

## Research Into Media Exposure Behaviors of Left-Behind Children in Rural Areas From the Perspective of Media as Substitutes

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### Abstract

With the accelerated transition of Chinese society, left-behind children have been an ignored vulnerable group. The media exposure and use behaviors, the media growing environment, and the cultivation of the media literature of the vulnerable group have become an issue of great concern. Based on theoretic knowledge of Communication and Sociology, and combining the research method of questionnaire survey and interview, this paper conducts a field survey of Kaixian County and Yunyang County in Chongqing Municipality. The research focus is on the analysis of the influence of media represented by TV and mobile phone on left-behind children in China's rural areas, and the exploration of feasible plans to improve children's media literacy.

**Key words:** Left-behind children; Substitute; Media exposure; Media literary

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### INTRODUCTION

"People live and work in peace and contentment." This is a wonderful vision of life depicted by *Lao Tzu*. However,

with the rapid development of China's economy, more and more young people in rural areas leave their home to seek employment in urban areas. "To live and work in peace and contentment" has become an illusion. As a large number of migrant workers pour into cities, many children are left behind in the rural areas who are longing for parents' love and company.

According to *Report on the Situation of Left-Behind Children in Rural Areas and the Migration Children between Urban and Rural Areas in China* by All-China Women's Federation Research Group issued in May 2013, there were about 61.0255 million left-behind children in China's rural areas, accounting for 21.88% of the total (All-China Women's Federation Research Group, 2013). Considering the large number of left-behind children, more attention should be paid to the issue. Especially against the backdrop of rapid media development, left-behind children spend most of their time on the accessible media due to lack of communication with their parents and necessary culture and entertainment facilities. However, the excessive exposure to TV, mobile phone and the other media can negatively influence the healthy growth and socialization of these left-behind children.

## 1. RESEARCH DESIGN

### 1.1 Research Object

According to the definition of Convention on *the Rights of the Child* (CRC) by the UN, "a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier." In this paper, a "child" is a natural person below the age of eighteen years old. According to the family types of left-behind children in rural areas divided by *The Sixth National Census of the PRC in 2010*, this research adopts the definition of "left-behind children" in the broad sense, namely meaning children who are left behind because both or one of parents are working in other places.

In order to ensure representativeness of samples, this research adopts the stage-by-stage cluster sampling method. To put it specifically, the research objects are divided into two levels, the junior high and the senior high; and the cluster sampling method is employed for the random sampling of the chosen classes in proportion. Among the randomly chosen samples, there are both left-behind and non-left-behind children for the convenience of comparing and seeking differences. "Difference is important because it is the root of meaning. Without it, the meaning does not exist at all." (Hall, 2003) Based on the above requirements, this research finalizes the number of valid samples in Kaixian County and Yunyang County of Chongqing Municipality.

## 1.2 Research Content

This research analyzes problems related to the media exposure and use situation of the left-behind children from five aspects. This can, on the one hand, ensure the basic scientificity of individual cases; on the other hand, conduct an in-depth study. The five aspects are: a) The basic situation of left-behind children; b) The TV exposure behaviors of left-behind children; c) The TV exposure and use situation of left-behind children; d) The reading habits of left-behind children; and e) The social interaction of left-behind children.

## 1.3 Research Methods

This research mainly adopts the research method of questionnaire survey, individual case interview and literature review. Based on the statistical analysis of data obtained through questionnaire survey, and the summary of literatures, Communication and Sociology theories are employed for an in-depth analysis and study.

Based on the questionnaire survey of *Media Exposure Behaviors of Left-Behind Children*, the author interviews some individuals. During the data analysis, SPSS is employed to conduct a descriptive analysis, summarize the media exposure situation of left-behind children in rural areas and classify the sample data to observe the influence of media exposure on the physical and mental development and socialization on left-behind children in rural areas. Chi-square test is used to deduce the overall significance of difference.

## 2. MEDIA DECODING FRAMEWORK: MEDIA EXPOSURE AND USE SITUATION OF LEFT-BEHIND CHILDREN

### 2.1 Basic Situation of Left-Behind Children

To Chinese, children are the hope of the whole family. Rural families also have high expectation of left-behind children. However, due to lack of guardianship, they can only explore on their own. To learn the basic situation of left-behind children can contribute to the study of

the relationship between the media environment and the behavior motivations.

Among 330 valid samples, 163 are boys and 167 are girls, accounting for 49.6% and 50.6%, respectively. They are aged from 10 to 17 years old, but most of them are 13 years old. Among them, 281 are left-behind children, accounting for 85.2%. Among the 281 left-behind children, 51% or 143 are boys; 49% or 158 are girls. The gender proportion is almost equal to each other.

As to the situation of left-behind children's parents, 45% of them live in a family where both parents work in other places; 34.2% live in a family where only father works in other places; and 5.5% live in a family where only mother works in other places. According to Lacan's theory, the absence of father or mother will result in "objet petit a" ("object little-a"), which stands for the unattainable object of desire, and the Phallus being deprived (Wu, 2011). The theory is closely related to the purpose of left-behind children's choice and use of media. They want to find some substitute to remedy the sense of frustration.

In terms of the types of guardian, the grandparenting accounts for a high percentage, about 40.6%. In rural areas, grandparenting has some disadvantages. First, the grandparents are all seniors. They might not have adequate energy to education children. Second, most of the older generation does not have received advanced education. They might not know how to scientifically supervise the young children. Third, the older generation might dote on the younger generation, thus leading to their indulgence in certain unfavorable behaviors.

Will supervision influence on the media exposure and use behaviors of left-behind children? If yes, how does it influence on the media exposure and use behaviors of left-behind children? All these questions can be resolved after the establishment of the media exposure environment framework of left-behind children.

### 2.2 TV Exposure and Use Situation of Left-Behind Children

Exposure to TV is a common phenomenon among the left-behind children in rural areas. Among the 330 valid samples, 316 children often watch TV, accounting for 95.8% of the total. Based on that, when and how long the left-behind children watch TV are studied, and compared with those of non-left-behind children so as to analyze the specific differences of media exposure behaviors between left-behind children and non-left-behind children. Research suggests that there is no significant difference in when and how long left-behind and non-left-behind children watch TV. In this research, the duration of children's daily TV watching is divided into three types: a) Low involvement (below two hours); b) Medium involvement (two to five hours); and c) High involvement (above five hours). In terms of the three involvement degrees, there is no significant difference between left-behind and non-left-behind children.

Wilbur Schramm once divided TV shows into ones based on imagination and relativity, respectively, from the perspective of the influence of TV on children. According to the above division, the media content can also be divided into two types. The first type is based on imaginary materials, which can satisfy one's emotional demands; the second type is based on the realistic materials, which can contribute to one's cognition. The first type mainly provides the imagination materials and contexts; while the second type provides materials and contexts in real life. As to the influence of the two types on children, the first type can guide children to get rid of the shackles of facts, stimulate their imagination and entertain them; while the second type directly guides children to pay attention to reality, stimulates their cognition and increase their understanding of the real life. Before the investigation, the author divides the TV programs often watched by left-behind children into the above two kinds, with animations, children's programs, films, TV series, talent shows and variety shows as the first type; and the current news and knowledge lectures as the second type. Based on the division, the author studies the influence of different TV content on the socialization of left-behind children.

Analysis shows that left-behind children are most interested in TV series, films, talent shows, entertainment programs, animations and variety shows. All of the five programs belong to the imaginary programs. Thus, generally speaking, most left-behind children are in favor of imaginary programs, though some tend to watch the realistic programs. Just as what has been stated above, the absence of either party of the parents will result in "objet petit a" ("object little-a") in the heart of left-behind children. It is impossible for left-behind children in rural areas to find substitutes (material enjoyment or spiritual encouragement) to make up for the absence of their parents in real life. Under the circumstance, they can only focus on media. Due to TV's media characteristics, it can help many left-behind children to create a world of their own especially through the imaginary programs.

### **2.3 Mobile Phone Exposure and Use Situation of Left-Behind Children**

In terms of mobile phone exposure and use situation of left-behind children, the author focuses not only on the influence of the mobile phone on the life of left-behind children as a communication medium, but also on the media literacy of left-behind children. With the popularity of smartphones, the increasing openness and the development of network, the ownership rate of mobile phones among children is on the increase. In this survey, the ownership rate reaches 54.5%. The percentage is even higher among the left-behind children, about 64.3%. This suggests that left-behind children have more exposure to the mobile phone and use it more often.

In terms of the mobile phone use situation, 30.0% of left-behind children use it to play games, 26.2% use it to

get information and 15.6% use it to keep in contact with their classmates and friends. Compared with left-behind children's preference for imaginary TV programs, their preference for mobile phone functions is more diversified. Apart from playing games, getting necessary information is the second purpose for left-behind children to use the mobile phone, which can contribute to the increase of children's media literacy. As a communication tool, the mobile phone is more often used by left-behind children to contact their classmates and friends than their parents. This suggests left-behind children's emphasis on the peer group.

### **2.4 Reading Habits of Left-Behind Children**

Due to the backward education facilities in rural areas, it is quite inconvenient for children to read extracurricular books. Few think reading books are a "very convenient" activity. The percentage of left-behind children thinking so accounts for 13.9%, and that of non-left-behind children thinking so accounts for 12.2%. Most children think reading books are "relatively convenient." In terms of reading locations, left-behind children generally read at home, who account for 61.4% of the total. The percentage of reading at school and bookstores accounts for 18.9% and 17.5%, respectively. The backward public facilities and the incomplete library construction force many children to read at home.

The author conducts an analysis of variance by regarding the time variable of reading at ordinary times and during weekends and holidays as a continuous variable. The variable value of reading at ordinary times (1.73) and the variable value of reading during weekends (2.50) among non-left-behind children are both higher than the average value of 1.62, so that among left-behind children is lower than the average. Thus, it can be seen that thanks to effective supervision, non-left-behind children spend more time in reading compared with left-behind children.

Reading plays an indispensable role in the growing path of children. The warmth conveyed by beautiful pictures and between lines can make left-behind children temporarily forget their sorrow and loneliness because of the absence of their parents. There is a Chinese saying going that, "In books one can find golden houses." By reading books and absorbing ideas conveyed by the books, the left-behind children can be unconsciously influenced instead of becoming problem children due to lack of parents' love. Therefore, school libraries can be a spiritual harbor for left-behind children, and comfort them when they are seized by loneliness.

### **2.5 Social Interaction of Left-Behind Children**

The socialization process of children is reflected in their social interaction. The reflection is a comprehensive result of the exposure and use of various media. By paying attention to social interaction of left-behind children, the author can summarize the influence of getting exposed and using the above media on them. Based on the above

analysis, it can be found that left-behind children are not indulged in TV, mobile phone or other media. In the survey of children's willingness for social interaction, about 87.9% of children are willing to play with their companions, while the other 8.9% tend to invite their companions to watch TV or play the mobile phone together with them.

After observing the willingness of left-behind children for social interaction, the author should judge their socialization degree. A clear understanding of both aspects can comprehensively reflect the performance of left-behind children in social interaction. The survey shows that the majority of children prefer to play with their companions. In terms of the social interaction of left-behind children, peer group is an intimate group for their daily communication, because they can get a sense of identity and form unique subculture among the peer group. The interaction among the peer group is quite casual, thus it has become an irreplaceable channel to meet left-behind children's demands for social interaction, safety and self-esteem. The interaction process is quite natural. Though TV, mobile phone and other mass media have started accompanying children's growth, their influence on the habits and the socialization process of left-behind children are negative in some aspects.

### **3. MEDIA COMMUNICATION PARADIGM: FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE INTERACTION BETWEEN LEFT-BEHIND CHILDREN AND MEDIA**

Media environment is a complex which integrates various contents and channels. Every individual in the media environment consciously and subconsciously interacts with the media. The interaction even accompanies the growth of individuals. The previous research into the interaction effect between left-behind children and media focused on the static description, and lacked the presentation of a dynamic process, thus it could barely provide a convincing explanation. As to the feedback of children's satisfaction degree of media, the previous research confined itself to the questionnaire survey instead of combining the data details. Daily life is the major activity scope of left-behind children. Politics and economics are not so much related to them. Therefore, it is necessary to proceed from the interaction between left-behind children and media to study the relationship between the two. This research conducts an investigation based on the "Symbolic Interaction Theory" put forward by Brummel. Though functionalism and effect study is inevitable during the research process, the author will be alert to defects of the two paradigms during the analysis process.

#### **3.1 Demands for Media**

As to the relationship between TV and children, Schramm pointed out that the influence of media communication

varies among the children. Every individual grows up in a different social and family environment and has different social demands (Schramm, Lyle, & Parker, 1961). Thus, it is necessary to study why children have demands for media, namely to study children's media exposure behaviors from the perspective of children's demands. Psychology defines "demand" as a reflection of individual and social objective requirements in the brain. It is a basic driving force for individual psychological behaviors and activities. Demand always targets at certain object. Without objects, demand does not exist at all. Besides, demand increases with the expansion of the objects it targets at (Zhu, 1989). Therefore, different children might have different demands for media, which can lead to different media exposure behaviors.

Scholars in the communication field mainly employ the "use and satisfaction" theory to explain the demands for media. Schramm also put forward three demands that children want to meet by watching TV. The first is their demand for entertainment; the second is their demand for information; and the third is the demand for practical use. According to the answers given by children and Schramm's division, the author divides reasons for children's preference for watching TV or playing mobile phone into four, namely "to kill the boring time" (31.7%), "to meet the demand for entertainment" (12.7%), "to meet the demand for information" (18.7%), and "to meet the demand for practical use" (36.9%). From the data statistics, it can be seen that TV and mobile phone have made up for the limits of rural living conditions to a large extent, exposing children to more knowledge, and allowing them to relax themselves and keep in contact with their parents, classmates and the outside world. However, the 31.7% of left-behind children who choose to watch TV and play on the mobile phone due to the boring time should not be ignored. For example, some students write that, "When I have nothing to do or have interest in nothing, I will feel extremely lonely. Then, TV and mobile phone become a good spiritual reliance for me." There are many reasons for it, such as backward public facilities construction, inconvenience of reading books and inadequate attention of guardians.

When their demands are met, they might develop the habit of turning to the media for various demands. According to the media system reliance theory, the reliance between individuals and media can be divided into reliance on understanding (self-understanding and understanding of society), reliance on guidance (guidance to behaviors and interaction), and reliance on entertainment (individual entertainment and social entertainment). Based on the involvement degree of left-behind children in media use discussed in the previous part, it can predict that left-behind children might turn to the media to meet their demands more and more, and finally will invest lots of time in the media.

Compared with the exposure rate to TV and mobile phone, the exposure rate to books among the left-behind

children is obviously lower. Left-behind children have not yet developed their reliance on books, even if books can meet their demand for reading. The comprehensive nature of TV and mobile phone, and the vivid images induce children to watch more and to think less, or even forget how to think. The various sounds delivered by TV and mobile phone numb or even upset children's audio sense. As time goes by, children will lose their interest in the printed texts, thus decreasing their reading amount.

Whether in terms of emotional reliance or demands satisfied through media techniques, the emergences of TV and mobile phone has undoubtedly transformed the childhood of left-behind children into a "media children." However, media are a double-edge sword, which, on the one hand, meets demands of the left-behind children; on the other hand, exert a negative influence on them. André Paul Guillaume Gide once said that, "Emotions are good, but the literature thus created is terrible."

### 3.2 Media Worship

As media keep meeting children's demands for imagination, information and communication, they have learned how to search wonderful programs and useful information through their "media childhood." Through subtle influence, "mass media have increased modern people's reliance on and blind faith in the media through their omnipresence and reconstruction of reliability. As a result, modern people have developed a media worship psychology (Fan, 1989). The worship is based on the media techniques, media rights, media information and media idols. The worship psychology is originated from children's demands for media. However, as media play a central role in the society, children with their special psychological mechanism admire media, and allow the pseudo-environment to skillfully replace the practical life.

In this research, about 18.7% of children think that TV and mobile phone can enrich their knowledge. This, to some extent, reflects children's faith in the knowledge transmitted by media. In the previous part, it has been pointed out that left-behind children have a preference for imaginary programs. The entertainment programs and talent shows also hold great attraction to children, which suggest their idol worship. While experiencing the convenience brought by media, they have not realized that the media are gradually corroding them. According to the research results, about 68.8% of left-behind children think that watching TV and playing mobile phone do no harm to them; and the rest define the negative influence physically, such as shortsightedness, radiation, etc.. Therefore, though there is no significant difference in terms of the involvement degree between left-behind children and non-left-behind children, the former has an excessive reliance on and worship of media.

Among the 43% of left-behind children can realize the negative influence of TV and mobile phone on them, only 2.7% of children do realize the influence of

negative information on their healthy growth. In *Data Smog* by David Shenk, two concepts are put forward, namely "information glut" and "information smog." David thought that when people are indulged in the development of information processing capability but cannot catch up with the rapid growth of information, their understanding and analysis ability of information might be on the decline. Gradually, they might be numb in their observation and follow something blindly. In this investigation, many left-behind children are unconscious of the corrosion of information. This means they do not know how to distinguish the complicated information pouring to them. The generation growing up in the TV environment might become the captives of media due to their excessive reliance on media. They might blindly believe in the knowledge transmitted by TV and mobile phone, and accept the pseudo-environment with a nearly worship psychology.

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## CONCLUSION

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The characteristics of the human society should be discovered through communication. Humans always rely on certain symbol for their thinking. These symbols are spread by the mass media, influencing the guardians and left-behind children. While interacting with these symbols, left-behind children experience communication with themselves and start interpersonal communication, through which they invite others into their life. In this way, "individuals are only complete by being connected with social members around them" (Hamid, 2008) and socialization of left-behind children is finished. With the rapid development of new media, it is necessary to pay more attention to the influence of media on left-behind children and guide them to develop media literary to prevent them from becoming victims of media worship.

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