

Research on the Impact of Social Media on Vulnerable Groups

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Abstract: In this society of rapid development of social media, people are increasingly influenced by it. This thesis aims to analyze the impact of social media on disadvantaged groups, objectively discuss the current situation of social media, analyze the needs of disadvantaged groups, and enhance people's understanding and care for them. This essay mainly talks about disadvantaged groups such as people with disabilities, special age groups, and the poor. The article concludes that social media can have both positive and negative impacts on disadvantaged groups, at the same time, the digital divide plays an important role in causing its negative impacts. This essay also puts forward feasible solutions to its negative impacts, aiming to encourage disadvantaged groups to engage in the network efficiently, obtain their rights and opportunities, achieve social equity and justice, and promote social harmony and development.

1 INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the Internet has been developing continually and waking into people's lives. With the rapid development of social media, people have been influenced a lot. The barrier to information is getting lower so the information is shared by people worldwide, and people can easily access all kinds of knowledge and resources through the internet as well as gain more opportunities, which significantly improves their lives and unprecedentedly promotes the development of education, economy, and technology in the world.

Even though social media creates a bridge between different areas and people, making different voices from people can be heard, not everyone in society can gain the same benefits. For example, designs of social media platforms are generally with the assumption that customers can see and hear because most of the platforms rely on audio. Without the assistance of subtitles or sign language, people who are blind or deaf inevitably suffer from inconvenience when they are using social media, resulting in them keeping up with the booming development of society, and the special groups may lack information compared to other individuals. The "digital island" effect not only shows the technological gaps in social media platforms but also shows the existing concern for equity among special groups. To understand the impact that social media

has on people, especially people with special needs, this article aims to analyze the influences deeply and objectively, focuses on the information island that the special groups may experience, and provides suggestions that hope to mitigate the negative impact. The special group this article intended to discuss includes a wide range groups of people which are disadvantaged people or people who have significant needs in society, such as people with physical disabilities, at a vulnerable age (people who are older than 60 or younger than 14), or are poverty-stricken population and so on.

2 POSITIVE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON DISADVANTAGED GROUPS

2.1 Traits of Social Media

This part analyzes the characteristics of social media to further analyze how these characteristics contribute to the improvement of the plight of special groups or exacerbate the severity of the difficulties encountered by special groups.

One of the great characteristics of social media is that it has a wide range of dissemination, which allows the dissemination of information to spread beyond the scope of geography and time and can

spread information in a large area in different communities. Because of such strong communication, events are easier to ferment and people's minds are more easily influenced. Taking the dissemination of political news as an example, "social media, with its immediacy and extensive network coverage, has significantly increased the speed of political news dissemination" (Liu, 2025). Political news can quickly spread events related to disadvantaged groups, drawing people's attention and concern.

At the same time, the threshold of social media is very low, and users are not required to have a high level of economic conditions and education, anyone can express their opinions on the Internet anytime and anywhere, and its operation is also very simple, including direct browsing videos, likes, comments, etc., which is simple and convenient.

Social media also has a strong sense of connectivity, not only by connecting individuals who need help and finding people who can help them or who are like-minded, but also by connecting different communities and bringing the whole society closer together.

Social media is also interactive in real-time, which means that users can communicate with each other in real-time and generate feedback, which can promote social communication and direct feedback from individuals.

Social media has the characteristics of diversity, which is not only reflected in the diversity of its video or article content but also the diversity of users and the diversity of ways of use, social media combines text, pictures videos, and other media forms, providing a variety of forms of social media that users can choose to participate in.

Social media integrates resources, including medical resources, educational resources business resources, etc., and most enterprises, organizations, and governments participate in social media, establish their official accounts on social media, and at the same time promote and obtain benefits for themselves, they are also casting opportunities to the outside world, of course, the outside world may also be rewarded.

2.2 Positive Impact of Social Media on Disadvantaged People

Disadvantaged people are considered disadvantaged because they experience more difficulties and troubles in life than the average person, and at the same time, they need unique needs. Before the popularity of

social media, disadvantaged groups undoubtedly faced much greater difficulties than they do now.

Social media platforms, commonly used by young adults, may offer an opportunity to ameliorate social isolation (Primack, et al., 2017). An important role of social media is to disseminate information and break the social isolation. Social media has a wide range of information dissemination, and various platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, etc., can deliver information to the world, which makes the digital silos faced by special groups of people can be effectively broken, so that they can easily find the information they need online, without leading to information blockage. At the same time, extensive information dissemination can make the dissemination of special topics more influential and gain social attention. For example, #MeToo is a feminist movement themed against sexual harassment and sexual assault. Mainstream media closely collaborated with social media in the coverage of the #MeToo movement, and its reports brought the #MeToo movement to the attention of mainstream society (Li, 2020).

Social media has low barriers to entry, which allows anyone to participate at any time and express their opinions. This feature enables people with lower economic and cultural levels to join, which is particularly beneficial for special groups in underdeveloped areas. These groups can showcase their lives, express their views, and share their troubles online, which can also help eliminate biases against certain special groups. For instance, short video software not only provides a platform for expression, voicing, sharing daily life, exchanging experiences, and seeking social recognition but also offers a healthy communication tool that can be operated daily (Wang, 2023).

The real-time interactivity of social media can also assist disadvantaged groups, which is evident in the ability of these groups to receive help quickly, especially in emergencies. For example, people with disabilities can post their location or special needs on social media during natural disasters, allowing rescue personnel to locate them swiftly. Additionally, real-time interactivity can provide prompt psychological counseling and emotional support for special groups, alleviating their feelings of loneliness or anxiety.

The close connectivity of social media can help disadvantaged groups find a sense of belonging and form a stronger community. Disadvantaged groups, such as those suffering from mental illnesses, can express their experiences and feelings on social media, and find like-minded individuals who have similar experiences with them. Social media can enhance communication with each other, gain experience from

one another, and draw strength, which is beneficial to the mental and physical health of these special groups. At the same time, these individuals with the same needs can come together to initiate activities, thereby maximizing their impact.

Social media has the characteristic of diversity, which is not only reflected in the diversity of its video or article content but also includes the diversity of usage methods. "The forms of information transmission have also become diversified, including text, images, videos, etc. The diversified information dissemination model has greatly expanded the channels of information transmission, making the spread of news more diversified" (Liao, 2024). Social media combines multiple media forms such as text, images, and videos, providing a variety of ways for users to participate in social media.

Social media integrates resources from many areas, which can greatly reduce the problem of information isolation for special groups. They will no longer miss out on opportunities that they could have had like others due to a lack of information. Special groups can gain access to more medical, educational, and commercial resources than before, and also have the opportunity to receive donations and support from individuals, public welfare organizations, and governments. For example, social media can provide employment opportunities for people with disabilities. In 2020, China Central Television launched a documentary called "The First Time in Life," in which a group of disabled cloud customer service representatives stated, "On the computer, we are just like anyone else." Additionally, more and more deaf individuals are making money through live streaming on the internet. Social media plays a great promotional role, with many people choosing to "reward" these special groups, bringing them a substantial income. Social media can not only improve the living standards of special groups, allowing them to participate in society but also drive the overall economic and technological development of society, promoting the establishment of a beautiful and harmonious society.

3 NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON DISADVANTAGED GROUPS

3.1 Digital Isolation

The phenomenon of "digital isolation" refers to the inability of specific groups to enjoy digital life, such

as the convenience and opportunities brought by social media. This is often due to inadequate access to information technology, the Internet, or digital services. Although social media can bring many benefits to these groups, if they cannot fully integrate into the online world for various reasons, a "digital island" will be formed. In fact, "Digital islands" themselves are not terrible and even are not completely avoidable. However, in modern society, where information is vast and rapidly changing, the impact of "digital islands" will be gradually magnified. A slight lag in information can lead to a greater gap in cognition, resulting in serious consequences.

The reasons for "digital islands" are complex and diverse. Such reasons include economic factors, such as people being unable to afford internet devices due to insufficient financial conditions, which affects their ability to participate in the online world. Geographic condition is also a factor, as the internet cannot cover all areas, and people in remote rural areas may fall behind the information due to lack of internet access. Insufficient education levels are also one of the causes of "digital islands," as those with low levels of education may lack knowledge of the internet and may not realize the importance of using social media or don't know how to use it correctly. There are also reasons related to reading abilities and other obstacles that may influence people with low-educated backgrounds to use social media. Physical factors can also be considered, such as people with disabilities. If they have visual or auditory impairments, it will also affect their usage of the internet.

3.2 Negative Impacts and Reasons on Different Groups

Next, this essay will analyze in detail the negative impacts that social media brings to vulnerable groups, which includes the negative impacts that the "digital island" brings to vulnerable groups. Vulnerable groups refer to the population who suffer greater obstacles to access to resources, services, and opportunities due to various factors. These obstacles may form from economic, social, or structural inequalities, such as poverty, discrimination, lack of education, or social exclusion. Vulnerable groups often include but are not limited to, racial or ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and low-income populations. This article will explore the negative impacts of social media on people with disabilities, special age groups

(such as left-behind elderly and young children), and the poor.

The impact of the "digital island" on people with disabilities is relatively significant. If people with disabilities encounter difficulties in using social media due to their physical characteristics, which hinders their use of social media, they will fall further behind in terms of the internet and even modern society. These difficulties can be the lack of accessibility features on social media, with many of its infrastructure designed only for able-bodied individuals. For people with hearing impairments, although some mainstream video platforms offer subtitle options, such as YouTube, there are also many video platforms that cannot automatically translate subtitles, such as the Chinese platform Rednote, which has 300 million active users per month. Since almost all mainstream video platforms do not have sign language settings, if video publishers do not add subtitles, people with hearing impairments will not be able to understand the video content. At the same time, even if people with hearing impairments can understand the general content of the video, they will miss out on enjoying the music and sound effects, thus creating a gap between them and others. Therefore, people with disabilities will encounter many difficulties and inconveniences when using social media, which can lead to them falling behind others to some extent in terms of accessing information and resources. However, as times develop rapidly, the speed at which others access information and resources will only increase, which can lead to a growing gap between people with disabilities and others.

The disadvantaged age groups include the elderly, those aged 75 and above, and children under the age of 14. These individuals do not have an age advantage and are more likely to experience greater negative impacts when using social media compared to other age groups. Based on clinical and empirical data, social isolation is found to be prevalent among elderly people, and it has negative consequences on the elderly's psychological and physical health (Chen & Schulz, 2016). If society does not act now to keep pace with rapid change, online risks may make vulnerable children more susceptible to exploitation, as well as more subtle threats to their well-being (Keeley & Little, 2017). Social media requires users to possess a range of technological skills, which can be challenging for those who are either too old or too young. The number of people using social media is also relatively small. Globally, 71% of the population aged 15 to 24 are using the internet, while the rest of the population across all other age groups stands at

57%. The primary target audience for social media is young people, and many of its infrastructure does not meet the needs of these vulnerable age groups. For example, the elderly may not know how to adjust the font size or may have difficulty operating touch buttons flexibly, which could be due to their failing sight, or decreased hand flexibilities. Children, on the other hand, may not be able to read long passages of text, as their educational level is still insufficient. This can lead to the "digital island" effect, where they are slower in accessing resources and information, and the information they obtain is more limited. As people of other age groups learn more, the gap between them and these vulnerable age groups widens, making them increasingly "vulnerable."

The impoverished population discussed in this article mainly refers to those living in underdeveloped areas who have difficulty accessing the internet and obtaining information from the outside world. These individuals are exactly the ones who need to gain access to information and resources to have opportunities to change their lives. However, due to the impact of the "digital island," the gap between them and the outside world widens, leading to an increasing wealth gap. The difficulties they may encounter when using social media include the possible lack of internet devices or unreliable network connections. Additionally, the impoverished population may also be unaware of how to correctly and efficiently use high-tech products and how to access the internet due to their lower level of education. In this era of rapid internet development, an increasing number of opportunities are obtained online, and more and more businesses are choosing to adopt online business models. Without the internet and social media, the impoverished population loses the opportunity to showcase themselves or express their needs to the outside world. They find it difficult to obtain the same amount of resources and opportunities as others, such as job opportunities, educational resources, and social welfare. Even if these individuals can successfully access the internet, they may still be unable to achieve efficient internet use due to economic and technological limitations. The video content they post may also lack exposure and attention due to its low quality. This not only results in a poor internet experience for them but also widens the wealth gap and exacerbates the information and resource gap between the impoverished population and the rest of the population.

4 SUGGESTION

This part of the essay will propose potentially feasible solutions to the barriers that social media brings to special groups, aiming to enhance the convenience of life for these groups, help them access resources, draw the attention of the outside world to them, and try to address the issue of "digital island."

4.1 Lower Barriers and Improve Services

Firstly, increasing the accessibility and barrier-free design of social media can greatly help special groups. Enhancing auxiliary functions can benefit people with disabilities as well as those with special age considerations. Barriers to mobile access can be attributed to the design of content on the graphical user interface, coupled with restrictions of assistive technologies" (Kuber, et al., 2012). In terms of visual assistance, the screen reader can be further improved and upgraded, making its installation and usage process more simplified and expedited. At the same time, simple operation tutorials can be set up to facilitate learning and use by visually impaired individuals, such as Google's "Chrome OS Help." The AI and AR-driven solution not only facilitated language learning but also fostered social inclusion by enabling seamless interaction with both sign language users and non-sign language users (Bekeš, et al., 2024).

4.2 Information Personalization

Making the information on social media more personalized according to the characteristics of disadvantaged groups is conducive to the better use of social media by these groups. Firstly, the operation or basic settings can be made more personalized. For example, allowing people with disabilities to give instructions through speech to adjust the content pushed on social media or skip the content they do not like. Or, as mentioned earlier, the elderly can adjust the size and color of the font on their own to find the most comfortable way to read. Subsequently, the push of information content should be more personalized. The information content can be simplified, highlighting the key points, because it is already inconvenient for special groups to surf the Internet, and it is very important to let them see important and concise information in a short time. Afterward, push content that is closely related to the lives of disadvantaged groups, allowing them to see people in the same situation as themselves, find a sense of

resonance, and find people or organizations that can help them, to obtain the resources they need.

4.3 Information Diversification

Diversifying the information on social media can also help disadvantaged groups better engage with it. Firstly, the diversification of how social media is used can facilitate its use by disadvantaged groups, such as the addition of screen readers, as mentioned earlier. Secondly, the diversification of social media content can help special groups access a wider range of information, gain rich knowledge, find help online, and obtain abundant resources, thereby achieving better integration with the world. More importantly, diversified information can draw the attention of the general public to special groups. By pushing content related to disadvantaged groups, the public can better focus on these individuals, and understand their characteristics, lifestyles, and the stories behind them, thereby eliminating prejudice against disadvantaged groups. This can lead to a society that has a respectful and caring awareness towards disadvantaged groups, enabling them to better integrate into society and making them no longer "disadvantaged."

4.4 Enterprise Social Responsibility

Social media should fully develop corporate social responsibility. Social media companies should take into account their social responsibilities in their business plans, to help disadvantaged groups from the perspective of social media. For example, they should specifically design teams to serve specialized special groups and develop specific technologies to help these groups better use social media. At the same time, these social media platforms should actively promote public welfare advertisements and cooperate with public welfare organizations. With the power of these enterprises, social media can better become a tool for spreading power and information, allowing more special groups to access resources and assistance, and enabling more people to see these special individuals. There is also research focus on the impoverished population, "The results show that from an individual perspective, corporations can enhance the working abilities of the poor by sharing technologies and resources and providing skills training and education. From a social/structural perspective, corporations can establish poverty reduction businesses to provide poor people with job opportunities, or introduce social network resources to assist poor people in starting a business" (Kao, et al., 2016).

5 CONCLUSION

This article mainly explores the impact of social media on disadvantaged groups. The disadvantaged groups involved in this article mainly include people with disabilities, age-specific groups, and the poor population in underdeveloped areas, as they are significantly affected by social media due to physiological reasons or other objective conditions. The article first discusses the characteristics of social media and objectively summarizes and evaluates the positive impacts that social media has on disadvantaged groups. Then, after introducing the phenomenon of "digital islands," the article discusses the negative impacts that social media has on disadvantaged groups and how it creates "digital islands" for them. Finally, based on the negative impacts experienced by special groups, the article proposes feasible solutions or methods to address or alleviate these problems. The aim is to help disadvantaged groups use social media more effectively, improve their usage efficiency, help them access more resources and assistance, and alleviate the "digital island" phenomenon. Also, it may enable society to hear the voices of these disadvantaged groups, eliminate prejudices, enhance the awareness of the whole society in caring for and helping disadvantaged groups, and promote the formation of a beautiful and harmonious society, allowing disadvantaged groups to become less "disadvantaged" one day.

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