The Characteristics and Value of Internet Use in the Elderly

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ABSTRACT

With the rapid development of science and technology, a digital "silver wave" is rising under the dual era background of informatization and aging. Based on the theory of three elements of use value and the theory of social reconstruction, this paper analyzes the group characteristics of the Internet use behavior of the elderly and the Internet use's impact on the life reconstruction of the elderly. The Internet use of the elderly group has the characteristics of the elderly themselves, online content and services, and environmental conditions. Internet use behavior contributes to the reconstruction of the role, relationship network and discourse power of the elderly.

Keywords: The elderly, Internet, Use characteristics, Use value

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of science and technology is accompanied by the arrival of the information age. Twenty years later, the Internet has emerged since the world's first electronic computer came out in 1946. The development of industrialization has caused human society to start a networked society rooted in the Internet based on the industrial society. The Internet has broken the boundary of time and space and reshaped the social form. At the same time, human individuals embedded in the social structure are also changing their social behaviors and organizational modes. The Internet has gradually penetrated into every aspect of life and has become an essential part of people's lives. At the end of the 20th century, the phenomenon of aging caused by the drastic changes in the global population structure gradually began to spread to China. With the deepening of the ageing of our society, the issue of the elderly has attracted more and more attention from all walks of life. A research report by Internet survey company Jupiter Media Metrix indicates that users over 55 years of age have become the fastest growing group of Internet users in the world. Thus, under the interactive background of aging and networking, the rapid expansion of the scale of elderly Internet users has become a global phenomenon. In the era of the information explosion, the Internet is one of the important media for individual socialization. As the main body of Internet use, the elderly should be paid special attention to because of the particularity of their group.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the 1990s, personal computers began to be widely used in developed countries such as Europe and the United States. Therefore, research on the elderly and the Internet started late in the academic field, and domestic research on the Internet use behavior of the elderly is relatively concentrated. Chen Rui and wang Tian believe that under the social background of the information age, the increase of "silver netizens" in China is just an epitome of the popularization of the Internet and the surge of the global Internet users. Meanwhile,many functions of traditional media ignore the needs of the elderly audience. As a representative of the new media, the Internet gradually attracts more elderly people due to its diversified contents. Entertainment, communication and resocialization have also become important personal motivations for the growing number of elderly Internet users[1]. Most domestic scholars have discussed personal motivations based on the actual needs of the elderly, including the physiological needs because of health problems caused by organ aging[2], and the spiritual needs because of negative emotions caused by retirement loss[3], in order to smoothly adapt to the continuous socialization needs generated by the current social development[4]. For the research on the influencing factors of the elderly's Internet use, the academic community mostly distinguishes them from subjective and objective aspects. Subjective factors include the elderly's own attitudes and concepts about aging, innovation and personality[5], objective factors include demographic factors, Economic status, urban and rural, social support, and so on[6]. Some scholars have studied the influencing factors of Internet use among the elderly from different theoretical perspectives such as planned behavior theory and expectation confirmation theory[7][8]. Regarding the impact of Internet use among the elderly, most domestic studies include the physical level[9][10], the psychological level[11][12],and the social level[13].

It can be seen that there are abundant domestic documents on Internet use by the elderly, but few domestic scholars have conducted comprehensive research on the value of Internet use by the elderly. At present, only a few

hypotheses about the value of Internet use to the elderly have been confirmed, and these questions need to be further studied. And the elderly, as a special group, have the characteristics of using the Internet that are obviously different from other age groups, which should also be paid attention to. Based on these, the paper proposes the following two questions:what are the group characteristics of Internet use among the elderly? What value does Internet use bring to the lives of the elderly?

3. INTERNET USAGE CHARACTERISTIC OF THE ELDERLY

According to the theory of three elements of use value, the value of a thing not only depends on the quality characteristics of the thing itself, but also on the quality characteristics of the subject using the thing and the characteristics of the environment in the process of use. From this perspective, the characteristics of Internet use can be analyzed from three levels: netizen, Internet and network use environment. Due to the particularity of the group, the elderly in the process of using the Internet have characteristics that are different from those of other groups, especially young Internet users.Based on this, this paper analyzes the network usage characteristics of the elderly Internet users from three aspects: the subjects of Internet use (the elderly themselves), the objects (the network contents and services used by the elderly) and the mediators (the living environment of the elderly).

3.1. Subjective Characteristics

3.1.1. Using attitude

Older people tend to be more mature due to differences in age and experience. Unlike young people who use the Internet for the purpose of playing games, venting, etc., older people use the Internet mostly with a serious attitude. Taking online speech as an example, compared with the wanton abuse and spoofing of young people, whether it is entertainment events or current affairs news, the elderly are more tolerant and the speech is more rational. The elderly also have a high degree of adhesion and loyalty when they use the Internet. They tend to choose certain software or functions according to their interests and hobbies, and have a high degree of participation, which even extends to real life. In terms of network trust, due to the low level of social information acceptance, although the elderly are more vigilant to network information than the young, they often get cheated online due to the lack of identification ability of the authenticity of network information. Under the vicious circle, the trust of the elderly on the Internet is increasingly reduced.

3.1.2. Behavior pattern

Information acquisition has always been the main behavior pattern of modern people surfing the Internet, in which there is no difference between the elderly and the young. In terms of the types of information concerned, the elderly pay more attention to health care information due to physiological needs such as the decline of physical function and the desire for a long and healthy life. The life course of the elderly group is accompanied by the great changes of the society, the rapid development of the society and the influx of diversified social values. The elderly hope that they can keep up with the pace of the times and maintain sensitive social cognition, so the social current affairs information is also the information type concerned by the elderly Internet users. After the elderly withdraw from social life, it is inevitable to have a psychological gap, and they are often more eager to realize their self-worth. In order to regain the recognition and respect of the society, sharing their own experience and knowledge online has become the main way for the elderly to achieve social interaction, such as forwarding all the links they think are meaningful in the Wechat, or sharing their own life experience and insights.

3.2. Objective Characteristics

3.2.1. Perceived usefulness

Whether it is online or offline goods or services, most of the elderly are more in pursuit of material practicality. Old netizens are still in the initial stage of exploring the Internet, and they have a strong purpose when using the Internet. The search of medical and tourism information is based on the pursuit of health and the need for pleasure. The search of medical and tourism information is based on the pursuit of health and the need for pleasure; Wechat is used to communicate with friends and family, and so on. Online behaviors such as Weibo, which tend to be more casual, are less common among older netizens. Therefore, for the elderly users of the Internet, the practical value is more than the external performance can become the main factor affecting their choice of a certain network service and continue to use. The use of the Internet must make the elderly feel that it is helpful to their daily life and can meet their internal needs, or they will not use it.

3.2.2. Perceived ease of use

As a group of "digital immigrants", due to cognitive function degradation and other reasons, the elderly tend to regard the Internet as a distant thing and think that they cannot learn complex network operations, so they have a sense of fear in the process of learning and use. Learning while forgetting has also become the norm for the elderly when they go online. Compared with the strong learning

ability and adaptability of the young users, the elderly Internet users often need to spend more time to learn the same network operation and overcome the problem of forgetting in the learning process. In addition, their self-esteem makes them unwilling to ask others for help too much. Over time, the elderly are more likely to give up using the Internet. Therefore, convenient, simple, and easy-to-use Internet operations have become a major feature of the elderly's use of the Internet.

3.3. Mediator Characteristics

3.3.1. Living condition

After retirement, the leisure time of the elderly has greatly increased. At the same time, due to the improvement of living standards and the popularization of the Internet, the economic consumption of using the Internet has gradually decreased. So most elderly people have sufficient time and economic conditions to learn to go online. With the changes in the family structure and the changes in living styles, such as the transition from the main family to the nuclear family, the number of empty-nest elderly has increased; Village relocation or demolition brings about the phenomenon of village in the city, which leads to indifference in interpersonal communication. As a result, children are not always around, and interpersonal communication between friends and neighbors is gradually weakened. The spiritual life of the majority of the elderly is relatively monotonous, and loneliness gradually increases. At this time, various services and contents on the Internet can greatly enrich the life of the elderly. The adequacy of time and economy and the lack of spiritual life have become important living conditions for the elderly to start using the Internet.

3.3.2. Peer group

When the elderly gradually withdraw from the social life, the field of life also shifts from the social stage to the family, and the scope of social contact is correspondingly reduced. Interaction with others has become one of the main ways for the elderly to participate in the society. Due to the same experience, life situation and other reasons, when choosing social objects, the elderly tend to choose peer groups for communication in order to avoid generation gap. According to Cooley's "me in the mirror" theory, people always adjust their attitudes and behavioral norms based on how others perceive them in social interactions. When internet usage is widespread among peer groups, older people will also become interested in the internet. Whether it's advice from peers or an attempt to communicate with a peer group, the Internet use behavior of the elderly is often accompanied by peer pressure.

3.3.3. Intergenerational interaction

After retirement, family field is the main place for the elderly, and family support plays a great role in promoting the elderly to use the Internet, among which intergenerational interaction is particularly important. It is not only one of the purposes for the elderly to use the Internet, but also the main source of motivation for Internet use. After the individual enters old age, the channels for social connection become narrower. Family members, especially children who are "digital aborigines", have become the main target of elderly groups seeking help when surfing the Internet. Studies have shown that whether children teach the Internet has become an important factor affecting the elderly's Internet using[14]. If their children show impatience or refusal when the elderly ask about Internet access, the elderly tend to have negative emotions and resist Internet access. Therefore, intergenerational support and help are an indispensable part of the elderly's Internet using.

4. THE VALUE OF INTERNET USE IN THE ELDERLY'S LIFE

The theory of social reconstruction was first proposed by American sociologist Professor Benstone. He believes that with the increase of age, the elderly's thinking and movement gradually become slower. At the same time, various environmental factors will threaten and destruction the elderly's competitiveness, so the elderly group is often considered to be vulnerable or incapable, and the elderly have become dependents in the general impression[15]. Therefore, the society should pay attention to the reconstruction of the old people's adaptation skills and confidence to avoid the disintegration of the old people's life caused by the influence of various aspects. For the elderly, if they are assumed to be absolute "non-contributors to society" simply because of their biological age, and deprive them of the opportunity to return to society. This is not only a violation of the legitimate rights of the elderly, but also the seeds of instability within the family and the whole society. Participating in the society is not simply coming out from the family and entering the society. As a special social group, the reconstruction of old people's life should arouse social reflection. As one of the characteristics of the time, the Internet has an important impact on everyone's life. From the perspective of social reconstruction theory, this paper specifically targets the elderly group, and focuses on the process and value of Internet use in helping the elderly to rebuild their lives in three aspects: role, relationship network, and discourse power.

4.1. Group Role Identification

Giddens' self-identity theory shows that in the context of modernity, the changing self is explored and constructed

as part of the reconsidering process that connects individual change and social change[16]. In the process of reconstructing the individual role of the elderly, the elderly reflectively understand the new role and new status, and form an individual's positive self-awareness. Meanwhile, the elderly gain social recognition from others in the process of self-acceptance. The role identity of the elderly group develops dynamically under the interaction of individual self-construction and social structure construction. Social structure, policy, culture, and individual reflectiveness collectively affect the self-integration of such individuals. A person once played his role in the social stage and made contributions to the society, then retired from the social stage at a certain age according to the existing social system, and was labeled as an "old man" by the society at this time. When a person is imposed a certain social role, others' classification of the individual's behavior will be affected by the inherent impression of this role, resulting in the individual passively accepting and playing these roles under the social expectation. After being labeled as "old" by the society, the elderly passively become a social vulnerable group, and their role has changed from a social mainstay to a social "burden". Many old people cannot accept and adapt to their "elderly" status, so the reconstruction of new roles and self-identity are particularly important.

Internet use behavior can contribute to the social identity of the elderly. In the process of using the Internet, the elderly can reunderstand the society and participate in the society, such as sharing their experience with others through the network. Although the elderly have retired, they can still return to the social stage by disseminating knowledge and experience, and gain the recognition of others in the social field. After decades of contributions to the society, the elderly continue to do what they can in the online world after retirement. They should be respected by the society even if they simply enjoy their retirement life. The inclusive cultural characteristics of the age demonstrated by the Internet can also effectively help the elderly to adapt to the new social role positioning and gain social recognition.

Social response largely constrains a person's self-awareness, the attitude that society adopts towards an individual, and the inward-looking consciousness of an individual after receiving social feedback, both of which affect the individual's perception and understanding of himself. That is to say, a person is more likely to see himself through the evaluation of others. Individuals will constantly strive to contact and understand the field in which they are located, and meanwhile carefully observe and experience the relevant information that the field is always feeding back to the individual, so as to determine the degree of integration with the field. Therefore, for the "digital immigrant" elderly group, the learning and use of the Internet not only brings new social identity from the perspective of others, but also means the elderly's gradual adaptation and integration in the Internet era and the expression of the self-confidence.All of these help the elderly to better achieve self-acceptance.

4.2. Relationship Network Reconstruction

Chinese people have always attached great importance to social relations in interpersonal communication. Chinese society is an ethical society as well as a relational society. The "ethics" here is not the moral good and evil, but the "relationship". The "differential order pattern" put forward by Professor Fei Xiaotong is a concise summary of the ethics-oriented society in China: "Our pattern was not bundles of neatly tied wood, but ripples like a stone thrown on the surface of the water. Take 'oneself' as the center, push out one round after another, push further and further, also push thinner and thinner."[17]Every individual is in the network of social relations from affinity to estrangement, from proximity to distance. After the elderly group returns to the family after retirement,the original relationship network is broken due to the change of social roles, especially the support network established in the social field. Although not completely dissipated, it has lost the function of social support to a certain extent. At the same time, the relationship network in the family field also has a corresponding transformation due to the sudden return of the elderly. The use of the Internet is a good way to help the elderly to establish a new network of relationships.

According to the theory of "differential order pattern", the ethical support network in the family field is the first to change when the elderly individuals use the Internet. For example, technological barriers to the elderly's use of the Internet may prompt them to turn to their families for help first,especially from their children.Such feedback behavior not only effectively promotes the intergenerational interaction between parents and children, but also enhances the understanding and support between the two generations for each other's behavior and culture, and continuously promotes the integration of parents' and children's lives. The Internet use of the elderly has given them new channels and topics of communication with their children and developed a more intimate intergenerational network.

What follows is a new network of social domains built by the elderly through the Internet. The Internet can help solve the problems of elderly people's weakened contact with the outside world due to their return to family. The characteristics of the Internet that breaks the space and time limit can help the elderly to strengthen the social connection, and let the elderly group, especially the elderly after retirement to adapt to the change from acquaintances to strangers. For example, the elderly follow their own interests to interact with others in the online community, and even extend the interactive relationship to real life, so as to enrich the elderly life and develop their own new social network.

4.3. Discourse Power Regeneration

In the information age background, as the "digital immigrants", the elderly group is often inferior to the

younger group in the acquisition of capital. When young people control valuable resources, social power--especially the discourse power--begins to lean toward the youth group, and the elderly gradually drift away from the field dominated by youth culture. Compared with the general population, the elderly groups need more social support to participate and integrate into the society. But it is worth reflecting on whether society has provided them with enough space to participate, and whether they have been cut off from participation because of their "elderly" label. In the social field where young and middle-aged people are the main force, the lack of discourse power of the elderly is increasingly serious, and the inter-generational discourse power of the family is also gradually skewed. The social and children's suspicion of the "characteristics of vulnerable groups" presented by the elderly is inadvertently revealed, which is exactly the most easily to stimulate the inferiority and resistance of the elderly. Under the dual effects of others' exclusion and self-exclusion, it is often difficult for the elderly to connect with the previous social life and participate in it again after retirement, and at the same time, they cannot return to the family smoothly. Whether in the social field or in the family field, the elderly are increasingly at a loss what to do.

The elderly's Internet using can effectively alleviate the imbalance of power. The elderly can obtain information and resources through the Internet, such as re-access to the Internet for education, the way of online appointment for hospital registration, obtaining more information about re-employment or to protect their labor rights and interests,and so on. The elderly can effectively grasp more information through the Internet, and talk about the same topic with the youth group. They also can maintain and criticize the language and behaviors that stigmatize the elderly on the Internet. These online behaviors enable the elderly group to regain their voice in the Internet era in another way. In the era of big data, the Internet is often the fastest and most effective way to make its own voice heard. When the elderly integrate into the Internet, they also let the society know and pay attention to the lack of the discourse power for the elderly. Although the elderly have withdrawn from the society, the Internet can re-convey their own voice and attitude to the society and help the elderly to realize the regeneration of the discourse power.

5. SUMMARY

In the rapid development of the Internet era, the rapid growth of the elderly Internet users has brought a new development face to the aging society. As an important special group in the society, the elderly's Internet use behavior has its group specificity in three aspects: the elderly themselves, the online content and services they use, and the living environment. The use of the Internet also reconstructs the role, relationship network and discourse right of the elderly from the aspects of social psychology, family and social field. It broadens the channels for the social participation of the elderly. While enriching the life of the elderly, it responds to the slogan of "active aging" and promotes the healthy development of the aging society in China.

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