

GLOBAL ACADEMIC RESEARCH INSTITUTE

COLOMBO, SRI LANKA



GARI International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research

ISSN 2659-2193

Volume: 09 | Issue: 03

On 30th September 2023

<http://www.research.lk>

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GARI Publisher | Social Science | Volume: 09 | Issue: 03

Article ID: IN/GARI/SL/ICM/2023/108AUG | Pages: 05-17 (13)

ISSN 2659-2193 | Edit: GARI Editorial Team

Received: 16.05.2023 | Publish: 30.09.2023

RESEARCH ON THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE VIRTUAL FAMILY IN WECHAT SPACE FOR RURAL LEFT-BEHIND CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

At present, the maintenance and development of rural left-behind family relationships are facing challenges, while WeChat builds a “virtual family in WeChat space” for rural left-behind children, making it possible for their family relationships to develop well. This study used questionnaires to investigate the use of WeChat by family members of left-behind children in rural areas for communication and interaction, as well as the family functions of virtual families. The results show that the current construction subjects of the virtual family in WeChat space of left-behind children in rural areas have different reasons to participate. The construction of the virtual family in WeChat space for left-behind children in rural areas can be carried out from three dimensions: time, space and content. The current construction status of the virtual family in WeChat space for left-behind children in rural areas is as follows: in terms of the time dimension, the subjects participating in the space construction communicate in WeChat for about 1 hour per day; in terms of the spatial dimension, the virtual family in WeChat space is mainly chat room space; in terms of the content dimension, the content involved in the virtual family in WeChat space is mainly about daily life, work and learning topics; overall, the virtual family in WeChat space for rural left-behind children has been basically constructed and formed, and its functions have been realized to a certain extent.

Keywords: WeChat, Left-behind children, Virtual family, Space construction

INTRODUCTION

Since the reform and opening up, China’s urbanization and modernization process has accelerated. In order to seek development, the surplus rural labour force has migrated to cities for work, especially a large number of young and middle-aged rural people who have migrated to cities. Most of their children are left at home to be taken care of by their grandparents or other relatives, resulting in the emergence of a group of left-behind children. In 2020, the number of left-behind children in rural China reached 41.77 million. Zhou Zongkui and Sun Xiaojun et al. found that rural left-behind children represented a group of children with low socio-economic status. Compared with peers whose parents are at home, they have problems in their behaviour, learning and psychological health due to the lack of parental companionship and supervision for a long period of time, especially in interpersonal relationships and self-confidence.

At present, issues related to left-behind children have become the focus of academic research. Experts and scholars from different fields have discussed the parent-child relationship, growth education, and physical and mental health of left-behind children from various

perspectives. Especially with the development and popularization of social media, the parent-child communication methods of left-behind children's families have become more diversified, which provides new opportunities and possibilities for enhancing the parent-child relationship of left-behind children and alleviating their problems. Tencent Holdings' Financial Report for the first quarter of 2023 showed that the combined monthly active accounts of WeChat reached 1.319 billion in the first quarter. WeChat, as a representative product of social media that people rely on for online socializing, has created a social space--WeChat space. WeChat space means that WeChat is no longer just regarded as a tool for mobile social software, but rather needs to re-examine the spatial production of WeChat users from the perspectives of virtual space, information space, and spiritual space, and on this basis, explore the construction of the virtual family in WeChat space for rural left-behind children. In the concept of Chinese people, a common living space is a necessary factor in the formation of a "family". With the development of network technology, people use WeChat to transform words, gestures, images, and other symbols to deliver to each other. The original interpersonal communication in real space has become interpersonal communication in WeChat space, and people construct the virtual family in WeChat space.

The definition of the virtual family in WeChat space for rural left-behind children in China is that in the families of left-behind children in rural areas, family members in different living spaces use WeChat space as a carrier for online interaction and communication, thus constructing a virtual space that can simulate and create a sense of shared life. In the virtual family in WeChat space, family members have a sense of family identity, and in this secret space isolated from social public space, members can

engage in activities such as family education and family production activities. The biggest difference between the virtual family in WeChat space and the traditional family space lies in the different material foundations of existence. The virtual family in WeChat space is not based on the physical space for living together, but in the cyberspace where we participate together. The construction of the virtual family in WeChat space places more emphasis on building a common spiritual space among family members rather than a physical space. This study mainly explores the following questions:

Q1. Has the virtual family in WeChat space for rural left-behind children been constructed in rural China?

Q2. What's the construction status of the virtual family in WeChat space for rural left-behind children in rural China?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Rural left-behind children

Impact of parental departure on left-behind children

Many scholars explored the physical and mental health status of left-behind children by conducting questionnaires and interviews with parents and left-behind children in Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Romania and other immigrant-exporting countries. Elspeth and Lucy (2011) found that left-behind children in Indonesia and Thailand had more serious psychological problems compared to children from non-immigrant countries, but this phenomenon did not appear in left-behind children in the Philippines and Vietnam. Kolitha Wickramage et al. (2015) proposed that 2 out of 5 left-behind children suffered from mental disorders, and boys were more likely to suffer from mental illness; 30% of left-behind children aged 6-59 months were underweight or severe emaciation,

compared to 17.7% of non-immigrant families.

Measures to solve the problem of left-behind children

In order to solve the growth problems of left-behind children, some researchers have provided corresponding countermeasures from different perspectives. Theodora et al. (2013) proposed from a technical perspective that the country could improve communication infrastructure construction to help parents develop relationships with left-behind children. At present, only a small number of scholars have conducted research on family communication of left-behind children. Among them, Mirca and Miller (2011) investigated female Filipino immigrants (mainly Filipino maids and nursing workers) in the UK and their children who stayed in the country, and found that mothers believed that mobile phones were helpful for communication with their children, and reshaped their role as mothers in parent-child communication. But their children had the opposite idea. They did not like this kind of family communication that relied on mobile phones to maintain.

Family communication

In the 1970s, Bochner published *Family Communication Research* (1975) and *Conceptual Frontiers in the Study of Communication in Families* (1976), which marked the beginning of family communication to form its own identity. However, the majority of family communication research at this time was conducted by scholars in non-communication disciplines, especially psychology, family therapy, and sociology. Brommel and Galvin co-authored *Family Communication: Cohesion and Change* in 1982, the first textbook to focus on the field of family communication. Afterwards, Beebe and Masterson co-authored *Family Talk: Interpersonal Communication in the*

Family in 1986, and Pearson authored *Communication in the Family: Seeking Satisfaction in Changing Times* in 1989. Communication scholars began to focus on family communication patterns, marriage types, conflicts, and decision-making. In 1989, the Commission on Family Communication of the United States was established, which confirmed that family communication was a sub-discipline of communication studies. Since then, communication scholars have approached the family from different theoretical perspectives and have reached a consensus that family communication has different characteristics from non-family interpersonal communication (e.g. groups of friends).

Many family communication research textbooks have been published one after another, such as *Understanding Family Communication* (Yerby, Buerkele-Rothfuss & Bochner, 1994), and *Perspectives on Family Communication* (West & Turner, 1998). Family communication research is becoming more and more mature in the field of communication. In 2001, the *Journal of Family Communication* was born, marking an important step towards the specialisation of family communication. According to Braithwaite, Surer and Floyd (2017), a total of 471 family communication papers were published in 21 academic journals such as the *Communication Quarterly* and *Communication Research* from 1990 to 2003, with an average of 33.6 papers per year. From 2004 to 2015, there were 486 papers, with an average of 40.5 papers per year. Among them, the *Journal of Family Communication* published the most papers on family communication, followed by the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*. Scholars' research on family communication mainly focuses on the following aspects.

Communication among different family members

With the nuclearisation of family structures, communication between parents and children has become the most important type of relational communication in family communication. Therefore, the study of parent-child communication has become the focus of researchers. Givertz and Segrin (2014) found that an egalitarian and open family communication climate was positively associated with family satisfaction for both parents and children. Ledbetter (2009) argued that parent-child communication patterns affected children's well-being and closeness to friends, with children from families with highly conversational communication patterns were more willing to solve friendship problems face-to-face with their friends, and their intimacy with friends was naturally higher. The transmitters and recipients of family communication are not only parents and children, but also husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, grandparents and grandchildren. Hartmann et al. (2012) conducted in-depth interviews with couples. They advocated a shift in gendered communication patterns to enhance effective communication between couples and encourage male involvement in family decision-making, which could improve marital relationships and have a positive impact on family fertility. Prentice (2008) found that when non-blood-related new members joined the family, their original communication habits were broken, and the family's communication content, frequency, and style would be adjusted and reconstructed according to the new members. The dilemma of family communication was that the addition of new members disrupted the original communication of the family and made the original family members feel uncomfortable.

Schrodt and Phillips (2016) proposed that different family communication patterns (conversation and conformity

orientations) had an impact on closeness and satisfaction between siblings, and that FCP (family communication pattern) theory should be used to guide the positive development of sibling relationships. Soliz and Harwood (2003) examined the link between young people's different perceptions of communication with their grandparents and their attitudes toward them from a contact theory perspective. When grandparents and grandchildren could feel that each other had a strong desire to communicate, their prejudice against each other would be weakened.

Sensitive issues in family communication

Scholars are very concerned about sensitive topics in family communication, such as sex, AIDS, cancer, alcoholism, family health history, organ donation, etc. These studies focus on the investigation of the effect of family communication. Rhucharoenpornpanich et al. (2012) studied the sexual communication between parents and children in Thailand. The results showed that parents were more willing to discuss physical changes with their children, while parents seldom talked about sensitive topics related to sex, such as contraception, HIV, AIDS, and so on. At the same time, compared with sons, parents were more willing to talk about sex with their daughters. The multiple regression analysis conducted by Rhucharoenpornpanich et al. showed that children's gender, parents' religious beliefs, and parents' views on adolescent sexual behaviour were important factors affecting family sexual communication. It is recommended to find ways to improve parents' communication skills on sexual-related topics in Thai families. Williams, Pichon and Campbell (2015) investigated sexual communication in religious African-American families. They proposed that as the main source of sexual knowledge for adolescents, religious parents should provide children with comprehensive and objective sex

education to promote sexual communication in religious families. Rangarajan and Kelly (2006) believed that the severity of parental alcoholism was negatively correlated with the offspring self-esteem, and conversation-orientation FCP would change the extent to which father's alcoholism affected the offspring self-esteem, while the extent to which mother's alcoholism affected the offspring self-esteem was not affected by FCP.

There are many similar studies. For example, Haverfield and Theiss (2017) also proposed that family communication between parents and children was the basis for members' emotional management and behavioural selection criteria. Through controlled experiments, it was found that the different behaviours of alcoholic parents and non-alcoholic parents in family communication would directly affect children's emotional management and behavioural choices. Scott and Quick (2012) disseminated information about organ donation to participants. Different family communication patterns affected the willingness of participants and family members to discuss organ donation, and ultimately affected participants' decision to donate organs. Therefore, in order to achieve the best publicity effect, staff should consider family communication as an influencing factor when designing information to encourage organ donation, and design targeted publicity information for different family communication patterns.

Relationship between technology and family communication

Kang (2012) studied that the differences in digital knowledge and skills between men and women in the family would affect their discourse power in family communication, thereby changing the power structure of the entire family. Pearce, Slaker and Ahmad (2013) proposed that the use of information and communication technology could mitigate the negative social impacts of migrant

families. Rudi et al. (2015) surveyed the media used in family communication--text messages, email, social networking sites, and Skype and found that parent-child use of media in family communication changed dynamically with the age of children and changes in the family system.

Family communication of special populations

After decades of development, scholars have tended to refine their research on family communication. In addition to the family communication of ordinary families, the research focus has also shifted to family communication of special groups, such as divorced families, immigrant families, sexual minority families, and families of juvenile offenders. As the life experiences and family environments of special groups are different from those of ordinary people, researchers have explored the content, patterns, media and effects of family communication separately. Through a controlled experiment on young people from divorced and non-divorced families, Schrodtt and Ledbetter (2007) found that the communication patterns of conversation orientations in non-divorced families had a direct effect on the mental health of young people who grew up in this family, while having an indirect effect on their well-being. The communication patterns of conversation orientations in divorced families had a positive direct effect on the happiness of young people who grew up in that family, while conformity orientations had an indirect negative effect on their happiness.

Gonzalez and Katz (2016) believed that the use of information and communication devices by immigrant family members reduced the cost of cross-border communication and made communication between members more frequent. Through interviews with Latino immigrant families, Carmen and Vikki S. found that digital information and communication technology helped immigrants interact

with distant relatives across borders, maintain virtual intimacy, feel family ties, and not prevent them from caring for the elderly in foreign countries and fulfilling their filial piety. Chevrette (2013) studied the dilemmas and solutions faced by LGBTQ in interpersonal communication and family communication from a feminist perspective. She argued that researchers had been more accustomed to constructing and describing LGBTQ relationships in terms of heteronormative norms, so the constructed LGBTQ relationship framework had obvious conceptual limitations. When studying interpersonal relationships and family communication, researchers would inadvertently differentiate or devalue LGBTQ. Their terms, body movements, intonation, images, descriptions, etc. would stimulate LGBTQ, and even prompt LGBTQ to commit self-harm or endanger society. Therefore, she suggested that when researchers discussed family communication, they should include LGBTQ family members without prejudice or specialisation, and avoid verbal violence to hurt them.

To understand the role of family communication in solving the problem of juvenile delinquency in Bandung City, a city in western Java, Indonesia, Rina (2018) investigated the family communication patterns of juvenile offenders in Kelurahan Pasirbiru, a town in Bandung City from a phenomenological perspective using a qualitative research method. It was found that the frequent occurrence of juvenile delinquency in Kelurahan Pasirbiru was due to the lack of strong family communication and parental supervision and education in the nuclear family. Family communication patterns were very important for the growth of young people, and democratic and responsible education patterns could reduce and prevent juvenile delinquency.

Dimensions of the construction of the virtual family in WeChat space

Space can be divided into reality and virtuality. The formation of real family space depends on the physical space of family life, and its size can be directly observed by measuring the common living area, the number of family members and the number of generations in the family.

The formation of virtual family space relies more on the emotional connections and identity of family members in the virtual network. Its construction is not only based on the marital relationship, blood relationship or adoption relationship, but also on the interaction time, space, and content of family members in the network space. The interaction time, space, and content directly determine the construction of the virtual family in WeChat space for rural left-behind children.

Time dimension

“Love grows with time” proves the logical relationship between time and emotion, which is also applicable to the construction of the virtual family in WeChat space of left-behind children in rural China. The longer left-behind children are separated from their parents, the fewer opportunities they have for emotional communication in real life, the shorter the duration of communication, and the more likely the parent-child relationship is to be weakened. In the network environment, the longer the online communication time of family members, the larger the WeChat space of the virtual family of left-behind children in rural China. The time dimension of the virtual family in WeChat space for rural left-behind children mainly refers to the duration and time distribution of family members' interaction and communication in the WeChat space for rural left-behind children. The main statistical indicators include two aspects: firstly, the average

time that family members use WeChat to contact their family members every day; secondly, the number of members who communicate and interact in the WeChat space during each period.

Spatial dimension

In the eyes of the Chinese, housing is an important criterion for measuring the integrity of a family. It is not only a common living space for families, but also a necessary material guarantee for forming a family. Therefore, the construction of the virtual family in WeChat space cannot be separated from the spatial dimension. WeChat space is virtual and cannot be measured quantitatively based on building area, three-dimensional space volume, etc. The WeChat software module is divided into Chats, Contacts, Discover and Me. Chats is composed of a search box, chat rooms and subscriptions. Contacts contains all WeChat friends, new friends, chats only friends, group chats, tags, official accounts, and wecom contacts. The top search box is also used to quickly search and add contacts. Discover mainly contains Moments and other multi-category and extended functions, such as scan, live, search, games, shake and nearby. The Me section mainly carries the functions, such as wallets, favourites, cards & offers, sticker gallery and settings. There is a separation between them, similar to small spaces. Therefore, the spatial dimension of the construction of the virtual family in WeChat space for rural left-behind children mainly refers to the specific space in which the family members of rural left-behind children communicate and interact with each other in WeChat space.

Content dimension

“Nothing to say” and “Nothing to say” can be described as the least ideal and the most ideal situation when family members

get along. It can be seen that interactive topics are very important for family communication. When interacting on a certain topic, family members can exchange information, perspectives, opinions, emotions, and attitudes to achieve common understanding, trust, and cooperation, thus forming a good family relationship. Thus, the content dimension of the virtual family in WeChat space for rural left-behind children mainly refers to the topics that family members of rural left-behind children interact and communicate in the WeChat space, mainly including daily life, work and study, emotional psychology, current affairs and news, entertainment and health preservation.

METHODOLOGY

Procedure

This study used a combination of online and offline questionnaires to conduct the survey. The online questionnaires were distributed on Questionnaire Star, and the survey was conducted for family members of left-behind children nationwide. The offline questionnaires were mainly distributed in rural areas under the jurisdiction of Changsha City in Hunan Province, Fuyang City in Anhui Province and Tongren City in Guizhou Province. In this survey, a total of 800 questionnaires were distributed, and 759 questionnaires were collected. 46 invalid questionnaires were excluded, and 713 valid questionnaires were ultimately obtained, with a valid questionnaire rate of 89.13%, which can meet the needs of the study. Use SPSS23.0 statistical analysis software to conduct statistical analysis on the survey results of the current situation of the construction of the virtual family in WeChat space for rural left-behind children.

Participants

Among the 713 questionnaires, 97 were from grandparents, 341 from parents, and 275 from grandchildren. There were 382 males and 331 females. The age distribution of the participants was as follows: 275 were aged 1-20, 209 were aged 21-40, 143 were aged 41-60, and 86 were over 60 years old. The education levels of the participants were distributed as follows: 266 participants were from primary school and below, 355 participants were from secondary school and 92 participants were from junior colleges and above. There were 66 participants from Eastern China, 496 participants from Central China, 107 participants from Western China and 44 participants from Northeastern China.

Measures

This survey questionnaire consists of three parts: personal basic information, WeChat usage status, and family function scale. Personal basic information mainly involves age, gender, home address, education level, etc. On the one hand, it is to screen out the target survey respondents who meet the requirements of this study. On the other hand, it is to grasp the personal situation of the survey respondents. WeChat usage status is mainly to understand the duration, frequency, main topics, interactive space, and usage attitude of family members of rural left-behind children in WeChat space. The family function scale used in this study was compiled by Epstein et al. The Chinese version of this scale was revised by Li Rongfeng and Xu Fuzhen et al. (2013) This scale has a total of 60 items, consisting of 7 subscales: problem-solving, communication, role, emotional response, emotional involvement, behavioural control, and general function. The average score of each subscale is the score of that subscale, representing the quality of family function at that level. The general function subscale score represents

the total function of the family function. A 4-point Likert scale is used, ranging from “completely disagree” to “completely agree” with a score of “1-4”. The higher the score, the better the family function. If 40% of the items in the subscale are not answered, the scale is invalid. The Cronbach's α coefficients for the subscales of the Family Function Scale in this study were: The Cronbach's α coefficient of general function was 0.601. The Cronbach's α coefficient of problem-solving was 0.596. The Cronbach's α coefficient of communication was 0.619. The Cronbach's α coefficient of role was 0.734. The Cronbach's α coefficient of emotional response was 0.630. The Cronbach's α coefficient of emotional involvement was 0.780. The Cronbach's α coefficient of behavioural control was 0.585. The overall reliability is good.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overall survey results

Theoretically, the median value of 2.5 can be regarded as the average value, a score below 2.5 can be regarded as poor family function, and a score above 2.5 can be regarded as good family function. The average scores of the dimensions of communication, role, emotional response, emotional involvement, and behavioural control are all above 2.5 points, indicating that the virtual family of rural left-behind children had good family function in these dimensions. The general function dimension score is 2.44 points, indicating that the virtual family of rural left-behind children is very general in terms of general function. However, the average score in the problem-solving dimension is less than 2.5 points, indicating that the virtual family of rural left-behind children is very poor in terms of problem-solving. Among the dimensions of family function, emotional involvement had the highest score (2.81 points) and problem-solving had the lowest score (2.23 points). All

dimensions' scores were above 2 points and the mean scores of all dimensions were above 2.5 points. It shows that in this questionnaire survey, the family function of the virtual family of rural left-behind children generally performs well in all dimensions, and the WeChat space of the virtual family of rural left-behind children has been successfully constructed.

Results of communication frequency

95.88% of grandparents only contacted other family members on WeChat once a week or even longer, while 89.74% of parents and 86.91% of grandchildren contacted other family members on WeChat at least once a day. The reason why there is such a significant difference in the frequency of using WeChat to contact other family members between grandparents and parents and grandchildren is that grandparents have not yet formed the habit of using WeChat, and their media skills need to be improved. In the wave of new media, young and middle-aged people have become the leaders, while the older generation is slow to catch on and has become the "internet refuge" in this wave. They are influenced by their own cultural level and traditional beliefs, and are curious about new technologies. However, they are timid and unsure about learning to use new technologies, so they would rather give up or use WeChat less.

Results of communication duration

In terms of the time dimension, more than half of the rural left-behind children's virtual family in WeChat space was less than or equal to 1 hour. 70.10% of grandparents, 54.55% of parents and 62.55% of grandchildren maintained an average daily WeChat contact with family members for less than 1 hour. 29.90% of grandparents, 31.67% of parents, and 33.45% of grandchildren maintained an average of 1 to 3 hours of WeChat contact

with family members every day. 13.78% of parents and 4.00% of grandchildren maintained an average daily WeChat contact with family members for 3-5 hours, and no participant exceeded this range. This shows that more than half of the family members of left-behind children in rural areas spend less than 1 hour in the virtual family in WeChat space every day. Parents who are working outside the home look forward to daily interaction with other family members, especially their children, out of guilt for neglecting to be with them and missing them. However, due to work, they often do not have much time to communicate with their family members online.

Results of communication period

Among the families of the rural left-behind children, the preferred time for family members to contact their families was highly concentrated. The family members of rural left-behind children most often contact their families from 12:00 to 13:59, accounting for 28.47% of the total number of respondents. The next most popular time to contact family members was from 20:00 to 21:59, accounting for 26.79% of the total number of respondents. The preferred time for family members of left-behind children to contact their family members is mainly concentrated in 12:00-13:59 and 18:00-23:59 every day. The total number of people who choose to contact their families during these periods reached 647, accounting for 90.74% of the total number of respondents. This indicated that the preferred time for family members of left-behind children to contact their families was highly concentrated. The results showed that the preferred time for family members of left-behind children in rural areas to contact their families is usually during mealtime and bedtime because these periods are often free time that does not delay normal study and work.

Results of Communication reasons

The main reasons why the grandparents of left-behind children in rural areas contact family members on WeChat are low traffic costs (accounting for 26%), family members were using it (accounting for 24%), and communication was time-saving (accounting for 20%). The main reasons why the grandparents of left-behind children in rural areas contact family members on WeChat are to fulfil their obligations (accounting for 27%), family members were using it (accounting for 21%), and communication was time-saving (accounting for 13%). The main reasons why the grandparents of left-behind children in rural areas contact family members on WeChat are timely sharing (accounting for 26%), time-saving communication (accounting for 23%), and family members using it (accounting for 15%). Time-saving communication and family members using it were the common reasons for family members of left-behind children to choose WeChat to contact other family members. This shows that if only one family member uses WeChat, there is no point in using it. Only when two people use WeChat together, can they communicate with each other. When more family members use WeChat, the communication between them will be more convenient and frequent, which will reduce the cost of communication accordingly. The feature that the use value of a media product for users will increase with the number of users using the product is the media network externality. The main reason why grandparents use WeChat to contact their families is low traffic costs. This is also in line with the traditional consumption concept of the elderly in China. Most of them have lived a hard life and experienced material poverty, so they pay more attention to economic costs and are eager for cheap and affordable consumption.

The main reason why parents use WeChat to contact their families is to fulfil

their obligations. They are forced to leave their hometown to work in cities and are unable to fulfil their obligations to their children and their elderly parents, so they feel ashamed and remorseful. Influenced by traditional concepts, parents will try their best to ensure the safety and health of the elderly and children at home, worrying that the elderly will not be able to take good care of their children, and the emergence of WeChat can help them better care for their families in other places and better fulfil their obligations as parents and children. The main reason why grandchildren use WeChat to contact their families is timely sharing. In WeChat space, the process of information dissemination is relatively simple and not limited by the release time. Real-time updates can be realized. The dissemination of information is accelerated from the source and the immediacy is effectively guaranteed. The grandchildren show their moods, feelings, food, travel experience, etc. in WeChat through text, pictures, short videos, etc., and show their status to other family members. This is instant self-disclosure in virtual space.

Results of communication content

From the perspective of content, the most important topic of conversation among family members of rural left-behind children in the virtual family in WeChat space is the topic of daily life. Grandparents prefer to chat with other family members on WeChat about daily life, current affairs news, and health topics. The parents prefer to chat with other family members on WeChat about daily life, work and learning, and current affairs news. The grandchildren prefer to chat with other family members on WeChat about work and learning, daily life, and emotional and psychological topics. From the survey, it can be found that almost all family members of left-behind children in rural areas take the initiative to chat with other family

members about their daily life, which means that when family members of left-behind children in rural areas start daily life topics in WeChat space, everyone will participate in the construction of the virtual family. When talking about other topics, some family members will withdraw from the construction of the virtual family. For example, when it comes to work and learning topics, the grandparents will basically withdraw from the virtual family in WeChat space. Only parents and grandchildren will remain in the virtual family at this time.

Results of communication channels

From the perspective of spatial dimension, the interaction scope of rural left-behind children's family members in the virtual family in WeChat space is mainly the chat room space. Grandparents preferred voice chat, video chat and forwarding content. Parents preferred voice chat, video chat and text chat. Grandchildren preferred text chat, posting emoticons and pictures, and voice chat. No matter how society develops and how open people's ideas are, family space will always be a more private space that is different from social public space. The chat room space of WeChat has a clear partition. Each chat is like entering a different room for different communication, and users can review the previous chat content. The chat room creates an independent communication space in the WeChat space, and a series of chat rooms aggregate to form a space for interpersonal interaction, which includes one-to-one and many-to-many interpersonal interactions. This significant separation has successfully created a spatial atmosphere, enabling users to form a subjective sense of space for WeChat chats, and the chat room can thus be regarded as an independent private interactive space.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper defines the connotation of the virtual family in WeChat space for left-behind children in rural China from the perspective of family communication. Through questionnaire surveys, the reality of the construction of the virtual family in WeChat space for rural left-behind children was examined. In general, virtual families for rural left-behind children have family functions, and the virtual family in WeChat space for rural left-behind children has been basically constructed. The participants in the construction of the space communicate in WeChat for about 1 hour per day. The virtual family in WeChat space is mainly the chat room space. The main topics of conversation in the virtual family in WeChat space are daily life and work and learning. However, this article only used a questionnaire to survey family members of left-behind children. In the future, methods such as in-depth interviews should be used. If conditions permit, more families of left-behind children in rural China can be visited for research.

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