

Research on Social Behavior of Rural Children in Online Communities (Postprint)

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Abstract

[Purpose] To explore the subjectivity shift reflected in the social behaviors of rural children and to reconsider the mutually constitutive relationship between children, media, and culture. **[Method]** This study takes children in HL Village as research subjects and examines the interactive content of online communities through online observation. **[Results]** The study finds that online communities have become a new channel for rural children to make friends, providing a new space for them to participate in social interaction behaviors such as “arguing, competing, cooperating, and playing.” **[Conclusion]** Online community communication among rural children enhances their ontological security, facilitates the acquisition of social capital, and re-embeds their subject position within media practice processes, maximally exerting children’s inherent agency. Children become subjects who participate in cultural creation and construct social meaning within communication relationships.

Full Text

Research on the Social Behavior of Rural Children in Online Communities

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Abstract:

[Objective] To explore the subjectivity shift reflected in rural children’s social behavior and reflect on the mutually constitutive relationship between children, media, and culture.

[Method] This study examines children in HL Village through online observation methods to investigate interactive content in network communities.

[Results] The study finds that online communities have become a new channel

for rural children to make friends, providing a novel space for them to engage in social behaviors such as “arguing, competing, cooperating, and playing.”

[Conclusion] Rural children’ s online community interactions enhance their ontological security, acquire social capital, and re-embed their subjectivity in media practice, thereby maximizing children’ s inherent agency. Children become subjects who participate in cultural creation and construct social meaning within communication relationships.

Keywords: network communities; rural children; social capital; social behavior; ontological security

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Paul Willis once stated: “Under different social systems, there are many ways to make people perform physical labor: from threats with machine guns, bullets, and trucks to instilling collective consciousness so they voluntarily join the industrial workforce. Our democratic and free society may lie somewhere between these two extremes—without obvious threats of force, and to a certain extent, the result of self-direction” [1]. To break this solidified outcome of self-direction, adults and society spare no effort in making various attempts. A simple review reveals that media has always been a tool for children to exercise subjectivity and resist authority. Children in the 1970s would secretly watch television at home, while today’ s children might make huge monetary rewards on gaming platforms when adults aren’ t paying attention. The emergence of online communities, in particular, has provided children with convenient information communication scenarios on one hand, while making parental supervision increasingly difficult on the other.

During fieldwork in HL Village, the researcher found that rural children use online communities with high frequency. When examining these issues from the perspective of children’ s subjectivity, online communities become important tools for them to re-embed their subject status. However, existing research only explores the possibility of class mobility through media for children, consistently treating it as an educational tool while ignoring children’ s subjectivity in media practice. The United Nations Children’ s Fund once published a brief report about a group of girls in Jordan’ s Za’ atari refugee camp learning English in front of a screen. Their classroom was rudimentary, with bare walls where paint had peeled off in places to reveal brown surfaces, yet the girls learned with great joy. Eleven-year-old Saha said, “This is very helpful for us. We can use it to learn things we didn’ t know before” [2]. The UN Children’ s Fund

holds great hope for the internet, believing it can be key to changing the fate of disadvantaged children by providing new learning opportunities and breaking intergenerational transmission. “Digital technology has changed the world—the internet is becoming increasingly popular among children and is transforming their childhood” [3].

The rapid development of media has thus made people perceive the contradictory judgments brought by new media empowerment. People simultaneously harbor evasive attitudes and various expectations toward new media, much as they do with children [4]. Looking back at media development, it seems it has not become the ultimate good tool as we imagined, nor have children achieved class mobility through media as expected. From the children’s perspective, the internet is like a maze; even when lost, they prefer to find the endpoint themselves rather than have “adults” point the way.

This study attempts to break away from traditional positivist research approaches and shift methods in studying children and media. Regarding children as a group, Corsaro noted: “Since many features of interactions and culture among young children are formed and shared in the moment, researchers find it difficult to understand them through reflective interviews or surveys. Therefore, ethnography becomes an effective method for child studies” [5]. Shifting from media-centered to child-centered approaches of “researching with children” and “researching for children,” and using qualitative methods to examine children’s everyday media practice, not only focuses on interaction outcomes (i.e., media effects) but also reveals the dynamic and intelligent interaction process between children and media, which has certain theoretical significance.

Therefore, this study focuses on HL Village, using observational methods to conduct deep fieldwork and richly describe the diverse interactive scenarios rural children engage in through online communities. It explores how rural children conduct online community communication behaviors within the same dimension, thereby enhancing their ontological security, acquiring social capital, and re-embedding their subject status.

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1. Investigation of Rural Children’s Internet Access

Amid China’s coordinated efforts to advance rural revitalization and new urbanization, cities continue to expand while rural areas shrink. HL Village has joined the ranks of rapid urbanization, with demolition bringing affluent eco-

nomic conditions to families. Most young people remain idle at home, making television and mobile phones their best “companions,” to the point where “every child having a mobile phone” has become possible. All this has laid the economic and social foundation for children’ s connection with media.

The researcher designed numerous questions for the access investigation, first examining what electronic devices were available for children at home, with options including computers, televisions, mobile phones, and tablets. As shown in [Figure 1: see original paper], mobile phone ownership among HL Village children is the highest (97.9%), followed by televisions (58.3%), computers (35.4%), and tablets (16.7%). Only a few families purchase tablet devices. TJL’ s family is one such case—her mother bought one hoping it would help with her studies, as mobile phone screens are small and harmful to the eyes. However, most parents are unwilling to buy tablets due to the cost. Nearly 60% of HL Village children’ s mobile phones are hand-me-downs from parents or relatives. After parents discard them, these phones become children’ s exclusive devices. Only 16.7% of families specifically purchase new phones for their children.

Common electronic device brands observed in HL Village include Apple, Huawei, VIVO, OPPO, and Xiaomi. The questionnaire specifically investigated these brands, revealing that VIVO (39.6%), OPPO (16.7%), Xiaomi (6.2%), Huawei (20.8%), Apple (4.2%), and others (12.5%) are used. Domestic mobile phones have the highest ownership rate in HL Village, particularly VIVO at nearly 40% (as shown in [Figure 2: see original paper]).

2. The Decline of Offline Gatherings and the Rise of Online Socializing

ZSY, a fifth-grade student in HL Village, comes from an impoverished family. The only place for guests to sit and talk is the bed, and the only modern facility is his smartphone. From a conventional perspective, this seems to be his window to the world and the most convenient path to education. However, when we delve into his interactive scenarios with media, we find that in the media world, he has learned nothing more than a few gaming moves, and his communication methods with village friends have also become entangled with online community usage to varying degrees.

One hot afternoon, LB sat idly at her doorstep, holding a wooden stick in her left hand to vigorously swat ants on the ground while using her right hand to call LST, asking when she could come over. After hanging up, LB lamented, “Alas! When we didn’ t have mobile phones before, everyone played jump rope together. Now nobody jumps rope; everyone plays with their phones.” With that, LB pulled out her phone and started a new round of chatting in the “Silly Geese Living Together” group, and her earlier sorrow dissipated with the ding-ding sounds of WeChat messages.

This field note records LB's everyday life scenario—a “new normal” that has emerged in HL Village children's communication since mobile phones and WeChat became widespread. Face-to-face communication, which had been dwindling, has been relocated to a new spatial venue. Teachers reported that mobile phones were not popular among HL Village children a few years ago, but by summer 2019 when the researcher entered the field, mobile phone ownership among village youth was already high, with teenagers busy building groups, chatting, and organizing gaming sessions.

Students went through a long journey in building groups. There were specialized “answer groups” for transmitting homework solutions, casual chat groups like “Silly Geese Living Together,” “Tsinghua Preparatory Students,” and “UN Children's Fund,” and “imperial harem” groups among close friends. Most groups became inactive after a period, but those that have survived with continuous interaction are “Silly Geese Living Together” (renamed several times) and the “UN Children's Fund” group. The “Silly Geese Living Together” group consists of sixth-graders LB, SZJ, LZX, LST, and fifth-grader LZQ. TJH and TCX were removed from the group for spreading rumors about LB using excessive profanity. The “UN Children's Fund” group has over 20 members, created by ZSY, comprising mostly peers “recognized” as having status in HL Village, including students from fourth, fifth, and sixth grades. The researcher joined these two WeChat groups to analyze chat records, clarify their interpersonal clues, and observe how new technology has become a new force affecting HL Village children's interactions and what kinds of social engagements they conduct within these groups.

3. Social Mapping in Online Communities

3.1 Participation in “Arguing”

HL Village children take pleasure in verbal abuse, particularly on campus where scenes of mutual insults escalating into chasing and roughhousing are common. With village demolition and an increasing number of outsiders, the “free-range” and “roughhousing” scenes rooted in village culture have become increasingly rare. However, WeChat groups have re-implanted verbal abuse into HL Village children's lives. Some profanity children use appears in daily life, while others are expressed through dynamic images. With five members total in the group, each takes turns becoming the target of teasing, which then triggers a round of abuse within the group. Compared to offline verbal abuse, teasing about physical appearance and rumored romantic relationships at school predominates, with less physical chasing. The abuse in groups is often interrupted by topics like homework or games, reducing its angry component.

Romantic topics related to gender frequently appear in groups. LB is often teased about being in a relationship. TCX frequently claims loudly that she saw chat records between LB and TJH where they call each other wife and husband,

and posts screenshots of their conversations in the group. This teasing about romantic relationships reveals children's budding gender awareness. However, this focused attack behavior in WeChat groups leads LB to seek female allies to counter-attack the rumor-mongers. Of course, such collaboration or division among HL Village children is always complex—they compete and control each other, so the social status of strength and weakness brought by such teasing is always fluid and changing. Besides using gender topics for teasing, they also frequently use “parent-child relationships” to mock each other.

Since group members frequently change their profile pictures and WeChat nicknames, other members often don't know who they are. In social groups, they ask each other's names, and regardless of whether the other person is male or female, the response is teasingly “your dad.” Predictably, such teasing responses elicit abuse or threats like, “Let me find out who you are, and I'll beat you to death.” In this teasing, if “mother” constitutes an insult, then playing the role of “the other person's father” represents having gained the upper hand in discourse struggle. Thus, the unlimited power of fathers in traditional patriarchal consciousness is creatively presented in another way in HL Village children's daily lives. Schiller found in play an indispensable aesthetic dimension that promotes individual socialization and human development. Whether exploring romance or worshipping patriarchal authority, HL Village children are constantly producing, reproducing, inheriting, and even creating numerous cultural characteristics of this demolition village throughout these processes.

3.2 Participation in “Competing”

Emojis and internet memes are common means for HL Village children to pass boring time. One April afternoon, several people gathered at LB's doorstep discussing where to go play, but after two hours, they still had no conclusion. While discussing, they played with their phones idly. SZJ first spent less than a minute continuously sending over 100 emojis in the group. Soon, several phones joined this emoji war, with the ding-ding message alert sounds rising and falling in succession. Each person basically used a fixed set of emojis. LST's phone had already frozen due to memory issues and couldn't receive messages. She sat on an electric bike anxiously watching LB's phone screen. In less than five minutes, over 1,000 emojis had been sent. While sending emojis, they kept blaming each other. LB once described: “Everyone is so annoying, constantly spamming emojis. One round is thousands of messages. Sometimes the phone keeps ding-ding all night long, driving me crazy.”

Besides sending emojis, they also enjoy sharing internet memes in WeChat groups, though they don't care about what the memes specifically express, only worrying that their copy-paste speed isn't fast enough and they'll be at a disadvantage in the meme competition. When the researcher once asked SZJ why everyone loves sending internet memes in the group so much, SZJ believed it was firstly because everyone is idle with nothing else to do, and secondly because memes are quite fun. This seemingly non-exclusive competition of emojis

and internet memes appears on the surface to be an important means for HL Village children to pass boring time. In reality, how many and how fast emojis and memes can be sent is a test of terminal devices, while the richness of emojis and memes represents the breadth and depth of cognition in the virtual world. What seems to be a behavior to pass time is actually another way for HL Village children to establish peer order and culture [1].

3.3 Participation in “Cooperating”

For children, conflict and cooperation can coexist. If the verbal abuse, teasing, emoji wars, and meme competitions in WeChat groups are viewed as conflicts among HL Village children, the frequent discussions about homework and lessons in groups demonstrate possibilities for unity and cooperation. The topic of homework always extends beyond everyday communication discourse. Once this topic is initiated, many group members are willing to join, describing their progress while also engaging in self-mockery and joint complaining. Homework acts like a common enemy, allowing children to extract themselves from conflict and establish cooperative trust relationships.

Transmitting answers doesn't only occur within the same grade. They utilize the convenience of WeChat group chats to conduct cross-grade, cross-time-space collaborations. Due to the shortage of teaching resources at HL Village Primary School, one teacher often undertakes teaching tasks for different grades. Therefore, around noon, fifth and sixth-grade students ask each other about the math teacher's mood in the morning, allowing the other grade to prepare accordingly for the afternoon. Additionally, fifth-grade group members ask sixth-grade members to share answers from classroom exercises when they were in fifth grade. TCX is often seen shouting in the group: What's the answer to question one? What about question two? Hurry! Please! Emergency help, send the answers quickly. Soon, someone sends answers searched from Homework Help into the group, and other group members enjoy the benefits of this sharing together.

3.4 Participation in “Playing”

Games are the most discussed topic. Around noon and after eight o'clock every evening, someone in the group asks: Who's playing games? Group members then begin discussing what games to play. During gameplay, group members constantly post screenshots of successful promotions or point additions, which is also an important strategy to demonstrate high gaming skills and consolidate group status in the group. Besides showing off achievements, group members with higher gaming skills share various strategies during gameplay, and group members also discuss combat methods.

LZQ: Why did I go directly from Silver to Star Diamond?

LB: How do you still have LB as a friend?

LST: Isn't LB you?

lzx: Open Peace Elite

lzx: I dropped ranks, down to Platinum III

HL Village children actively share game-related upgrade status and special skins launched for different festivals in the group. Of course, such sharing appears to be informational but actually contains elements of showing off, as not every member has the skills to obtain new skins or sufficient funds to purchase them. Interestingly, those posting achievement screenshots are not only boys but also many girls, who all express frustration when losing points and joy when gaining points in the group. Peace Elite, as a simulated battlefield game, is favored by many girls in HL Village. This preference reveals deeper gender implications. Adolescent children do not grow up as adults expect—for instance, girls having obedient and gentle temperaments. Instead, their game choices and personality displays highlight a desire for physical competition and independence. Boys seeking worship and praise when showing off their game levels are actually displaying masculinity. From the perspective of game communication and interaction, the improvement of cultural diversity awareness in peer relationships holds significant importance.

4.1 Enhancing Ontological Security

Giddens believes that ontological security is closely connected to a “bracketing” assumed by the “natural attitude” in daily life. From an existential perspective, ontological security identifies the types of duration and extended space, as well as the identity of objective things, others, and the self. Giddens believes this ontological security is based to a certain extent on the formation of trust in credibility, what Winnicott called “primary relatedness.” Media, as a tool for time-space distancing, has the characteristic of “symbolic symbols.” Just as currency can replace other forms of flow, media can be understood as a “mirror image” of real society in cyberspace, symbolizing neighborhood and kinship relations. It facilitates the transfer of offline emotions and the generation of online emotional trust, making physical communication venues and bodily “presence” less significant and greatly expanding the scope of time-space extension.

Previously, children’s life ontological security was deeply linked to rural land connections with heavy family relationships and blood-geographic ties. However, the acceleration of urbanization has taken away peer groups, and with parents working away from home year-round, rural children long-term lack spaces to obtain ontological security, making their social scope increasingly narrow and social behavior 越来越少. In traditional society, because print media isolated the adult world from children, children were highly protected, and their socialization process had direct relationships with adults, with media playing a minimal role. Therefore, Neil Postman believed that the shift from the print era to the visual era led to the disappearance of childhood’s innocent world and expressed concerns about television’s impact on children’s growth and education [2]. This concern has also prompted many scholars to reflect on the relationship between

media and ontological security. However, the arrival of new media has changed the environment of youth socialization. The internet is entering rural areas as an emerging information dissemination tool and becoming increasingly popular. This popularity is not simple technological adoption but integration into life, completely embedding itself into rural children's daily lifestyles, becoming a member of rural space and compensating for the ontological security lacking due to family absence.

4.2 Acquiring Social Capital

At the sociological level, Putnam opposed adolescents' media use to social capital because he found that Americans at the time would rather stay home alone watching television than go out to interact with neighbors and participate in community activities. This not only led to the depletion of individual social capital but also affected community life and American democracy [3]. Subsequent researchers continued this approach, conducting empirical surveys on different populations and finding that people who use the internet more have smaller social networks, communicate less with family and friends, and are more likely to experience negative emotions such as loneliness. This not only hinders their social capital formation but also affects their physical growth and may even lead to antisocial behavioral characteristics. However, it can be observed that in rural children's online community interactions, the online and non-online worlds are not opposed. Online world activities can provide new ways for people to engage more vigorously in real-world activities. Internet use blurs the temporal and spatial boundaries of real-world interactions, expanding and enriching children's social networks. Therefore, it does not deepen adolescent social isolation but instead becomes an important source for generating social capital.

If ascribed capital is innate to children, then potential social capital is capital children obtain through self-effort, such as peer prestige, status, and charisma [4]. The virtual world is an important place for HL Village children to accumulate symbolic capital. High game levels or many fans in short videos can become "idols" to chase. "Idols" accumulate capital through skilled gaming techniques, fan counts in short videos, and other forms, establishing social status and recognition among peers. However, in children's virtual friendship fields, social capital is not obtained through moral and pure dedication but manifests as symbolic power, generating reputation and status in the gaming world. This to some extent legitimates the utilitarian nature of rural children's future growth, as the existence of class and hierarchy systems changes the dimensions and boundaries of social capital, with the connotations of morality and pure dedication quietly exiting the stage.

4.3 Re-embedding Subjectivity

Mediatized interaction is the reorganization of social relationships under media technology development. It not only affects individual and group behaviors but

also has restructuring significance for social and cultural structures [5]. In the future data era, we need to place the contradiction between media and audiences at the level of social relationships to possibly critique the foundation of technological traps. As Roger Silverstone summarized why we should study media: “Of course, it’s all about power. In the end, maybe it is, but this statement has always worried me, as it seems to erase many things from people’s lives, including their meanings, values, culture, and even their humanity” [6]. Therefore, returning to a “children’s perspective” rather than an adult-style “perspective on children,” where children become objects of cognition transformed from abstract to concrete people, this shift makes exploring the truth of theory extremely important.

If offline and online social relationships are interconnected, the internet can not only strengthen social trust but also encourage children to participate more in public activities. However, if they become addicted, they fall into isolation, causing the capital attenuation Putnam described. These two views simplify the issue of internet use, failing to give more attention to specific and complex social ecologies and ignoring internal differences in individual usage processes. Only by placing adolescents’ internet use within specific social contexts can such discussions and research have practical meaning and value, because “media influence” is not simply “media” influence but the result of people using media in certain environments [7]. From the perspective of HL Village children’s online community communication scenarios, rural children have formed unique communication contexts influenced by their growth environments.

In short, media has become one of children’s lifestyles. It is everywhere, and its utility and impact are difficult to measure. In microscopic daily life, it presents children’s understanding of texts and demonstrates the diverse existential meanings of children interacting around media. In children’s everyday life contexts, daily experiences such as family and peer relationships become indispensable. These experiences define the basic patterns of cultural experience, going further than Schramm’s [8] restoration of children’s interpretive freedom and subjectivity. Children become subjects who participate in cultural creation and construct social meaning within communication relationships.

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

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