The Role of New Media in the Identity Transformation of the New Generation of Migrant Workers

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Abstract. The new generation of migrant workers has become a large population in China. After leaving their rural hometown and entering big cities, they face the challenge of identity transformation. As an indispensable component of modern life, the rapidly developing new media plays an important role in their adaptation and integration into urban life. This research examines how and to what extent new media facilitates the identity transformation of the new generation of migrant workers by conducting qualitative interviews. It is found that although new media can help the new generation of migrant workers realize the transformation in job hunting, daily life, entertainment, social life and education, the effect on helping them break through the identity barrier is still limited. New media’s different role in their material life and spiritual life, changes in their use of new media after coming to cities, and their motivations for using new media have been discussed as well.

1. Introduction

According to a report released by National Bureau of Statistics (2019), the total number of migrant workers in China in 2018 was 288 million, of which 135 million migrant workers went to big cities. This growing large group has always been attracting attention of the public, media, and researchers. In recent years, however, there is a noteworthy new phenomenon: The new generation of migrant workers born in 1980 and after has accounted for over 50 percent of the total number of migrant workers in China (National Bureau of Statistics, 2019). These young people, growing up in the information age, usually live and communicate differently from their parents’ generation in many ways, including the usage of new media techniques.

One thing that has closely related to almost all aspects of contemporary people's life is media. As Zhang pointed out in her book (1998), it is hard to imagine the life without mass communication. Its influence has permeated the behavior and even ideas of members of society. The media system dependency theory, put forward by American mass communication sociologists Sandra Ball-Rokeach and Melvin DeFleur, tries to explain why media becomes a powerful influence. It proposed that the relationship between media system and social systems, including individual, group and organization, is interdependent. There are three important goals of individuals identified in the theory: understanding (themselves and society), determining direction (of action and interaction), and obtaining (social and individual) entertainment. The realization of these goals depends on personal access to media-controlled information resources. Especially when the situation is "ambiguous", individuals will rely heavily on media information systems (Zhang, 1998). This theory applies well to the case of the identity transformation of migrant workers. Their goal is to integrate into the city as soon as possible and they are unfamiliar with the situation when they first come to the city. Media is an important way to help them get necessary information as well as establish interpersonal relationships in the city, thereby obtain a sense of security and realize identity transformation.
Besides, the media landscape has been changed. A report of online new media users in China (iResearch, 2016) showed that the development of Internet and mobile Internet in China is more and more mature, and new media is gradually replacing traditional media as the media form with the highest utilization rate. With the rapid development of new media, it has more and more influence on people, playing an important role in all aspects of life (Xie & Zhang, 2011). Meanwhile, at present, the gap between urban and rural areas in China is still very large. As Zhang noted (1998), because people's educational level and economic situation are different, the use of new information communication technologies is different, which results in the disparity between the rich and the poor in terms of information ownership. This study takes the gap between rural and urban mass communication into account and explores this issue from a sociological perspective.

Based on the increasing proportion of the new generation of migrant workers, the effect of media on individuals, and the rapid development of new media, this paper aims to investigate the role of new media in the identity transformation of the new generation of migrant workers.

There are three key concepts in this research: New media, new generation of migrant workers and identity transformation. The definition of Cambridge dictionary (2019) has been borrowed to define new media: Products and services that provide information or entertainment using computers or the internet, and not by traditional methods such as television and newspapers. For the second concept, the definition of National Bureau of Statistics (2019) has been adopted, which refers to people who was born in 1980 and after, has been working in cities, and still owns rural household registration (hukou). Due to the lack of well-established definition, the concept of identity transformation is defined by researcher in this paper as changes and adjustments people make, both materially and spiritually, in order to adapt to the city culture as well as become a member of the city when they come from the countryside to live and work in the city for the first time.

2. Literature Review

2.1. New media and migrant workers

A lot of research has been done on the impact of new media on migrant workers. Scholars have already paid much attention to how the use of new media changes different aspects of migrant workers’ life, including their subjective class-identification and self-perception (Cao & Liu, 2006; Xie & Zhang, 2011; Zhou, 2011), job hunting experience (Ding & Song, 2011; He & Huang, 2018; Huang & He, 2018), political participation (Yang & Li, 2018), access to information (Huang, 2017), personal social network (Xie & Zhang, 2011) and so on. Substantial studies have proved that new media influences, benefits and empowers migrant workers in many ways, ranging from basic living needs, social and cultural pursuits, to the realization of self-identity.

On the other hand, there are also many researchers focusing on the problem of involution and the closure of social class. Some scholars argued that low and middle-level information communication technology products are widely used by migrant workers because of their needs for the most basic and survival-related information (Ding & Song, 2011; Qiu, 2009). Besides, the new generation of migrant workers’ use of online new media is highly dependent on Internet cafes, thus isolated from the mainstream urban life (Guan, 2017; Qiu, 2009). It is believed that although these migrant workers are connected by the Internet, they always stay in the edge of the Internet society. New media in fact solidifies the original identity, social class and social circle of migrant workers instead of helping them really integrate into cities (Gao, 2018; Guan, 2017; Wang, 2006; Zhu, 2019).

Despite the abundance of existing literature, there are three deficiencies in these existing research. Firstly, there lacks a comprehensive study on the role of media in the identity transformation of migrant workers. Most of current research focus on only one aspect of their life instead of examining the whole experience. Secondly, the existing conclusions are scattered and sometimes even contradictory, thus request more works and proofs. Lastly, the research methods can be further enriched. Most current research adopted quantitative research methods, such as...
survey and questionnaire (Huang, 2017; Wang, 2006; Zhu, 2019). Some other studies are qualitative, mainly based on case study (Ding & Song, 2011) or field work (Guan, 2017).

To fill the research gaps mentioned above, this paper aims to comprehensively investigate, from both material perspective and spiritual perspective, the role of new media in the identity transformation of the new generation of migrant workers, by conducting qualitative interviews and analysis.

2.2. Media situation theory

Joshua Meyrowitz (1985) elaborated the media situation theory in his famous book No sense of place. It proposed that people's use of mass media is restricted by the corresponding social situation, which requires people to play different roles (Zhang, 1998). For migrant workers, entering cities is a conscious identity transformation. The reason behind is that in their minds, rural and urban situations are completely different and there are boundaries. They should play corresponding social roles in different situations, and their behavior should be suitable for different social situations.

With the continuous improvement of education level, it may be more common as well as easier for the new generation of migrant workers to use new media to adapt themselves to urban life. Meanwhile, media as an important part of the social environment has different characteristics in rural and urban areas. Since people's use of media is not completely at will but restricted by the social environment, the following hypothesis is raised:

H1: After the new generation of migrant workers enter the city, their way of using new media has changed.

2.3. Uses and gratifications

Uses and gratifications theory is a classic theory in communication research, assuming that people use media actively with underlying motivations. As a result of these needs and expectations, people choose certain media to use and conduct different usage pattern (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1973).

Previous studies have developed different typologies. After examining a variety of traditional media, McQuail, Blumler and Brown (1972) concluded four motivations for using traditional media, including diversion, personal identity, personal relationships, and surveillance. Another classic categorization comes from Katz, Gurevitch and Haas (1973). They identified thirty-five kinds of needs and divided them into five main categories, which were cognitive needs, affective needs, personal integrative needs, social integrative needs, and tension release needs.

Based on the uses and gratifications theory, this research proposes the following hypothesis to understand the role new media plays in the identity transformation:

H2: The new generation of migrant workers use different new media to fulfill various needs in the process of identity transformation.

3. Methodology

Many current studies on the effect of new media prefer using questionnaire. This research, however, adopts the approach of qualitative interview, because only in this way can we understand the situation of the research objects, the reasons and motivations behind their way of contacting new media, and the process of realizing identity transformation. The researcher aims to dig the stories and experiences of the new generation of migrant workers, the underlying operating mechanism as well as significance of new media in identity transformation, and the interviewees’ understanding towards this problem.

3.1. Data collection

The interview is semi-open and responsive, which means the researcher designed an interview outline listing several main topics and basic questions, and leave more specific questions to
naturally emerge during the conversation with interviewees. In this way, the interview can both avoid being off-topic and keep flexible.

The five main topics are job hunting, daily life, entertainment, social life and education, which should cover most aspects of the identity transformation of the new generation of migrant workers. For each topic, there are three basic questions: (1) Have you ever used new media on this aspect? Please share your experience; (2) Please describe and evaluate the overall situation of your life in this aspect after coming to the city; (3) Please compare the situation of this aspect in the city with that in your hometown.

According to the definition of the new generation of migrant workers given before, five eligible young people were interviewed face to face. All of them are working in Beijing at present. Table 1 shows their basic information:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Hometown</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Time spent in Beijing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Wuhu, Anhui</td>
<td>Construction Worker</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Wuhu, Anhui</td>
<td>Renovation Worker</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Xiangcheng, Henan</td>
<td>Security Guard</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Zhumadian, Henan</td>
<td>Receptionist</td>
<td>9 years</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Zhangjiakou, Hebei</td>
<td>Property Caretaker</td>
<td>2 months</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Among them, interviewee C, D and E received a second interview by phone one week after the first interview, because the researcher noticed some deficiencies after analyzing interview materials.

3.2. Data analysis
All collected data were coded and analyzed with the help of NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software. To improve the credibility and reliability of the research, the data were analyzed by two coders separately. The findings were fully discussed and built on consensus.

4. Findings
Among the five categories, job hunting and daily life are classified as part of the material life, while entertainment, social life, and education belongs to the spiritual life.

4.1. The role of new media in the material life

4.1.1. Job hunting.
Through interviews, it is found that new media only plays a limited role in the job hunting of the new generation of migrant workers. All interviewees found their present jobs via personal connection. Interviewee C got the job because one of his relatives worked there, and the other four were all introduced to the employers by their friends or fellow townsmen. Some of them had sought job by going to offline agency or wandering on the street to see if there were any recruitment notices.

Interviewee A and B said they once tried job search websites, but found those online platforms were “unreliable” and “there were many cheaters”. B met a recruiter who asked him to pay certain amount of money in advance and “never searched job online any more since then.” A’s experience was similar, but he believed and lost 200 RMB that time. Only interviewee D mentioned positive experiences of using new media to seek job. During her nine years in Beijing, she successfully found jobs on job search software a few times and she felt they were “quite reliable and convenient”.

Besides looking for job, some interviewees also made effort to make money online. Interviewee B has tried multiple times to start own computer game-related business, including selling game equipment, power leveling, and taking advantage of game bugs, etc. His business partners were net
friends and communications were done in a WeChat group. All those attempts, however, have failed.

Therefore, it can be concluded that although new media provides some ways for the new generation of migrant workers to find jobs in the city, there are not enough targeted information and guidance for this group of people. As a result, most of them either rely on traditional personal networks to find jobs or have had unpleasant experiences in online job hunting.

4.1.2. Daily life.

New media is widely used in many aspects of the interviewees’ daily life, but the degree of dependence is not high. Although the company provides free lunch, interviewee C, D and E often order food delivery on mobile apps. On the contrary, interviewee A and B choose to cook and bring own meals to their working places every day, because they thought food delivery is too expensive for them. For transportation, interviewee B and C mentioned that they searched routes on the Internet when they first came to Beijing alone, and C often bought air ticket online. Besides, all interviewees are frequent users of mobile payment apps and C even borrowed money online. Their consumptive habits have been partly changed by new media as well. All interviewees do online shopping on various websites but view it more as a supplement of offline shopping rather than the main channel. The two females D and E also often followed online comments to make purchase decisions, while none of the male interviewees visit commentary websites.

In terms of more complicated tasks such as renting houses and getting driver license, however, no interviewee sought the help of new media. Instead, they seemed to depend more on acquaintances and face-to-face communication with the renter or agency to gain information, which is quite similar to their experience in job hunting.

To conclude, the new generation of migrant workers make extensive use of new media in terms of food, information, transportation, consumption and daily necessities, thus facilitating their urban life. However, due to the constraints of consumption level and education level, the use of new media is limited to the basic scope of daily life. Convenience, ease of use and low cost are the main factors they consider when using new media.

4.2. The role of new media in the spiritual life

4.2.1. Entertainment

According to the interviews, new media is a significant source of entertainment for the new generation of migrant workers. Firstly, most of their leisure time is spent on various mobile apps, covering all forms of recreation such as music, cyber-fiction, video, short video, and game. It seems that new media has greatly enriched the interviewees’ life, as each of them uses at least two kinds of entertainment apps and they mentioned almost no any other activities except using new media in their free time. Secondly, some minority hobbies of the interviewees can be satisfied on new media. A once accidentally noticed a video of Fujian puppet show while browsing a video website and became a big fan of the show since then. B loves old movies produced in the 1980s, but he could only watch TV in the countryside. Thanks to those video websites, they can find plenty of resources to satisfy themselves now.

Although new media brings joy to these migrant workers’ life, many of them still feel a sense of boredom and emptiness. Four interviewees do not play games any more now because they feel more and more that it is “boring and just a waste of time”. Interviewee C said: “In Beijing, I am bored. Nobody talks to me and there are few activities.” Interviewee A and B criticized popular TV dramas nowadays, saying that they “cannot understand the actor’s lines” and “feel the director is insulting” them, so they seldom watch those TV series.

Apparently, the new generation of migrant workers can get some pleasure and entertainment through the new media and adapt to the entertainment mode in city, but as a whole, it mainly relies on individual recreation, lacking common fans and collective recreation. Others feel spiritual
emptiness as well as boredom in urban life, and there is a lack of entertainment more suitable for them.

4.2.2. Social life

The benefits brought by new media in the field of social life are mainly reflected in maintaining the original social relationship rather than making new friends. All five interviewees use social media to communicate only with their families, former classmates and friends in their hometown. They may have several colleagues in their social media contact lists, but seldom have interaction with those people. In the virtual world, the chance of making Internet friends is small as well. Interviewee A and E sometimes browse online discussion forums or communities, but almost never post anything or leave comment.

In terms of making friends of the opposite sex, there exists a gender difference. Two female interviewees D and E said they did not deliberately make attempts to meet more boys, while both interviewee B and C had tried dating apps in hope to make friends with girls. C explained that it was “because it's hard to meet girls in real life, no opportunity in the reality.” The result, however, was not desirable. B found that “it feels like it's not social software at all, it's a show-off platform. Girls only ask for red envelopes. It feels like if there's a woman in it, she's cheating you.” C felt the girls he met online were not real people but “computer man”, and “those apps are useless”.

In general, the new generation of migrant workers will change and adapt to the urban social media habits, using new media to keep in touch with relatives and friends in their hometown. However, new media is not very helpful for them to make new friends in the city, no matter in real world or virtual world, friends or romantic partners.

4.2.3. Education

The interview results show that the new generation of migrant workers has certain awareness of self-education and tries to learn new things through new media. Interviewee A, C, D and E all mentioned that they would consciously learn meaningful and useful knowledge by subscribing relevant social media accounts, following social news, reading electronic books, and watching online lectures, etc. Their motivations can be explained in interviewee A’s words: “I definitely want to improve, because I personally feel that I am still young and should learn more.”

Despite of the awareness, their practice of self-education in new media is restricted by many factors. Firstly, they often do not have clear goals. As what interviewee A said: “In fact, most of my generation, some friends of my age, are as confused as I am. They don't know what they are doing, what they are going to learn, and what their goals are. I feel that it is fatal. I realized this from a very early age, but I still don't know what I want and what to learn, so I'm confused. There is no concept at all.” Secondly, the study is usually fragmented and not systematic, consisting of independent articles and videos. That is partly because these migrant workers have no time to complete a time-consuming course and partly because they do not know how to start a formal learning.

In summary, for the new generation of migrant workers, new media to a certain extent meets their needs of self-learning and self-education after they come to the city, but they also have the problems of unclear learning objectives as well as the lack of systematization, coherence and continuity.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

In general, after the new generation of migrant workers come to the city, the new media can help them realize the transformation in job hunting, daily life, entertainment, social life and education, so as to better adapt to the city life. At the same time, however, the help provided by new media is limited. It is difficult for them to break through the barrier of identity only with new media. More often than not, they are still maintaining original relationships and lifestyles, which is consistent with the involution discussed in previous literature.
Compared with the time in the countryside, they use more types of new media in more ways after coming to cities. The overall change is not significant in terms of material aspects, because their adoption of new media remains at a basic level, usually not involving complex operations. In spiritual aspect, their degree of dependency on new media is much higher. Unlike days in their hometown, now they have to accomplish almost all social intercourse, entertainment and education on new media. Therefore, H1 is partly supported.

For H2, the new generation of migrant workers do make many attempts to use new media to meet some needs, such as making friends, starting own business, learning knowledge, and killing time, but the results are often unsatisfactory. Most attempts ended in failure, and they are often in situation full of confusion about the future.

Due to the limitation of time and resources, this research interviewed only five interviewees in Beijing. To further understand the identity transformation of the new generation of migrant workers as well as the role of new media, future researchers may conduct interviews with more diverse interviewees in various cities. Also, more research may focus on factors that hinder the function of new media in the identity transformation of the new generation of migrant workers.

References


