

The Positive and Negative Effects of Wechat on Parent-Child Relationship Maintenance

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ABSTRACT

WeChat has been deeply involved in every aspect of Chinese people's life, and has exerted great influence on the Chinese family and parent-child relationship. This paper discusses the effects of WeChat on Chinese family stability, consumption pattern, family function, parent-child relationship and other aspects through interviews and literature review. The results show that WeChat has both positive and negative effects on the Chinese family and parent-child relationship. The negative effect of WeChat should arouse the great attention of technical developers and sociologists so that a good balance between the application and restriction of WeChat can be achieved.

Key words: Wechat, family, parent-child relationship, positive and negative effects

Science and technology are playing an increasingly important role in human society for they have penetrated into all aspects of human life, which gives rise to technical totalitarianism. Technical totalitarians believe that science and technology have brought about a significant and far-reaching impact on human society and man cannot do without science and technology. But the progress of science and technology cannot be separated from the participation of individual factors and social factors and it is inevitably influenced by all kinds of values, material economic interests and complex social relations.

Communication technology is one of the fastest growing fields since the 1980s, and it is one of the important signs of human access to the information society. WeChat is a significant branch of communication technology. WeChat technology has been fully and deeply involved in the lives of Chinese people, and in some areas has upended the Chinese lifestyle, such as the change in payment methods.

The rapid development of WeChat, like that of other science and technology, has brought great convenience to human beings, but at the same time, it has also caused a series of humanistic and social problems and conflicts. When people are keen to study digital technology and discuss its characteristics as well as its political [2, 3], social [4] and cultural application values [5], few people systematically analyze what WeChat technology, as a social presence, means to the maintenance of family and parent-child relationship, and how to take full advantage of its merits. This article will focus on the following questions: What humanistic and social problems

does WeChat cause in the maintenance of parent-child relationship? What social contradictions and conflicts have been triggered? How to evaluate the positive and negative effects of WeChat technology?

METHODOLOGY

This paper obtains relevant information through interviews and literature reviews.

This study, through in-depth interviews with 20 Chinese overseas students and literature reviews, examines the role of WeChat in the maintenance of family and parent-child relationship. The students interviewed include those who were studying in France as the author of this article.

This study takes Chinese overseas students as the research subject mainly because they are studying abroad away from their parents, which is a typical long-distance parent-child relationship.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The positive role of WeChat in parent-child relationship maintenance

Virtual emotional support

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines health as: "Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity"^[6]. Mental health is an essential part of health. In order to catch up with the level of science and technology in developed countries, the pace of social life in China is speeding up, the competition for talents is becoming increasingly fierce, and the learning tasks for Chinese students are becoming increasingly heavier. As a result, the mental health problems of Chinese students are on the rise. Anxiety is caused by a variety of factors, among which the biggest is the environment, such as stressful events (difficulty in writing papers, experiments not going well and so on) and loneliness.

Loneliness is more likely to occur in distant families. The interviews show that most of the overseas students have severe or mild anxiety symptoms. Those who are studying far away in foreign countries often bear more loneliness and academic burden, which leads to the emergence of anxiety disorders. The interviews show that for Chinese students studying abroad, the biggest obstacle they need to overcome on their way to complete their studies is to overcome loneliness. Those who have no strong will finally give up their studies.

There are many ways to prevent and relieve anxiety disorders. It can directly promote mental health to relieve pressure and regulate emotions through exercise^[9]. Xiaoxue (F, Phd, 27 years old) became anxious because of her studies, her parents encouraged her to take a walk in the park every day. While walking in the park, she kept using WeChat voice to chat with her parents, talking about life and study and sharing the interesting things they met. When she was experimenting hard, her parents gave out red packets through WeChat, so that she could eat out and get relaxed. After more than half a year of unremitting efforts, her anxiety disappeared and she developed the habit of walking every day. They had tens of thousands of voice chats, she recalls. The virtual presence makes it possible to give emotional support between distant family members.

WeChat plays a positive role in the occurrence of major social changes. During the lockdown of COVID-19, WeChat became the most frequently used social software. Students interviewed had relieved worries by communicating with their parents and classmates via WeChat or passing time updating WeChat Moments. Parents of Chinese overseas students often chatted with their children for a long time every day. Xiaoxue, when interviewed, said that she and her parents would chat in the WeChat group every day. If she was in a bad state, the chat lasted up to 2-3 hours. Her parents would try their best to collect a variety of funny videos and jokes for her to ease her anxiety. Of course, these students also sent back some videos they found interesting to their parents to show that they were emotionally stable and to ease their parents' anxiety and worry.

During the epidemic, there are some interesting phenomena in the use of WeChat by parents of overseas students. In addition to communicating with their children on WeChat, parents of overseas students also set up a group to exchange information with each other and relieve their own tension. WeChat helped to strengthen contact among these parents. And for parents whose children are studying in the same country, they also exchanged the latest information about the epidemic in their children's host countries every day. The convenience of WeChat and its group chat feature have played an important role in easing overseas students' and their parents' anxiety in the fight against the epidemic.

Closer family relationships

WeChat has changed the pattern of parent-child interaction. Family is a social life community formed on the basis of marriage, and family members are linked by blood relationship or living together (such as foster children, etc.). Family is the basic unit of social life and the primary place for social exchanges.

Family members have common interests and interdependent intimate relationship because of marriage and kinship, or because of living together. This relationship makes family members inseparable and indispensable to each other. WeChat is the carrier of family relations and family culture nowadays. In China, almost all families have a variety of groups on WeChat, such as "Happy Big Family" group, which may include several generations and dozens of members, and "Auspicious Nuclear Family", which only includes parents and children. Family members exchange information, share news, and negotiate related matters in the group. However, according to our survey, few interactions are carried on among most of these family groups, and members exchange frequently only during holidays or when there is important family event. In comparison, the small family group composed of only parents and children is usually very active, indicating that parent-child relationship is the core of modern Chinese family.

The traditional transmission of Chinese culture follows the pattern of inheriting from the previous generation to the next generation, in which the parents are the indoctrinators and the children can only receive the indoctrination in a passive way. This results in the inequity between the two sides in social education. The idea that "the father guides the child" presents throughout the process of Chinese social education, which is the basic law of the social cultural inheritance of Chinese civilization.

In the digital age, great changes have taken place in intergenerational relations, cultural heritage, parent-child interaction patterns and other aspects of Chinese society.

In the traditional Chinese culture and education methods, the parental generation has the supreme cultural authority. The parental generation is superior to the offspring in both knowledge and experience, and parents' authority is natural. In the process of growth, the offspring mainly rely on the transmission of parental experience. Due to the singularity of media (parents-to-children education), the knowledge transmission is almost always in a single top-down mode, which, coupled with the constraints of the ethical concepts of traditional Chinese society, leads to the absolute obedience of the offspring to their parents. However, social progress and the advent of WeChat has changed this rule. Children grown up in the digital age have more access to knowledge and information. Due to the equality and sharing of network culture, parents' authority is beginning to weaken, the traditional hierarchical structure of knowledge transmission is disintegrating, and the value of parent-to-child education is also fading. In the digital age, children have active thinking and broad vision. In terms of knowledge stock and knowledge updating, they are no longer greatly inferior to their parents as in the single media era. In some aspects, they have even surpassed their parents. Parents may be slower in response to the use of new media, such as WeChat, than their children. It becomes difficult for parents to show the advantages of their own knowledge and social experience. On the contrary, their children are significantly better than their parents in the use of new transmission media. Therefore, in the eyes of their children, their parents are no longer omniscient and omnipotent authorities, and their parents' status as cultural authorities begins to erode. On the other hand, children surpass their parents in many aspects, such as the network use, cultural fashion, entertainment and leisure. The two generations, parents and children cannot understand the newly emerged things and adapt to the rapid social changes at the same pace. While parents are losing their role as the absolute authority in education, the children are gaining the "cultural feedback" ability. Cultural feedback refers to parents' active learning or passive acceptance of children's influence in terms of values, ways of thinking, behavior practices, dietary habits, clothing styles, hobbies and other aspects, or "the process of cultural absorption of parents from their children in the era of rapid cultural changes ^[15]". The phenomenon of "Cultural feedback" is a reverse socialization process. The emergence of "reverse socialization" indicates that under the background of communication mode changes, not only has the content of cultural heritage changed greatly, but also the direction and form of cultural heritage have changed. We are entering an era in which the elder have extensive cultural assimilation and information feeding from the younger generation." Cultural feedback has formed a new model of parent-child relationship in contemporary China ^[16].

According to our interviews, several students have realized cultural feedback with their parents in two levels: technical level and social level. They taught their parents how to use digital devices and especially some functions of Wechat like how to locate a car or order something from internet. These students try to increase the quality of their parents' life during their absence. Some other students also tried to share with their parents new culture and values which could be so different, even if opposite from Chinese traditions. They tried to give access to their parents of entering their world.

The negative effects of WeChat technology

While WeChat technology brings great convenience to human beings, the problems caused by WeChat are becoming more and more serious. Technological pessimists believe that many of the problems facing mankind today, such as ecology, civilization, morality, values and other crises, are rooted in WeChat technology.

WeChat alienates parents and children

WeChat has a significant impact on parent-child relationship. In the survey, we found that people addicted to WeChat have worse communication with their parents than the normal Internet users and their attitudes towards their parents are a lot worse.

According to our interview with these twenty Chinese students on “The impact of WeChat on family intimacy”, the result shows that more than half of them limit their parents’ access to their WeChat Moments. When asked if you had any concerns about what you posted on your moments because your parents followed you on WeChat, 60% of respondents said they would consider what they posted, while 23.08% said they would not consider it because they had set limitation to their parents. Only less than 20% said they would not hesitate. And when asked if you gave truthful answers to your parents’ questions, only 15% said they never lied to their parents.

These studies show that long-term addiction to the Internet and WeChat has a great negative impact on family relations, which is manifested in significantly reduced communication with parents and increased resistance to parents’ preaching, affecting mutual understanding between parents and children and weakening parent-child relationship. The reason lies in that on the one hand, the Internet enhances teenagers’ autonomy in the process of socialization, weakens the control of parents, and challenges the authority of parents, and on the other hand, there are too many interesting or seductive messages on WeChat, which attract too much attention from children, thus creating a serious backlash against parents’ well-intentioned advice.

WeChat dependency syndrome and parental anxiety

As mentioned above, the features of WeChat such as immediacy, chatting, and convenience play a positive role in relieving the anxiety, worry and even psychological fear of children and parents in distant families. However, it is undeniable that many parents have hence developed WeChat dependency syndrome. Especially in one-child family, parents are more likely to become anxious during the absence of their unique child.

Some students said in the interview that if the talks with their parents were interrupted unexpectedly and they were not given timely explanation, their parents would feel inexplicably nervous, or even panic. One of the interviewees, Xiaoyu (F, Master, 25 years old) told a story that happened to her. Once she was walking and talking to her parents on WeChat when she came across a cheater sitting in her car on the side of the road. The cheater said that he was Italian and she couldn’t back to Italy because he forgot to bring his credit card. He wanted to give the student his Hermès dress as long as the student refueled his car. The student patiently explained to the cheater that she was only a student and she didn’t need this dress. It lasted about 20 minutes, which made the parents worried and angry. Her father made 5 phone calls during their conversation.

Parents are likely to give immediate responses to the WeChat messages from their children but children aren’t, especially if the child is a boy. This is the common case in parent-child relationship. Since WeChat has the feature of immediacy, it deserves an immediate response. You’ll get anxious if you don’t get one, which may be the price of access to convenient communication.

WeChat weakens parent-child relationship

As a kind of social software, WeChat has more functions beyond simple communication. These functions may take more time from parents, consume parental energy and attention that could be allocated to children, and thus affect parent-child relationship. For example, the entertainment function will occupy the communication time between parents and children, distract parents from children, and reduce the communication opportunities and interest between them. This is an important issue that must be taken serious consideration by all parents and children.

WeChat affects the way and frequency of parent-child communication, and changes the proportion of “true information” and “false information” in the communication process. WeChat provides a more convenient way of parent-child communication for distant families. But the direct and face-to-face communication in the past has now been simplified into a message, and the communication between parents and children has been transformed from a direct and comprehensive way into an indirect and one-sided way. Compared with the traditional way of communication, the proportion of false information conveyed via WeChat is higher, thus affecting the mutual trust between parents and children.

WeChat affects the sense of interdependence and security between parents and children. It also has a profound impact on how they think of each other, which is an important embodiment of parent-child relationship. The influence of parents on children is closely related to their positions in the hearts of children. If the child respect his parents heartedly, the authority of parental role is easier to have an effect, and vice versa. How receptive a child is to his or her parents' influence depends on whether he or she accepts them from the bottom of heart. The positive or negative image a parent has created in the child's mind is very crucial to his or her future development. Compared to their parents, Children have more energy and spend more time on WeChat. So they are able to receive more information than their parents, resulting in their information disorientation. WeChat may have been used for inappropriate purposes, and it objectively plays a role in the transmission of bad information. Children are likely to be led astray for lack of sufficient identification ability. A young boy surnamed Xiao saw pornographic pictures and videos on WeChat, tried to imitate them, and finally raped a six-year-old girl in the neighborhood [20]. More reports suggest that the vast majority of teenage rapists have had access to bad information via WeChat, which is an important incentive for them to commit crimes. Three migrant workers took an overdose of sodium nitrate to seek “die on the same day”, which eventually resulted in two deaths and one injury. However, the police investigation concluded that this is “a case of collective suicide via WeChat” [21]. In fact, the records on WeChat showed that these young people repeatedly expressed their feelings of being pessimistic and world-weary with words like “too tired, too boring to live, don't want to live” etc. But people around them, including their parents, don't have time to communicate with them very much because they are busy working. This is the result of improper use of modern social software and also the embodiment of “information loss” [22].

WeChat has had a positive impact on us, but at the same time, it has undoubtedly brought serious problems to the development of parent-child relationship. It is an important work for educators, media and sociologists to take efforts to avoid the negative impact of WeChat and make a full use of its advantages.

CONCLUSION

The positive effects of WeChat on human beings are obvious, but its negative effects on parent-child relationship and other aspects are apparent too:

1. Mental health maintenance and WeChat dependency syndrome

Modern social softwares represented by WeChat have made great contributions to human beings. In distant families, the immediacy of WeChat in chatting plays an important role in communicating with family members and alleviating their anxiety, depression and other psychological diseases. However, excessive reliance on and use of WeChat leads to WeChat dependency syndrome. How to make a reasonable and appropriate use of WeChat has become an important issue for people to consider.

2. Individual privacy and parental supervision

Individual privacy and parental supervision is another pair of contradictions and conflicts in the use of WeChat. Children think that they should have their own privacy, but parents want to know everything about their children and then try to intervene. As a result, children usually shield parents from checking their WeChat Moments, completely blocking the path of parental supervision.

The positive and negative effects of WeChat on human beings teach us that we should be in awe of modern technology such as WeChat. It provides us with too many possibilities along with great challenges. In consideration of human ethics and nature, we should impose restrictions and controls over the application of WeChat. This is also an important matter waiting for WeChat developers to handle. It's their mission and responsibility to find an appropriate point at which their enthusiastic pursuit of WeChat technology and the healthy development of society and human beings are able to achieve a balance.

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