

Provision and Utilization of Rural Public Digital Cultural Services in Underdeveloped Areas: A Postprint Based on Field Research in Hengnan County, Hunan Province

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] This study investigates the supply and utilization status of rural public digital cultural services in underdeveloped areas, deeply examines the existing problems in the supply and utilization of rural public digital cultural services, and seeks to understand villagers' perceptions.

[Method/Process] A combination of online surveys and fieldwork was employed to investigate the supply and utilization status of public digital cultural services in two villages in Hengnan County, Hunan Province. Original interview data were collected through visit observations, in-depth interviews, and focus group interviews, and qualitative research was conducted using grounded theory.

[Results/Conclusion] The survey results indicate that negative environmental factors, service supply issues, personal factors, and service demands contribute to extremely low utilization rates and increasingly negative perceptions of public digital cultural services among villagers. The two villages face numerous problems, including poor basic utilization conditions, inadequate supply, insufficient promotion, unreasonable planning and management, and low awareness and utilization rates. The study subsequently proposes relevant recommendations to provide references for advancing the construction of rural public digital cultural services in underdeveloped areas.

Full Text

Supply and Utilization of Rural Public Digital Cultural Services in Underdeveloped Areas: A Field Survey in Hengnan County, Hunan Province

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] This study investigates the current state of supply and utilization of rural public digital cultural services in underdeveloped areas, aiming to deeply understand the existing problems in service provision and utilization in rural regions and to grasp villagers' psychological perspectives. **[Method/Process]** Combining network surveys with field investigations, this research examined the supply and utilization of public digital cultural services in two villages in Hengnan County, Hunan Province. Original interview data were collected through observational visits, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions, with qualitative analysis conducted using grounded theory. **[Results/Conclusions]** Findings reveal that negative environmental factors, inadequate service supply, personal constraints, and limited service demand have resulted in extremely low utilization rates and predominantly negative perceptions of public digital cultural services among villagers. Both villages suffer from poor foundational conditions for utilization, insufficient supply, inadequate publicity, unreasonable planning and management, and low awareness and usage rates. Based on these findings, the paper proposes relevant recommendations to provide references for advancing the construction of rural public digital cultural services in underdeveloped areas.

1. Introduction

The implementation of national digital cultural initiatives—including the National Cultural Information Resource Sharing Project, the “Digital Broadcasting to Every Village” program, and public welfare digital film screenings—has achieved remarkable success, alleviating cultural poverty in many remote and backward regions and narrowing the digital divide. However, numerous prominent contradictions and problems persist, particularly in rural areas of underdeveloped regions where issues such as inadequate supply, substantial dual-structure disparities with urban areas, and digital poverty are especially acute. Promoting rural public cultural construction and achieving equalization of basic public cultural services between urban and rural areas represent key strategies for breaking the “cultural poverty trap.” As digitalization and urbanization advance, strengthening and advancing public digital cultural construction in rural areas can help underdeveloped regions connect with the digital era, reduce the

gap in public culture between urban and rural areas, and promote equalization of basic public digital cultural services, thereby safeguarding the fundamental cultural rights of rural residents.

Existing research on rural public digital cultural construction includes: (1) Studies on different provinces. For instance, Ni Jia proposed promoting synergistic integration between “Digital Hunan” and the National Cultural Information Sharing Project to extend “Digital Hunan” to rural grassroots levels and address farmers’ “information poverty.” Li Shaohui and Wang Dingxiang examined how to use the cultural sharing project to drive the construction of rural public cultural service systems in Gansu Province. (2) Specialized research on different public digital cultural facilities in rural areas. Liang Aiqin studied content construction models for rural book houses and digital rural book houses, while Zhang Tie analyzed rural digital library construction routes and proposed recommendations for accelerating legislation, clarifying responsibilities at various library levels, highlighting construction priorities, integrating resources, and establishing special development funds. (3) Macro-level research on rural public digital culture. Xu Xinlu argued that the National Cultural Information Resource Sharing Project should fully embody three principles: orientation toward rural areas, grassroots levels, and ordinary people. Liu Ping and Luo Yunchuan studied transmission paths and service models for rural public digital cultural resources. Xiao Ximing and Wanyan Dengdeng recommended constructing a comprehensive coverage rural grassroots service network to promote equalization of basic public cultural services through digitalization. Ma Yanfei and Chen Ya proposed that the key to targeted poverty alleviation through public digital culture lies in precise positioning and providing differentiated cultural services.

Although field research and studies on rural public digital cultural services have yielded some results, few scholars have specifically investigated the supply and utilization of rural public digital cultural services in underdeveloped areas using field survey methods. Therefore, this study conducted field surveys in two villages under Hengnan County, Hunan Province, and applied grounded theory to analyze the collected interview data, aiming to more deeply and systematically understand existing problems and propose effective and feasible recommendations.

2. Research Design

2.1 Research Methods This study primarily employed network surveys, field investigations, and grounded theory methods. Network surveys were used to collect data on rural public digital cultural service supply in Hengnan County. Field investigations were conducted through site visits to H Village and X Village in Hengnan County, Hunan Province, to obtain original data. The collected interview data were then analyzed using grounded theory to construct a model of demand and utilization behavior for rural public digital cultural services in underdeveloped areas.

2.2 Survey Site Selection H Village and X Village, located in Hengnan County, Hengyang City, Hunan Province, exhibit typical characteristics of underdeveloped rural areas. Hunan Province is in central China, and Hengnan County is situated in Hengyang City. In 2018, the ratio of primary, secondary, and tertiary industry added value was 17.3:38.2:44.5 for Hengnan County, 8.5:39.7:51.8 for Hunan Province, and 7.2:40.7:52.2 for the nation. Hengnan County's GDP was 33.037 billion yuan, with total agricultural output value of 9.957 billion yuan, accounting for approximately 30.14% of the total—indicating a relatively large proportion. The county's per capita GDP was 35,274 yuan, far below the national average of 64,644 yuan. Both villages lag in economic and cultural development (detailed below), reflecting to some extent the conditions of rural public digital cultural service supply and utilization in underdeveloped areas of central and western China.

H Village covers an area of 6.324 square kilometers, comprising 30 villager groups with a population of 2,567. Among 704 households, 49 are registered poverty-stricken families. X Village covers 5.116 square kilometers, comprising 31 villager groups with a population of 2,516. Among 671 households, 59 are registered poverty-stricken families. Both villages feature typical southern hilly terrain with steep slopes and winding roads. Villagers live scattered across considerable distances between groups. Each village has only one or two privately purchased buses serving as public transportation to the nearest small town (approximately 7 km and 8.5 km away, respectively), making transportation extremely inconvenient. Permanent residents are predominantly middle-aged and elderly with low overall education levels and cultural literacy. Most young people have migrated to cities for work. Villagers engage in relatively backward agricultural production with low and single-source income (most households rely primarily on rice and vegetable cultivation, livestock raising, and fish farming). There are no established characteristic or advantageous industries, and the overall economic situation is poor. Various advertisements are commonly seen on utility poles and houses along roadsides, and villagers frequently gather in card rooms converted from residential houses for entertainment activities like playing cards and mahjong. Natural geographical disadvantages, backward agricultural production methods, and poor economic conditions have fostered a weak cultural atmosphere and low cultural literacy over time. Living in such circumstances, villagers have impoverished cultural lives and low cultural awareness, which continuously exert negative influences on personal factors, service supply, service demand, and utilization and perception, inevitably marginalizing them in the digital era and trapping them in digital poverty.

2.3 Data Collection Data were collected through network surveys of relevant public digital cultural service websites, documents, and other information; on-site observation of the cultural environment, network facilities, and public digital cultural facilities in both villages; in-depth interviews with 39 villagers; and two focus group discussions (with 6 and 9 participants respectively). The study primarily employed open-ended interviews where topics were introduced before

allowing respondents to freely elaborate, supplemented by semi-structured interviews to address important issues. The survey period was from January 19 to February 10, 2019.

3. Current State of Rural Public Digital Cultural Supply in Hengnan County

Beyond national-level public digital cultural services such as the “National Cultural Information Resource Sharing Project” and “Digital Broadcasting to Every Village,” Hunan Province primarily provides rural public digital cultural supply through: (1) Construction of websites and self-built resource databases such as Hunan Library and All About Hunan, which connect with the National Public Cultural Digital Support Platform and cooperate with the National Library to provide provincial urban and rural residents with unified user login platforms, “Online Book Fragrance Retrieval Platform,” and “Mobile Reading Platform” for one-stop remote access; (2) Allocation of equipment such as public cultural all-in-one machines, interactive broadcast terminals, projectors, and televisions to towns and villages (the surveyed villages had not yet received such equipment); and (3) Various forms of training for grassroots service point staff on equipment use, maintenance, and technical upgrading.

In addition to urban-rural universal resources, Hunan Library’s website offers rural-oriented publications like Rural Science and Technology Abstracts, while the Hunan Provincial Center of the Cultural Sharing Project provides resources including agricultural market information, planting techniques, breeding techniques, rural law popularization, rural life, and Hunan agriculture sections. However, when the authors accessed these links, most were found to be non-functional.

Hengyang City has established public digital cultural service websites such as “Hengyang City Library” and “Hengyang City Cultural Center,” and launched a WeChat public account for Hengyang City Library offering information push, library catalog search, borrowing record inquiry, renewal services, and reader activity information, but without online reading functionality.

Hengnan County has county libraries and cultural centers, with most towns under its jurisdiction having cultural stations and library branches. The Hengnan County Cultural Center has an official website “Hengnan County Cultural Cloud” and a WeChat public account featuring four sections (folk art sketches, artistic photography, online exhibitions, and creative activities) and two characteristic databases (Hengnan Comprehensive Resource Database and Hengnan Intangible Cultural Heritage Database). The official website provides venue rental, announcements, and activity registration, while the WeChat account offers article push without other diversified menus or functions. As of June 2018, Hengnan County Library had 512,400 digital books, 1 electronic borrowing machine, and 2 newspaper reading machines. It maintains an official website and WeChat public account, a Hengnan characteristic database, and provides dig-

ital resources such as Zhihang Cloud Library, Superstar e-books, and Mobile Library, supporting off-campus login. The WeChat public account supports subscription, “Cloud Reading,” and information push, with a client app “Superstar Mobile Library.” The nearest town cultural station is about 5,000 meters away and offers activity registration and venue rental functions through the county cultural cloud website.

The Hengnan Cultural Cloud platform has achieved inter-branch book “universal borrowing and returning,” remote video conferencing, real-time interactive training, remote live broadcasting (and recording) of cultural and sports activities, and unified allocation of teachers (and equipment), enabling urban and rural residents throughout the county to enjoy “zero-distance” public cultural services. By December 2018, Hengnan County had held 22 various video training sessions, lectures, and competitions via the cultural cloud platform, achieving full coverage of township library branches throughout the county, with 2 social force branches, 3 village-level branches, and 372 grassroots service points, realizing full coverage of rural book houses in 375 administrative villages. In 2018, over 150 opera performances were brought to villages, 8,844 public welfare films were screened free of charge, and all public cultural service venues in the county were opened free of charge. Hengnan County has built a comprehensive Cultural Cloud digital service platform, integrating basic public cultural service resources and content such as cultural activities, artistic performances, exhibitions, lecture training, creative guidance, and intangible cultural heritage tours into a comprehensive platform, providing “Internet-style,” “menu-style,” and “on-demand” supply.

Based on the above construction of national, provincial, municipal, and county-level public cultural service institutions and platforms, which primarily provide rural areas with public digital cultural network resources, equipment, service platforms, personnel training, and activities, what phenomena or problems will emerge regarding public digital cultural supply and utilization in the two villages surveyed?

4. Field Survey Findings

In in-depth interviews, the authors first asked 39 interviewees about their age, education level, occupation, and understanding and utilization of public digital cultural services. They then briefly introduced public digital cultural services and demonstrated resources from major public digital cultural service websites, using open-ended interviews to elicit respondents’ views and opinions. Individual interviews lasted 10-20 minutes. Interviewees were primarily typical permanent residents of underdeveloped rural areas, with a few temporarily returned migrants. Details are shown in .

Through open coding of the collected interview data, the authors extracted 2/3 (26 interviews) as initial data, reserving the remaining 1/3 for theoretical saturation testing. To maintain objectivity and minimize subjective bias during

coding, two management graduate students were invited to discuss categories until consensus was reached, yielding 20 categories. Sample original interview statements and their categories are shown in .

After obtaining , the authors analyzed the internal relationships and logic among the 20 categories derived from open coding, inductively identifying five main categories: environmental factors, service supply, personal factors, service demand, and utilization and perception. Specific connotations are shown in .

Based on the main categories from axial coding, the authors conducted deeper refinement and processing of their content, constructing a typical model to connect them with other categories and further forming typical relational structures among main categories, as shown in , with representative interview statements for illustration.

Through repeated comparison and study of original interview statements, the 20 categories, and 5 main categories, combined with in-depth analysis of the surveyed villages' actual conditions, the authors finally extracted the core category: "Model of Rural Public Digital Cultural Service Demand and Utilization Behavior in Underdeveloped Areas" ([Figure 1: see original paper]). The remaining 13 interview transcripts were used for theoretical saturation testing and comparative analysis, yielding no new categories or typical relationships, indicating theoretical saturation in this study.

4.1 Environmental Factors Both villages only implemented broadband network coverage in the second half of 2018, with poor mobile network signals in some hillside or high-elevation locations, some areas having only 2G or no service. Public digital cultural facilities in both villages consist solely of digital broadcasting, which villagers report provides poor-quality resources with excessive advertisements. No other public digital cultural service equipment has been allocated, and no service activities have been organized.

Both rural book houses (without computers) and digital broadcasting suffer from improper planning and management. Constrained by funding and land, rural book houses are located in unused rooms on the second floor of local primary schools. With narrow spaces and no tables or chairs, and considering student safety during class hours, they are not open to the public. Management is rotated among duty village cadres, who are burdened with heavy affairs and often need to engage in other economic activities due to low income, making proper management difficult. Interviews revealed that a digital broadcasting unit in one villager group of H Village was initially installed at the group's center, but villagers considered it too noisy and relocated it to a distant field, making it inaudible to some villagers due to the distance.

Supply lag and numerous problems in both villages are insufficient to support villagers already disadvantaged by their environment to utilize public digital cultural services.

4.2 Personal Factors Middle-aged and elderly villagers with low education levels constitute the main population. Due to their upbringing, they received minimal cultural education and face economic constraints, resulting in low private digital device ownership rates (according to rough estimates by villagers and cadres, most households use cable television, computer ownership is less than 10%, and most middle-aged and elderly people do not own smartphones or computers). Many middle-aged and elderly villagers have weak literacy skills and low digital literacy. Having long lived on the margins of the digital era, they possess weak learning, acceptance, and adaptation capabilities for new things. They harbor conceptual concerns (such as fear of addiction or health effects), and some elderly villagers face physical inconveniences (for example, some elderly suffer from cataracts that have not received timely treatment due to economic constraints, medical resistance, or lack of care, resulting in poor vision). Some elderly villagers are satisfied with traditional cultural forms (as opposed to digital culture) and do not perceive a need for public digital cultural services. These negative personal factors severely constrain villagers' service demand, utilization, and perception of public digital culture.

4.3 Service Demand Under the combined constraints of environmental factors, service supply, and personal factors, villagers' understanding of public digital culture is extremely low. Most people only roughly heard about public digital culture when introduced during interviews. Their expressed resource, facility, and activity demands remain at a superficial stage, with explicit demand expressions mostly being singular (primarily revolving around existing supply to express resource preferences). However, latent demands exist for online educational resources, public welfare digital film screenings, and digital literacy activities.

4.4 Utilization and Perception Beyond internet resources and services, the only public digital cultural facility in both villages is "digital broadcasting," with no public digital cultural activities held in recent years. Most interviewed villagers expressed low interest in digital broadcasting content, minimal attention, and low utilization frequency. Their utilization of digital broadcasting mostly manifests as passive listening (broadcasting plays regularly at fixed times).

Although both villages have extremely scarce public digital cultural facilities and activities, villagers can still utilize public digital cultural resources and services provided through internet platforms. However, influenced by the four categories of factors described above, all interviewed villagers stated they had never "accessed websites like the National Digital Culture Network or Hunan Provincial Library and their WeChat public accounts, or used mobile software like digital rural book houses or digital mobile book houses to read e-books, journals, or newspapers." This indicates villagers' utilization forms of public digital cultural services are singular, passive, and have extremely low utilization rates. Moreover, villagers' perceptions of public digital cultural services tend to be negative, with many considering these services "not very useful," "less

convenient than watching TV (cable television),” or “troublesome.”

A typical interview statement: “I don’t know and have never used these services... but I feel they are not very useful. I’ve basically watched all the movies they have on TV (cable television) or discs... I think it’s too troublesome to go elsewhere (the village contains multiple villager groups with certain distances between them) to watch movies...”

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the public digital cultural supply situation in both villages, observational findings, and interview content, although national, provincial, municipal, and county-level public cultural institutions provide relatively rich public digital cultural resources and services, both villages have benefited little (except for publicly accessible digital resources via the internet). Public digital cultural facilities and activities are extremely scarce, while villagers are generally uninterested in digital broadcasting content, indicating inadequate public digital cultural supply. This inadequacy manifests both as insufficient facility and activity coverage (i.e., inadequate policy implementation) requiring strengthened universality, and as mismatched resource supply and villager demand. Both villages suffer from backward economic conditions, inconvenient transportation, impoverished cultural life, poor network conditions, low private electronic device ownership, and poor foundational conditions for utilizing public digital culture. Villagers have low awareness of public digital cultural services, extremely low utilization rates, unreasonable planning and management that fails to consider local realities and villager preferences and demands. Under the combined influence of these negative environmental factors, service supply, personal factors, and service demands, villagers exhibit extremely low utilization rates and negative evaluations of public digital cultural services, with biased understanding and perceptions. This negative and passive utilization and perception invisibly exerts negative feedback on the other four factors, creating a vicious cycle.

Both villages represent typical underdeveloped rural areas that can, to some extent, reflect the current state and existing problems of rural public digital cultural service supply and utilization in China’s central and western underdeveloped regions.

To address these issues, the authors propose the following measures:

(1) Promote Coordinated Rural Economic and Cultural Development to Break the Vicious Cycle. According to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, cultural demand belongs to higher-level needs; promoting cultural construction without an economic foundation is like building castles in the air. Conversely, culture can serve and react upon the local economy, and coordinated development can achieve twice the result with half the effort. First, local governments should base themselves on local realities, deeply explore viable industry types, introduce rural enterprises or establish cooperatives through multiple measures to serve the local economy, transform scattered and backward agricultural pro-

duction methods, leverage mechanized production advantages, gradually form economies of scale, and liberate rural residents from busy and monotonous farm work. Second, targeted (digital) training activities on breeding and planting knowledge can gradually mobilize learning enthusiasm, foster a good cultural atmosphere, and enable cultural literacy to indirectly serve personal and local economies through improved work skills and techniques. When rural residents benefit from culture, this can build a good foundation for rural public digital cultural service utilization.

(2) Implement Service Supply and Emphasize Actual Demand. Service supply is the prerequisite and guarantee for utilization, and supply-demand matching can promote service utilization and enhance understanding. On one hand, village affairs information (including financial information and public cultural information) should be made more transparent to supervise the implementation of public digital cultural facilities and activities, ensuring public digital cultural service policies are effectively executed. On the other hand, since most rural residents in these areas have limited contact with digital culture, traditional public opinion survey methods should be combined with on-site investigations of rural residents' needs and on-demand delivery services. Questionnaires and interviews can be conducted during activities to survey needs and provide on-demand services.

(3) Improve Basic Utilization Conditions and Rationalize Planning and Management. Network and accessible equipment are two important factors for public digital cultural service utilization, but relying solely on public digital cultural service supply will hardly meet rural residents' needs, let alone help them connect with the digital era. On one hand, the rural network environment should be improved, mobile network site construction should be perfected to achieve more comprehensive mobile network coverage, and social-enterprise cooperation should be strengthened to make smartphones, computers, and broadband networks more affordable for rural households, especially low-income farmers, through subsidies and other means. On the other hand, public digital cultural service planning should be integrated into overall planning, comprehensively considering local realities and rural residents' preferences to properly locate rural book houses, digital broadcasting, and other public cultural facilities, reasonably plan opening hours, and assign dedicated personnel to manage public digital cultural facilities rather than having village cadres hold multiple positions. Additionally, facility utilization environments should be optimized to provide good utilization experiences.

(4) Conduct Cultural Activities to Improve Digital Literacy. First, public cultural institutions can collaborate with local universities to conduct activities leveraging their human and intellectual resources in combination with student social practice needs. Second, services should be expressed and presented in ways that are close to rural residents and easy to understand, considering the characteristics of underdeveloped rural areas. Learning activities with small gifts can be organized to encourage active learning and reduce ob-

stacles caused by low education levels. Furthermore, local rural primary and secondary schools can be engaged to cooperate in organizing public welfare digital film screenings and other activities (which can better solve problems regarding venues and participation numbers). Finally, county-level institutions and township cultural stations can utilize their available venues and equipment to regularly organize digital literacy training activities with shuttle bus services, cultivating and improving rural residents' proficiency in operating public and private electronic devices and helping them learn basic equipment operation skills for utilizing public digital cultural services.

(5) Strengthen Publicity to Enhance Rural Residents' Awareness. Villagers in both villages have low awareness of public digital cultural services but frequently watch television programs. Publicity can be considered during TV news programs or advertisement segments, combined with on-site publicity and popularization activities (participants can be selectively given inexpensive daily necessities or cultural products to attract participation) to alleviate rural residents' concerns, enhance their psychological adaptability, enable better acceptance of public digital cultural services, and combine strengthened publicity with psychological counseling.

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Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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