

## MASTER'S THESIS

### An exploratory study on online communication media use and social networking practices among older adults in urban China

He, Ranran

*Date of Award:*  
2020

[Link to publication](#)

#### General rights

Copyright and intellectual property rights for the publications made accessible in HKBU Scholars are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners. In addition to the restrictions prescribed by the Copyright Ordinance of Hong Kong, all users and readers must also observe the following terms of use:

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from HKBU Scholars for the purpose of private study or research
- Users cannot further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- To share publications in HKBU Scholars with others, users are welcome to freely distribute the permanent URL assigned to the publication

## **Abstract**

The use of online communication media has increased dramatically over recent years, with people from different age groups becoming users of online communication media. Many scholars have become interested in how online communication media influence or even reshape people's social networking practices and social networks. Most existing studies on the impacts of online communication media are based on the observation of online practices of the general population or the younger population, while older adults are rarely taken into consideration. An increasing number of elderly people have become active users of online communication media and they may differ from younger people in many aspects such as networking strategies. Studying the elderly population may therefore enhance our understanding of the utility of online connectivity.

Based on 35 in-depth interviews of elderly WeChat users in urban China, which were conducted between December 2017 and March 2019, this study considers two major questions: (1) How do older adults use online communication media to network with their different social relations? (2) How do the online networking practices of older adults influence their social relations? The analysis focuses on two major issues to answer the second question: accessibility and the relational intimacy of social ties. By considering these two questions, this study aims to determine whether older adults become “networked individuals” or just stay “alone together” when they become active users of online communication media.

My findings show that how elderly people use online communication media to interact with their social ties is different from younger users and their unique networking strategies have different digital impacts on their social relations. Elderly people often lack opportunities to socialise due to their age-related conditions.

Online communication media can reduce their costs of manage social ties and serve an important channel to help many elderly users to (re)connect and develop their social ties, enhancing both the accessibility and relational intimacy of those social ties and help them to become “networked individuals”.

Keywords: online communication media, aging, social network, WeChat

# Table of Contents

<b>DECLARATION</b> .....	<b>i</b>
<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>ii</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b>iv</b>
<b>List of Tables and Figures</b> .....	<b>xi</b>
<b>Chapter 1 Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 2 Social Networks and Aging</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>2.1 Introduction</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>2.2 Social Networks and Important Concepts in Social Network Analysis</b> .....	<b>5</b>
2.2.1 Social Networks and Social Ties.....	5
2.2.2 Closeness of Social Ties: Relational Intimacy .....	6
2.2.3 Utility of Social Networks: Social Support.....	7
<b>2.3 Social Networks in the Aging Context</b> .....	<b>9</b>
2.3.1. Role of Social Networks in Old Age.....	9
2.3.2 Changes in Social Networks in Old Age.....	11
2.3.3 Elderly People’s Social Networking Activities .....	14

2.3.4 Elderly People’s Networking Practices with Different Ties.....	15
<b>2.4 Conclusion .....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Chapter 3 Online Communication Media Use, Social Network and Aging....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>3.1 Introduction .....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>3.3 Online Connectivity and Online Networking Practices .....</b>	<b>25</b>
3.3.1 Online Connectivity .....	25
3.3.2 Mediated Social Networking Activities .....	26
<b>3.4 The Impacts of Online Connectivity on Social Relations.....</b>	<b>27</b>
3.4.1 Impacts of Online Connectivity on the Accessibility of Social Ties.....	28
3.4.2 The Impacts of Online Connectivity on Relational Intimacy .....	29
<b>3.5 To Be a “Networked Individual” or “Along together” .....</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>3.6 Online Communication Media and Social Relations in the Old Age.....</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>3.7 Other Influential Factors: Gender and Socioeconomic Status.....</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>3.7 Summary .....</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>3.8 Analytical Framework.....</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>Chapter 4 Methodology and Data Collection .....</b>	<b>44</b>
<b>4.1 Introduction .....</b>	<b>44</b>

<b>4.2 Research Setting .....</b>	<b>45</b>
4.2.1 Aging and Social Networks in a Chinese Context .....	45
4.2.2 Online Communication Media in China .....	47
<b>4.4 Data Collection.....</b>	<b>50</b>
4.4.1 Research Site-Nanjing.....	50
4.4.2 Study Participants.....	51
4.4.3 Recruiting Strategies and Criteria .....	52
4.4.4 Interview Arrangement.....	53
<b>4.5 Data Analysis.....</b>	<b>54</b>
<b>4.6 Limitations .....</b>	<b>55</b>
<b>Chapter 5 The Online Social Networking Activities of Elderly People.....</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>5.1 Introduction .....</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>5.2 One-to-One Chat .....</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>5.3 Group-based Activities .....</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>5.4 Support Exchange as a Networking Activity .....</b>	<b>68</b>
5.4.1 Informational Support .....	68
5.4.2 Emotional Support and Companionship .....	72

5.4.3 Instrumental Support .....	75
<b>5.5 Summary and Discussion .....</b>	<b>77</b>
<b>Chapter 6 Online Relationship Management with Different Ties.....</b>	<b>82</b>
<b>6.1 Introduction .....</b>	<b>82</b>
<b>6.2 Primary Ties.....</b>	<b>82</b>
6.2.1 Spouse .....	82
6.2.2 Children.....	84
<b>6.3 Non-primary Ties.....</b>	<b>89</b>
6.3.1 Ties with Relatives .....	89
6.3.2 Ties with Coworkers .....	94
6.3.3 Ties with Old Schoolmates.....	99
6.3.4 Other Non-Primary Ties.....	106
<b>6.3.5 Summary and Discussion.....</b>	<b>109</b>
<b>Chapter 7 Impacts of Online Connectivity on Individual Life in Late</b>	
<b>Adulthood .....</b>	<b>112</b>
<b>7.1 Introduction .....</b>	<b>112</b>
<b>7.2 Impacts on Networks and Resources.....</b>	<b>112</b>

<b>7.3 Impacts on the Fragility of Social Relations .....</b>	<b>115</b>
<b>7.4 Impacts on Autonomy .....</b>	<b>117</b>
<b>7.5 Summary .....</b>	<b>121</b>
<b>Chapter 8 Conclusion and Discussion.....</b>	<b>123</b>
<b>8.1 Introduction .....</b>	<b>123</b>
<b>8.2 Elderly People’s Online Networking Practices and Aging Condition.....</b>	<b>123</b>
<b>8.3 Impacts of Online Communication Media Use on Social Relations .....</b>	<b>127</b>
8.3.1 Accessibility of Social Ties .....	127
8.3.2 Relational Intimacy of Ties .....	128
<b>8.4 “Networked Individual” or “Alone Together”? .....</b>	<b>130</b>
<b>8.5 Research Implications .....</b>	<b>131</b>
<b>References.....</b>	<b>133</b>
<b>CURRICULUM VITAE .....</b>	<b>160</b>