily life, rural elderly individuals, as a marginalized group, find themselves subjugated under the dominance of technological rationality. Viewing technological alienation through a developmental lens and fostering a rational perspective on technology are crucial steps toward integrating value elements into technological rationality. Critically examining technology facilitates the reconstruction of harmonious relationships between humans and technology.

While recognizing the positive impacts of smartphones on the lives of rural elderly individuals, it's imperative to address the issues they provoke. By adopting a balanced approach, we can acknowledge both the beneficial effects and the challenges posed by smartphones in rural communities.

6. Conclusion

The article delves into the impact of shifts in consumption patterns on social interactions from both internal and external perspectives. Primarily, with the efflux of consumption subjects, traditional markets have undergone gradual decline, thus impeding their consumer functions. This phenomenon has culminated in the diminishing role of traditional markets as public spaces and social hubs, exacerbating the loss of vibrancy within regional social circles due to inadequate maintenance by pivotal members. Secondly, propelled by e-commerce platforms, an expanding cohort of rural residents has been assimilated into user groups. Embraced by traditional rural constituents, these novel consumption methodologies offer quality assurance, convenience, and expeditiousness. To a certain extent, online shopping mitigates the risks associated with information asymmetry prevalent in traditional markets. Nonetheless, the time-

honored "acquaintance customer" relationships between buyers and sellers in traditional markets have been gradually eroded. Finally, the article scrutinizes the array of issues and challenges precipitated by smartphones from the perspective of rural elderly individuals. In sum, while changes in consumption patterns have engendered heightened consumer efficiency, they have also dismantled the relational fabric cultivated through consumption between buyers and sellers. In this regard, smartphones have undermined interpersonal networks within regional bounds.

References

- [1] He Xuefeng: On the semi-acquaintance society - understanding a perspective of the village committee election (Political Science Research, China 2000), p.61-69 (In Chinese)
- [2] Wu Chongqing: Society without subject acquaintances (Open Age, China 2002), p.121-122 (In Chinese)
- [3] Huang Junhua: The change of rural communication tools and the deconstruction of rural meaning - Take the current situation of communication in the southeast of Henan Province as an example (News Communication, China 2010), p.65-67 (In Chinese)
- [4] G.WilliamSkinner: Marketing and Social Structure in Rural China (Association for Asian Studies, America 1998)
- [5] Fei Xiaotong: From the Soil —The Foundations of Chinese Society (SHANGHAI RENMIN CHUBANSHE, China 2006)
- [6] Gao Lisha: Everyday life and smart phone practice (Ph.D., Yunnan University, China 2018), p.27.
- [7] Zhang Kuo. County, Shanxi Province—Based on the survey of Village A in Zuoyun on the Life of Rural Elderly Study on the Influence of Smart Phone (MS., Northwest A&F University, China 2020), p.11.
- [8] Information on: <https://www.stats.gov.cn>