

# A Study on the Influence of New Media on the Social Adaptability of the Aged in China

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**Abstract.** This paper investigates the development of new media in China and the current situation of China's aging population. Based on the definition of the social adaptability of the aging population, it analyzes the influence mechanism of new media on it in China. The results show that, compared with traditional media, new media significantly improves the cognitive ability, social participation level, social relations, and social psychological adaptation ability of the aged. This paper also analyzes the "digital divide" faced by the aged in integrating into new media from the aspects of desire, access, and skill. Meanwhile, different policy suggestions are put forward from the national to the individual level to promote the integration of the elderly into the digital new media so as to help them better adapt to society.

**Keywords:** New Media; Aging; Social Adaptation; The Digital Divide.

## 1. Introduction

As China enters an aging society, the social adaptability of the aging population is gradually becoming an urgent problem in China. Entering old age not only means the decline of income and social prestige but also may mean the loss of some life goals. Changes in social roles and life patterns and psychological, economic, and social life problems make the elderly face considerable challenges regarding social applicability. In recent years, China's new media has shown a strong development trend under the background of a global economic slowdown. It not only becomes a new growth point in the process of Chinese economic development but also provides a new opportunity to alleviate the social adaptability dilemma of the elderly. Based on the investigation of new media helping the aged into the present situation of social life, this paper analyzes the new media to the aged social adaptability, its internal mechanisms and influence, and the obstacles of the aged using new media to participation in social life; thereby, putting forward policy suggestions to help improve the adaptability of them.

## 2. Research background and concept definition

### 2.1 Research background

By December 2021, the number of the aged over 65 years old in China had reached 200 million, accounting for 14.2% of the total population, indicating China has officially entered an aging society. It is expected that by 2030, the population over 65 will account for more than 20% of the total population, indicating an increasingly prominent aging problem in China. The 49th Statistical Report on the Development of Internet in China released by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) shows that by December 2021, the number of Internet users in China has reached 1.032 billion, an increase of 42.96 million compared with December 2020, and the Internet penetration rate reached 73.0%. Among them, the number of Internet users over 60 years old in China is 119 million. This means that 43.2 percent of China's 267 million senior citizens are already online. It can be seen that the increasingly low threshold of Internet technology has enabled more older people to get the opportunity to participate in social life through new media.

However, compared with other young and middle-aged groups, the average participation rate of new media in the elderly group is more than 30.0% lower. Only 69.7%, 52.1%, and 46.2% of the aged Internet users could independently perform online activities such as presenting health codes,

purchasing daily necessities, and searching for information, respectively. These data show that there is a big gap between the aged and the young in the breadth and depth of new media participation, and the old still belong to the "digital vulnerable group".

## 2.2 Concept definition

Different from broadcasting, newspapers, magazines, and other traditional media, the new media in this paper adopts digital technology as the support, based on wireless communication technology and network technology media form, such as computers, OTT(Internet TV), IPTV (interactive Internet TV), mobile terminal, etc. Mobile media is the most critical form of expression of new media [1]. It transcends the limitations of regions and computer terminals. The most significant feature of new media is that it breaks the boundary between media communicators and receivers. In addition, new media also shows the characteristics of outstanding personalization, customization, a more excellent choice, and real-time information release.

In recent years, the development of Internet and mobile phone users in China has entered a plateau. In 2021, the number of mobile Internet users in China was 1.029 billion, an increase of 43 million. The number of OTT users of Internet TV reached 1.083 billion, an increase of 128 million. And the number of IPTV users was 348 million, an increase of 33 million (Table 1 for details, sources: the China Internet Network Information Center of the 49th Statistical Report on China's Internet Development).

**Table 1.** New Media development in China, 2015-2021

	Internet users (100 million)	Including mobile phone users (100 million)	IPTV (million households)	OTT (million households)	Actual cable TV subscribers (100 million households)	Among them, digital TV users (100 million)
2015	6.88	6.20	0.46	1.02	2.36	1.98
2016	7.31	6.95	0.86	1.37	2.28	2.02
2017	7.72	7.53	1.22	1.74	2.14	1.94
2018	8.29	8.17	1.55	4.20	2.18	2.01
2019	9.04	8.97	2.92	8.21	2.07	1.94
2020	9.89	9.86	3.15	9.55	2.07	2.01
2021	10.32	10.29	3.48	10.83	2.04	1.95

Although the social adaptation of the aged has been widely concerned, the definition of its concept is not uniform. For example, Havighurst et al. believe that social adaptation refers to the process in which individuals or groups actively get used to the new social environment they feel, and the analytical dimension of social adaptation of the elderly should focus on the adaptation of daily life and interpersonal relationship [2]. Li Youlian et al. believe that social participation refers to individual participation in activities that enable two-way interaction between individuals and the external environment [3]. Chen Bo divides the social adaptation of the aged into two categories: "survival social adaptation" and "developmental social adaptation". "Survival social adaptation" refers to the degree to which the elderly can take care of themselves in real social life, and "developmental social adaptation" refers to the degree to which the aged can give play to their potential and expand their self-worth in real social life [4]. In this paper, it can be regarded as a certain degree of social adaptation, as long as the elderly carry out the following two characteristics of social adaptation:

- (1) Sociality: they can contact others in society.
- (2) Interactivity: They have particular communication and interaction with others.

## 3. The impact of the development of new media on the social adaptability of the elderly

This paper believes that new media is not only a tool for the aged to maintain social interaction but also brings convenience to their life and provides entertainment. New media has become an

important channel to improve the social adaptability of the elderly. This paper believes that new media has the following four advantages for the aged:

### **3.1 Slowing down the decline of the aged's cognitive ability**

Human cognitive abilities usually include memory, thinking, and language. The deterioration of physiological function and brain structure is the main reason for the decline of cognitive ability in the elderly. Although scientists proved the inevitable connection between intelligence and age is nonexistent, the decline rate of cognitive ability and abstract thinking of the aged with a strong willingness to continue learning is relatively slow[4]. In the process of integrating the aged into new media, only through continuous learning and practice and specific information skills can allow the aged make better use of Internet services[5].

### **3.2 Improving the level of social participation of the aged**

The aged who were born in the 1960s in China or before spend most of their time with newspapers, radio, and television. Although the one-way transmission media type for the aged to understand social change blend in society has also had a certain positive effect, the information resources of one-way communication and passive acceptance are not social participation itself. In the relationship-centered new media environment, some of the aged successfully obtain the rights of expression, communication, action, and other aspects through the use of new media, realizing the reconstruction of "self" identity in the network world. This has solved a large extent of the problem of social participation of the aged.

### **3.3 Optimizing the social relations of the aged**

With the expansion of the social circle, the family relationship is at the core of the social relationship. New media also help produce this modest intimacy between two or three generations of a family. In the interview, numerous of the aged mentioned that they often use computers to help third-generation children find tutoring materials. They said, there was no Internet in the past, so they could not imagine that they could take on these roles and tasks while caring for the third generation. The aged withdraw from their original units and begin to take the path of "individuation". Through WeChat moments, most of the aged can integrate into the community and join associations, like hometown associations. Under the premise of limited social resources, new media bring broad social resources and development space for the aged, optimize declining interpersonal relationships, and make them feel no longer lonely[6].

### **3.4 Strengthening the social psychological adaptability**

Social psychology refers to the whole social psychological state that pervades society and its groups in a specific period and reflects in people's general life emotions, attitudes, and comments. First, with the changes in the living environment after retirement, the elderly are prone to psychological problems such as loneliness, depression, and low self-confidence. Thus, they can obtain information about health and life through new media, enabling them to enhance their self-confidence[7]. Second, retirement does not mean they quit mainstream society and the possibility of contact with other people. On the contrary, new media gives them a "sense of belonging" to return to the community again.

## **4. The digital divide: the barrier for the aged to use new media to participate in social life**

People have also seen a multitude of media reports on the difficulties faced by the aged in integrating into an intelligent society emerge, the so-called "digital divide". The aged have challenges in using mobile terminals to buy goods, showing health code declarations, using intelligent face recognition, and other new scenarios.

The causes of the "digital divide" among the elderly are very complex. None of these scenarios is possible without Internet access or digital terminals. When the aged use smartphones and electronic devices, most of them need help from others. According to the differences in people's use of new media, there are three main types of the digital divide: Desire, Access, and Skill.

#### **4.1 Desire**

The subjective initiative of the aged is a prerequisite for integrating into new media. The elderly not only need to overcome the habit of passively receiving information but also participate in the expression of information in new media actively. Suppose governments want more older people to participate in new media. It is pivotal for them to be aware of the benefits of new media in terms of information services, intergenerational communication, social participation, and spiritual nourishment[8]. New media education for the elderly needs to understand their real needs to stimulate their potential needs.

#### **4.2 Access**

The popularity of mobile Internet and smartphones has enabled more of the aged to cross the gate of new media. However, the proportion of elderly Internet users still has much room for improvement. The objective factors that hinder the elderly's integration into the digital world are mainly reflected in financial ability, physical function, psychological cognition level, etc[9].

#### **4.3 Skill**

The aged need specific information skills to expand the breadth and depth of digital integration. Then they can enjoy diverse services provided by new media, including opinion expression, emotional communication, and relationship construction. Moreover, the digital space dominated by young people should actively accept the equal participation of the aged and provide more suitable content, such as providing various services on WeChat official accounts, live streaming applications, and other platforms[10].

### **5. Policy suggestions and conclusions: using new media to improve the social adaptability of the aged**

The progress of digital technology and the emergence of new media pose challenges and great opportunities for the aged. In order to encourage them to remove the "digital refugee" label of vulnerable groups in the Internet world, enrich their lives, enjoy the new media dividend in the digital era, and become beneficiaries of new media technology, this paper puts forward the following four suggestions:

#### **5.1 Remodeling the positive image of the aged using new media to enhance social adaptability**

Governments should actively publicize the rich scenes of the aged participating in social life in the new media environment and guide them to improve their ability to master information technology in the process of contacting and using new media. Once the aged are familiar with using new media technologies and resources, they can also provide experience and innovative solutions for the online world to continue promoting social progress.

#### **5.2 Advocating the young generation to carry out "digital feedback" and "technological feedback" on the aged's new media literacy**

In the face of the inevitable penetration of mobile payment, online shopping, and other technological floods into the daily life of modern society, whether the elderly can smoothly integrate into the new media digital world depends to a large extent on material support and technical training from family between generations. Family members have become a vital force in promoting the popularization of new media among the aged.

### 5.3 Helping and organizing the aged to learn the use of smart terminals in life scenarios

The community should organize a variety of learning activities for them to help each other. This training is more effective because the members are relatively fixed, have similar interests, and trust each other. In this way, the aged are able to obtain new information and entertainment through the Internet and plan their trips through mobile maps. Only by allowing the elderly to truly perceive the benefits of new media technology in various scenarios can they use it much better.

### 5.4 Playing a coordinating and promoting role in narrowing the "digital divide"

With the implementation of the "New Digital Infrastructure" strategy, the government should clear the "digital life" infrastructure barriers for the aged in economically backward areas, provide Internet access opportunities, and stimulate their demand for new media technologies. The network supervision department should also further improve the management system, and create a good information environment and privacy security of the new media culture, for those who use the Internet to carry out fraud and other damage to the elderly groups of illegal acts resolutely crack down.

### 5.5 Conclusions

So far, most of the aged have no chance to access the learning opportunities of new media devices because of their decline in learning ability. Therefore, at the national, social, and individual levels, people should work together to help them better adapt to the new media era. In contemporary society, various places hold activities to narrow the "digital divide" to help the aged, and the quality of life of the aged gradually enhances.

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