Research on the media use literacy of rural youth in the digital media era

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Abstract: *With the development of digital technology and the increasing popularity of the Internet, media has become an important component of contemporary youth's lives. On the other hand, the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China proposed the strategy of "Rural Revitalization", which raises the urgent topic of how to effectively utilize rural media infrastructure for rural revitalization and development. In this process, rural youth, as the "early adopters" of innovation diffusion, play a significant role in guiding the followers. Therefore, it is timely to explore the media literacy of rural youth. This paper conducted field research in a township in Wuwei City, Gansu Province, using a combination of participant observation and in-depth interviews. It was found that the access to media among rural youth is influenced by economic level and willingness. Their media analysis skills are currently at a stage of singularity and weakness. The ability to evaluate media is greatly limited by educational level. As for media creation skills, they mainly focus on short video production. Based on these findings, it is crucial to prioritize efforts to enhance the media literacy of rural youth.*

Keywords: Rural Youth; Media Literacy; Rural Revitalization

1. Introduction

The proliferation of new media has led to an explosive growth of information, and people's interpretation of information and understanding of reality are inevitably influenced by mass media. Therefore, it has become increasingly essential for modern citizens to have a correct understanding of media, choose media wisely, and continuously enhance their ability to interpret and critically analyze media information. Mass media is the primary means through which people obtain social information, and individuals' usage behavior of media directly affects their cognitive processes and the content of information they receive. However, people's cognitive processes, content, and behavior are not solely determined by mass media. Social cognitive theory suggests that individuals' own actions, reflection on those actions, and the social environment in which they live also have a direct impact on their information cognition. In the report of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, the "rural revitalization" strategy was proposed. It is an urgent topic to discuss how to effectively utilize rural media infrastructure for rural revitalization and development. In this process, rural youth play a crucial role, making their media literacy exploration even more important.

2. Problem Statement and Research Methodology

In recent years, with the development of communication technology and the emergence of new media, the information dissemination environment has become increasingly diverse and complex. Different media have different characteristics in terms of information dissemination, and they have varied effects on their users. Lipman's concept of "mediated environment" suggests that the world we perceive through media is not a direct reflection of the real world; rather, our environment is a mediated construction. Therefore, in this environment, the choice of media and exposure to different types of information can significantly influence our behavior in relation to reality. Youth, as the most intellectually active and quick-to-embrace-new-things group in society, have frequent and extensive exposure to media, making them highly susceptible to media influences. Furthermore, youth can be divided into urban and rural youth, with significant differences in media literacy between these two groups. This paper focuses specifically on the media usage among rural youth and aims to investigate the following two questions: Firstly, in today's digital media era, what is the willingness and usage patterns of media among rural youth? Secondly, in an environment characterized by diverse media

entities, what is the state of media literacy among rural youth? By addressing the two aforementioned issues, a more comprehensive understanding of the media literacy among rural youth can be accquired, enabling us to provide better recommendations for rural revitalization strategies. Therefore, this paper aims to research the current status of media usage literacy among rural youth, and subsequently provide feasible suggestions for the implementation of rural revitalization strategies.

This study selects a township in Wuwei City, Gansu Province as the research site. It utilizes qualitative research methods such as participant observation and in-depth interviews to observe and document the research subjects. By engaging in in-depth communication with the research subjects, firsthand and credible data is obtained. Field research logs are maintained to ensure thorough documentation. After collecting the data, it will be organized and analyzed, thus the conclusion will be drawn.

3. Literature Review

In previous studies, scholars have mostly focused on researching and analyzing the media usage patterns of youth across different regions, while paying less attention to the rural youth population. Yao Junxi conducted an empirical study in Shanghai, targeting college students as the research subjects. The study examined the relationship between audience media exposure behavior and their perception of social justice, attitudes, and expression of social rights. The conclusion drawn was that college students' media exposure behavior primarily revolved around the use of emerging and social media platforms[1]. Kong Xiangwu conducted a research study on media literacy among college students in five universities in Nanjing, focusing on five types of media: the Internet, newspapers, television, magazines, and radio. The study revealed that college students had a low level of trust in media, emphasizing the need to prioritize media literacy education[2]. Yang Peng conducted a study among the youth population in Shanghai and found that the content and dissemination methods of the media objectively limited and constrained the youth's motivation for media exposure. However, it is undeniable that as recipients of media information, youth's motivation and behavioral patterns still have a significant impact on media[3]. Tang Meiling and Wei Jianwen analyzed articles published in major youth research journals such as *Youth Studies*, *China Youth Study*, and *Contemporary Youth Research* over the past decade. They found that mass media had a profound influence on the socialization of adolescents[4]. Li Tianlong, Li Mingde, and Zhang Zhijian focused on the rural youth population. Based on survey data from rural areas in four northwestern provinces of China, they analyzed the impact of media exposure on the offline public participation behavior of rural youth[5].

4. Research Subjects and Conceptual Definitions

4.1 Definition of research subjects

In defining rural youth for this study, the primary criterion is their household registration (hukou) status, specifically focusing on those who have a rural hukou. The age range considered for youth is typically between 18 and 30 years old. Therefore, rural youth in this study are defined as individuals within this age range who have a rural hukou.During the process of urbanization, many rural youth choose to migrate and work in urban areas. They may live in cities for an extended period of time, and their lifestyle, ideologies, and consumer behavior are strongly influenced by urban culture. Some rural youth may choose to stay in major cities, but factors such as their educational background, family situation, and consumption level still influence them. Therefore, even rural youth who choose to work in first-tier or second-tier cities are included in this study. In terms of the level of internet penetration, rural youth do not have a strong advantage. Most of them have lower levels of education, which means they have relatively weaker abilities to embrace new things. Additionally, their understanding and utilization of internet culture are also not sufficient. Therefore, this research primarily focuses on rural youth without urban household registration.

4.2 Definition of media literacy

Media literacy is a multidimensional concept, and currently, there is no clear and explicit definition for "media literacy" among scholars both domestically and internationally. In addition, there are differences in the definition of media literacy between domestic and foreign contexts. Foreign scholars believe that media literacy refers to the ability of individuals to learn, understand, evaluate, and use

mass communication media in modern society. It encompasses the ability to obtain information through media, make reasonable judgments about the media, and engage in media creation and production. On the other hand, domestic scholars define media literacy as the ability of individuals to understand and transform the world through media. It refers to the effective use of media to participate in social life and social management. Additionally, media literacy is seen as a comprehensive skill set that includes the ability to discern information, make choices, think critically, and engage in creative activities.

5. Research Content

5.1 Types and duration of media exposure

In the observation of 10 research subjects, it was found that the types of media exposure among rural youth are limited by their economic capacity. However, their choice of media types is relatively consistent, mainly focusing on mobile media. Xiao Qian (pseudonym), a female college graduate who chose to work in her hometown, primarily engages with media through her mobile phone and computer. "I bought my computer during college mainly for doing assignments. After graduation, there are few opportunities to use it at work because our classes mainly rely on chalkboard teaching, and we don't need to make PowerPoint presentations. I rarely use it unless I have to fill out forms occasionally. I use my mobile phone more often, watching short videos, dramas, and occasionally playing small games."

When we accessed the screen time data on Xiao Yuan's (pseudonym) mobile phone, we were surprised to find that his daily mobile phone usage reached as high as 10 hours, with a staggering 6 hours spent on watching Douyin short videos. Regarding this data, Xiao Yuan said, "Besides work, there's nothing else to do except using my phone. I haven't turned on the TV in a long time; it's just a decoration now. When I do open it, everything requires a membership. It's better to have a membership on my phone and watch."

Xiao Hong (pseudonym), who also chose to return to her hometown after attending college due to family reasons, treats her mobile phone primarily as a tool for communication. She doesn't frequently use her phone, but instead, she prefers an e-book reader. "Whenever I have free time, I like to read e-books because the e-reader is very portable, and I can take it out anytime to read. Compared to using my phone, I feel that this type of reading is more enriching and less influenced by the excessive content on the media."

In conclusion, through the observation and interviews of 10 rural youth, it was found that among common media types such as newspapers, radio, television, computers, and mobile phones, mobile media usage is the most frequent and has the longest duration. Traditional media like television, which used to be widely popular, is gradually fading out of the view of rural youth.

5.2 Types of media information focus

In the context of mobile phones being the primary medium of access, rural youth primarily obtain social information through various apps on their mobile phones, with short video apps being the most popular among them. Xiao Yuan spends nearly 6 hours a day on short video platforms. When we looked at the content categories he engages with, we found that personal interests and hobbies rank first, followed by domestic social news, and the rest consists of cultural and entertainment content. The research also discovered that the attention of rural youth to domestic political news, economic news, livelihood news, science and technology news, and international news can positively influence their "media accessment ability", "media analysis ability", and "media creation ability"[6].

Xiao Di (pseudonym) primarily obtains news information through various WeChat official accounts and video platforms on his mobile phone. Among them, he can only distinguish content published by high-quality media such as *People's Daily*, *New Chian News Agency*, and *Southern Weekly*. He holds absolute trust in the content published by these reputable media outlets. However, he maintains a skeptical attitude towards content published by local media or individuals, often considering it as entertainment or something to be laughed off. "*People's Daily*, *New China News Agency*, and others are national media outlets. The information they publish must have gone through rigorous verification. Who wouldn't trust them? But some small media outlets love spreading rumors and even deceiving people. You can't trust them. Whenever I come across something interesting happening today, I always check who publish it and whether I can trust it before deciding whether to read it or not."

Yao Yao (pseudonym) focuses on her own life and hobbies on her mobile phone, rather than social

news or hot topics. Although she has more short video apps on her phone, the content she consumes mostly revolves around her own life and interests. "I love pets and funny videos, so that's what I watch. I feel that these types of content bring some joy during my tiring work. If I watch other news or emotional videos, I tend to feel more depressed. Sometimes, even encountering one negative thing can weigh heavily on my mood, so it's not necessary to subject myself to that."

In summary, as rural youth become increasingly dependent on media, their information needs become more diverse, and their expectations for information quality are also rising. In the digital media era, it is essential to understand how young people perceive media, how they view the functions of media, and whether they can use media in a responsible manner. The answers to these questions lie in understanding the motivations behind rural youth's media usage.

5.3 Motivations for media usage

In the investigation of the motivations for media usage among rural youth, it was found that the majority of them are motivated by the desire to stay informed about news and engage in leisure and entertainment activities. Learning knowledge and socializing/chatting were also important motivations. However, there are certain differences in media usage motivations based on gender and occupation among rural youth. For example, females prioritize leisure and entertainment, as well as shopping, as their primary motivations for media engagement, while social news awareness comes second. On the other hand, for males, staying informed about social news takes precedence.

After graduating from university, Xiaoman (pseudonym) returned to the countryside and took up a job as a special post teacher. When asked about her most frequently used media and the motivation behind it, she was very clear. "Nowadays, almost everyone has their companion, which is their mobile phone. Can anyone leave the house without a phone? I definitely don't believe it. I always have to have my phone with me, especially when I'm eating. I have to have something playing on my phone, like variety shows or TV dramas, otherwise, it feels like something is missing. Additionally, I have shallow sleep, so before going to bed, I watch various live streams. Even though I don't buy anything, it's magical how I fall asleep while watching the live stream. For me, the phone serves these functions. But when I prepare lessons or study, I use a computer, which is more convenient." For her, the mobile phone serves as a companion, making her feel less lonely when she is alone. Her motivation for using the mobile phone as a medium is simple, mainly for leisure and entertainment purposes.

On the other hand, Xiaoli (pseudonym) also primarily uses a mobile phone as her main medium, but for her, the phone serves as a perfect space for cultural consumption. "Ever since I watched the anime 'Spirited Away' that the teacher showed in class during junior high, I fell in love with watching movies. Later, in university, I even took an elective course on film. After that, I started watching more movies, but usually on my phone. Every night, I watch a movie. It's both relaxing and educational. We don't usually turn on the TV at home because it requires a membership. It's more comfortable and convenient to lie in bed or on the sofa and watch movies on my phone."

Xiaoyu (pseudonym), 29 years old, is married and has a 2-year-old daughter. She has previously ventured to Lanzhou and Hubei but eventually returned to the countryside due to marriage. She has opened her own beauty and makeup shop in the city. In her life, the media she uses primarily includes mobile phones, magazines, and television, and her motivations for using them always revolve around her daughter and work. "When there are no customers at work, I browse through Douyin (a popular short video app) to see the latest bridal makeup styles and nail art designs. I save them for reference, and it gives me a wider range of styles to offer when customers come in. In our shopping mall, every stall gives out the *Hongliu Advertisement* magazine every day. When I have free time, I flip through it. It mainly contains job recruitment information, or if you want to find a cleaner, it's very convenient because the information is locally sourced, which feels more trustworthy and closer in proximity. I have previously posted apprenticeship opportunities in the magazine, but now with short videos, it's even more convenient." In her life, work and family occupy a significant amount of her energy, and the opportunities for media exposure are limited to mobile phones and magazines. The purpose of using these media is primarily related to work, serving her life and career.

6. Conclusion

Since the introduction of the "Rural Revitalization" strategy in the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, the media infrastructure in rural areas has been increasingly improved. It is

crucial to utilize these media facilities for development. In this regard, rural youth play a significant role as "early adopters" of innovative ideas and practices in rural areas[7]. Therefore, based on the analysis of rural youth's media literacy, this study finds that the current access of rural youth to media is largely constrained by economic conditions and their willingness to use it. Unless there is a compelling reason to acquire new media, their most common medium of exposure in daily life is the mobile phone. However, their ability to analyze media is evidently influenced by their environment, and their capacity to effectively extract useful information through the mobile phone medium is relatively weak. Moreover, the evaluation of media information is limited by their level of education. Those with higher education tend to be inclined towards knowledge-based occupations, which strengthens their ability to evaluate media information, while those with lower education levels may have weaker skills in this regard. In terms of creative abilities, rural youth primarily focus on video creation. Therefore, it is crucial to prioritize guiding and empowering rural youth in effectively utilizing communication media. This will not only contribute to the revitalization and development of rural areas but also support their overall progress.

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