

MASTER'S THESIS

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

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Date of Award:
2020

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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

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