

Generational Differences and Causes of Social Media Functional Applications in the Information Age Within Chinese Regions: A Case Study of WeChat

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Abstract: In the context of the information age, the use of social media has been popularized and become widespread. While bringing a convenient life, how middle-aged and older adults adapt to and skillfully use social media as a tool has become a topic of discussion. This paper analyzes the differences in social media use between the two generations and an in-depth investigation of the reasons and insights behind them. Therefore, this paper introduces the research subject through the social trend of “aging”, focuses on the differences between Generation X and Generation Z in the use of WeChat and the reasons behind it, provides the corresponding aging reform suggestions according to the research subject, and finally summarizes the research process and emphasizes the importance of aging reform. Finally, it outlines the research process and emphasizes the importance of aging reform. This paper finds significant intergenerational differences in social media use, which are caused by potential factors: application design, living environment, and psychological factors. This paper makes a series of recommendations to improve the social media experience of middle-aged and older adults, including the design adjustment of social media applications and the government’s policy adjustment to create an age-friendly social atmosphere.

Keywords: inter-generational study, social adaptation, social media usage, adaptive reform

1. Introduction

With the development of network technology, how people communicate has become easier and faster. We are now in a new era, also known as the information age, which comes along with it. How people communicate information has changed from disseminating physical information to using computers and big data to upload and download the required information resources [1]. People born between 1996 and 2010 are known as Generation Z. They were born and raised in the Information Age, have been exposed to the Internet since childhood, and have been influenced by the Information Age. They are more adaptable to the many technological innovations of the Information Age than people born in other eras, and Generation X refers to people born between 1964 and 1980 who were exposed to the Information Age at a later age and, therefore, may exhibit different behaviors and perceptions when using social media than Gen Z [2].

Current academic research on young people’s interactions with social media has been relatively abundant, based on the impact of social media on mental health, family relationships, and social

relationships [3]. Meanwhile, middle-aged and older adults are often chosen as subjects for research due to the more prevalent barriers to using social media. Few cross-sectional comparisons have been made between these two generations, Gen X and Gen Z. This study visually compares these two groups' social media use preferences.

Against the growing importance of aging issues, there has been a rise in hunger focusing on discussing older adults' adaptability to social media, with scholars aiming to examine the significant resistance that hinders older adults' social media use. By comparing the two generations, this study highlights the existing differences. It looks at possible causes of barriers to social media use among older adults to find ways to help alleviate the walls and support middle-aged and older adults in adapting to social media use.

To investigate the differences in social media use and the potential reasons behind the differences between Generation X and Generation Z. Focusing on the functional cognitive differences in social media use between the two generations, an investigation is launched to explore the differentiated attitudes towards social media resulting from different ages.

This paper studies the Generation X and Generation Z groups to examine the differences in social media use and the factors contributing to the differences. The trend generated by the aging society not only makes the middle-aged and elderly groups receive more attention but also triggers people to think about the degree of adaptation of the middle-aged and elderly groups to the information age nowadays. Now, more and more virtual and non-physical services are beginning to enter the horizon of the information age, in the use of WeChat, for example, the payment code of cell phone scanning, the communication platform constructed by the Internet, as well as the short videos and tweets pushed by big data. These social media functions involving information technology have permeated our lives. For the digital natives of Generation Z, it is relatively easy for them to adapt to and use these functions because they live in an era of rapid information development and social media innovation. On the other hand, middle-aged and older adults show different attitudes toward social media, which are reflected in both differences in their social media use and their perceptions of social media functions.

Theoretically, it is hoped that the study can enrich the understanding of social media use barriers among middle-aged and older adults, primarily through the comparison of the two generations, to explore the reasons for the formation of differences to gain inspiration and make some suggestions for the improvement of facilitating the use of social media by middle-aged and older adults in the future. In a practical sense, by exploring the reasons for the differences, we can improve the quality of life of middle-aged and older adults in social aspects in the future, such as the use of WeChat, QQ, and other social media, by reducing the difficulty of their operation. And help the middle-aged and elderly understand and familiarize themselves with the Internet, intelligent algorithms, and other technological innovation products in the information age.

2. Differences in Social Media Use by Generational Groups in China

2.1. Breadth

Nowadays, social media are widely used by people with various functions, such as WeChat, which combines entertainment, socialization, payment, service, etc. The social media functions that Gen X and Gen Z are exposed to are not limited to socialization and communication, and their breadth of functions provides more room for operation and flexibility for these two generations to use. Gen X and Gen Z show different ways of using social media when they are exposed to this comprehensive social media platform. After acquiring such a comprehensive social media platform, Gen X and Gen Z showed different ways of using it. Gen Z have grown up in a social media environment where they are familiar with and accustomed to using WeChat to expand their social circles, spend their leisure time, and present themselves. Therefore, they fulfill their social media needs through applications

involving more functions [4]. On the other hand, middle-aged and older adults view social media as a platform for them to obtain information and express their opinions, often with a strong sense of purpose. They see WeChat as a tool for maintaining relationships and dealing with work and life issues [5]. People at work use WeChat to improve their work efficiency and to communicate with their customer base on a work-related basis. Some retired Gen X groups use WeChat to maintain frequent contact with their loved ones and friends and build stronger intimate relationships [6]. Therefore, Gen X groups use WeChat to focus more on its social communication functions, and by using WeChat's social functions, they have satisfied their needs for social media function usage. Middle-aged and older adults' motivation to actively explore unknown parts will be weaker than Gen Z.

2.2. Depth

Gen X and Gen Z also show differences in the depth of information they care about when using WeChat. Among the social features of WeChat that both generations use together, Gen Z is more inclined to explore more ways to use WeChat beyond the range of known elements, such as the pat-a-pat feature and emoticons. They expanded the deeper parts of WeChat by changing the prefix content of the pat and adding new emoticons. Among the established features, Gen Z was more skillful in utilizing them and more in-depth in researching and exploring the parts themselves. On the other hand, the Gen X group's use of the WeChat function is relatively fixed, and the number of pats and emoticons used is relatively small, which also leads to understanding barriers in communication between the two age groups [7]. The difference between the emoticons utilized by middle-aged and older people and those of the Gen Z group can lead to a lack of understanding between the two parties, resulting in decreased intercommunication between the two generations and forming a relatively closed circle for each [1].

2.3. Strength

Gen Z uses WeChat more frequently and for longer than Gen X and spends more time keeping in touch with friends and family, such as liking and commenting on friends' circles, with middle-aged and older people tending to spend more time on WeChat [6]. Gen Z's WeChat use also involves more frequent use of WeChat Pay to make purchases and a focus on entertaining tweets and videos. The setup of features such as fingerprint recognition and face unlocking may be a barrier for some middle-aged and older adults, so they may try to avoid using WeChat for consumption, thus further reducing the time Gen X spends on WeChat [8].

3. Potential Influences Causing Intergenerational Differences in Social Media Use

3.1. Application Design

Most of the graphic designs of social media platforms nowadays take young people as the target consumer group, and the interfaces launched are also focused on serving the needs of young people. In the "All Functions Index Area" of the software design, its thinking logic and usage habits are mostly set according to the characteristics of young people, and middle-aged and old people need to spend more time adapting to this section [8]. In WeChat, many of the function areas are represented in the form of icons, and for aesthetic reasons, they are set smaller, which is difficult for middle-aged and older adults to understand. Due to the decline of memory and eyesight, recognizing and identifying the functions represented by icons will be difficult for the middle-aged and elderly groups. If memory errors occur, it is possible to mistakenly touch other parts, which further creates no change in use. In this case, it is possible that middle-aged and older adults deliberately reduce the frequency

of use of certain WeChat functions to minimize mis-touching into an unfamiliar functional block. This phenomenon is expected in the 60+ age group, but the barriers created in interface design have extended to the Gen X group. Although cell phone systems can adjust font sizes and page layouts to help middle-aged and elderly groups, the settings within social media software are still limited to enlarged font icons, and the simplicity of function use has not improved significantly. As a result, while Gen Z can use WeChat conveniently, Gen X's willingness to use it is considerably lower.

3.2. Environment

The environment can impact the frequency and form of social media use, with economic conditions and government policies playing a significant role. The Information Age has seen increased income and quality of life compared to previous eras. China is also focusing on eliminating absolute poverty and reducing income inequality. As a result, in the age of Gen Z's life, the economy was developing rapidly, and people were more likely to have their material needs met. And they turned to social media, built by internet technology, for spiritual fulfillment. Gen X grew up in an environment that did not reach the standard of living of today's information age, and people were struggling to make a living and get enough of the necessities of life. Spending more energy on work income reduces Gen X's need for social media to provide spiritual fulfillment, so social media platforms such as WeChat may not be as important to Gen X as it is to Gen Z.

3.3. Psychological Factors

Another important reason for the difference in the use of WeChat between the two generations is the psychological factors of the users themselves, especially fear. First, when middle-aged and elderly people have difficulty adapting to social media, a kind of fear will arise, called "technophobia." Even if the ability of middle-aged and older adults to adapt to social media is not significantly lower than that of other groups, the inherent thinking of the general public will give them the psychological implication that it is difficult for them to learn and use new social media functions, making them fearful of new parts and even technology. Secondly, "learned helplessness" is shared among the middle-aged and elderly. When they try to explore WeChat several times without success, they form a reflex that links attempting to use WeChat with failing to do so, which can lead to a feeling of depression and frustration among middle-aged and older adults, resulting in a decrease in their self-confidence in using WeChat successfully and a decrease in the frequency of using WeChat actively [8].

In addition, the fear of the middle-aged and elderly may also stem from the large amount of disinformation in their sphere of exposure. Gen X, while obtaining information through social media, forwarding information that they find helpful to their close friends is one of the main ways to socialize. By forwarding, they believe they can expand the reach of the information and make more people aware of an article. It is worth noting, however, that the social media used by the middle-aged and older population tends to contain false information, including exaggerated advertising campaigns, scams, and misleading remarks. This is because webpages automatically redirect them to unrelated pages when they are mistakenly accessed, leaving the opportunity for false information to enter social media. When middle-aged and older adults interact with other groups and realize that the sources of information they believe to be true may not be reliable, they may perceive much of the information on social media to be untrustworthy, becoming fearful and reducing their use of social media platforms [9].

4. Generation X's Social Media Use Dilemma and Adaptive Reforms

Gen X's social media barriers will deepen with the further development of technology. With the inability to adapt to the use of social media platforms, there will be a more closed and prominent circle between the middle-aged and the young, i.e., Gen X and Gen Z. The two generations will have difficulty understanding each other, which will make it difficult for the two generations to communicate with each other smoothly. The problem in understanding each other will make it difficult for the two generations to communicate smoothly. Moreover, with the rapid development of the Internet, middle-aged and older adults's identification of their own identity will deviate, and they will be forced to connect with unfamiliar technological products and use them to live their lives. Therefore, there is a need for software and platforms that are more convenient for the middle-aged and the elderly to adapt to this information age. The following are potential recommendations for age-appropriate reform of social media:

Governments can encourage the use of social media by middle-aged and older adults through policy development and advocacy. For example, the World Health Organization's (WTO) "active aging," proposed in 1999, aims to achieve the best possible quality of life in old age. By encouraging middle-aged and older adults to participate in training or universities for older people, their ability to accept new things can be improved, and a social atmosphere that cares for middle-aged and older adults is also more conducive to alleviating the inner fear of trying social media. In response to the large amount of false information, the government can strengthen the supervision of online information platforms to reduce the appearance of such data on social media sites for all age groups to enhance the public's trust in social media. When the fears of middle-aged and older adults are reduced, they are likely to develop a need to want to actively explore social media because social media can be used to fill the leisure and entertainment gap in senior life. Intergenerational communication barriers will also be alleviated when Gen X groups actively learn about social media.

In addition, social media itself can also make some aging reforms, such as WeChat's Care Mode, which has now been launched to provide a smoother experience for older people by simplifying the mode of operation. However, in addition to increasing font and icon sizes, more adjustments should be made to facilitate the operating habits of older people, such as reducing the number of steps to send a message, labeling the use of icons, and making the keyboard more conducive to the use of older people with declining eyesight [10]. Adjustments can also be made to the video phone, which is commonly used by middle-aged and older adults, such as enhancing the system to adjust the upper limit of the sound to assist the needs of people with hearing loss.

5. Conclusion

The emergence of social media has facilitated people's lives and accelerated the speed of information dissemination among people, but for some groups, namely Gen X, adapting to social media platforms and using them proficiently is also a challenge. This paper analyzes the literature, compares the social media habits of Gen X and Gen Z, and gives recommendations for aging reform based on the potential factors leading to differences between the two generations. The deepening trend of aging in the information age has brought attention to the social topic of adapting social media for Gen X. Their fear of using social media platforms is caused by false information and difficulty. Helping them to alleviate their inner fears to enhance communication between Gen X and Gen Z generations requires the intervention of others. This requires government policies that create a social climate more conducive to the positive acceptance of innovation and technology by middle-aged and older adults and investment in university programs for the elderly. There is also a need to innovate the functionality of the social media software itself to minimize the emergence of "learned helplessness"

in the use of social media by middle-aged and older adults and to help them overcome their internalized fears.

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