

Research on the Impact of Internet Environment on Adolescent Gender Role Identity and Analysis of Countermeasures

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Abstract: With the popularization and development of the Internet, the network environment has become an important part of the daily life of adolescents. The network environment, with its unique information dissemination mode, social mode, and value concept, has an impact on the formation of adolescents' gender role identity concept. Research at home and abroad shows that the vividness and visualization of gender information and gender imitation objects in the network environment are more likely to affect individual gender identity. The purpose of this paper is to deeply explore the influence of the Internet environment on adolescents' gender role identity through the method of interview and observation and to analyze certain countermeasures, to provide a useful reference for further research and education.

Keywords: Internet environment; Adolescent; Gender role identity

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1. Introduction

Nowadays, the wave of informatization has swept the world. The Internet environment, with its unique openness, interaction, and virtuality, profoundly affects the cognition, emotion, and behavior of adolescents, and has become an indispensable part of the growth of adolescents, especially in the aspect of gender role identity. In traditional social structure, gender role identity is mostly affected by physical space such as family, school, and social environment. However, in the Internet era with the rapid development of science and technology, adolescents can access more diversified gender role images through social media, film and television works, network literature, and other media, and these diversified gender role images have a profound impact on their self-cognition, mental health, and social adaptability. But at the same time, adolescents are in a critical period of psychological development, their gender role identity has not been fully formed, with greater plasticity. Gender stereotypes, prejudices, and the blurring of gender roles in the Internet environment may lead to the deviation

of adolescents' cognition of gender roles and even gender identity disorder. In addition, sexist comments and bullying in the online environment can also cause adolescents to question or self-deny their gender roles, which can affect their mental health and self-esteem. Therefore, this paper aims to deeply explore the influence of Internet environment on adolescents' gender role identity through interview and observation methods, and make certain countermeasures analysis, to provide beneficial guidance for the healthy growth of adolescents.

2. Theoretical basis and literature review

2.1. Theoretical basis

2.1.1. The theory of cognitive development

The theory of cognitive development, based on Piaget's genetic epistemology, emphasizes the cognitive factors of gender formation and believes that the formation of gender characteristics of men and women lies in the individual's understanding of their gender and its activity characteristics, which is a series of structures gradually established in the continuous interaction between the subject and the external world. Individuals rely on cognitive structures to actively understand and grasp gender norms.

2.1.2. Social learning theory

Social learning theory points out the main influencing factors in the process of the formation of individual gender identity. First is the direct reinforcement of individual gender behavior by parents and others; The second is the individual's observation and imitation of same-sex role models. Social learning theory only emphasizes the plasticity of explicit behavior in the process of gender identity but neglects emotional factors and psychological activities.

2.1.3. Psychoanalytic theory

Freud, the founder of psychoanalytic theory, was the first to delve into the theoretical research of gender role formation. He believed that the different physiological anatomical structures of men and women determined that they had different psychological maturity processes. Based on psychoanalytic theory, psychoanalytic theory emphasizes the role of self-identification in the formation of gender behavior between men and women. The mechanism of self-identification is recognition, acceptance, suggestion, and imitation, which is a self-defense mechanism to maintain psychological balance and an important factor in individual socialization.

2.2. Literature review

2.2.1. Gender and gender role concepts

Gender is divided into "biological sex" and "social sex." Biological sex refers to the difference between men and women in physiology, which is embodied in the difference between physiological structure and physiological function. Social gender refers to the understanding of differences between men and women formed by social culture, as well as the group characteristics and behaviors of men or women formed in social culture. Meanwhile, there are also many interpretations regarding the definition of the concept of "gender roles." Some scholars believe that gender roles refer to "personalities, attitudes, values, and behaviors that are socially recognized as suitable for both males and females." Others believe that "gender roles refer to normative expectations of gender division of labor and gender-related rules in social interaction that exist in specific historical or cultural contexts. Zheng believes that "gender role refers to the position of each sex in the society

and group to which it belongs, as well as the specific behavior pattern specified and expected by the society and group”^[1].

2.2.2. Review of research on gender role identity

In sociology, gender identity refers to a person’s identity with their gender but can also be used to refer to the gender that people assign to individuals based on their perceived gender role phenomena. Gender identity is influenced by a variety of social structures, including an individual’s moral position, work status, beliefs, and family.

According to Kohlberg, gender identity refers to an individual’s knowledge, understanding, or self-awareness of his or her gender status. According to Schaffer, gender role identity refers to the correct calibration of one’s gender and that of others^[2]. Lin pointed out that gender role identity is an individual’s confirmation of their own gender^[3]. The most distinctive feature of this kind of concept is that it emphasizes the psychological self-recognition of an individual’s biological gender. According to Hayden, gender role identification refers to the ideal psychological structure of an individual’s identification with his or her own gender group, which is specifically manifested in behaviors, attitudes, and emotions that are appropriate for an individual’s gender^[4]. Lin believes that gender role identity refers to the individual forming corresponding motives, attitudes, values, and behaviors according to social and cultural expectations of men and women, and developing corresponding personality characteristics, namely, the so-called masculinity and femininity identity is the degree of individual acceptance and internalization of social gender role stereotypes^[5]. Ma also investigated the general situation of adolescent girls’ gender identity development^[6]. These scholars have explained gender role identity from different aspects, which is helpful for the subsequent analysis of the impact of network environment on gender role identity.

3. Analysis of the current situation of the Internet environment

3.1. Analysis of the current situation of the network environment

At present, the Internet environment presents the characteristics of diversity, individuation, and strong interaction, which brings certain challenges to the gender role identity of adolescents. According to the 52nd China Internet Development Report released by China Internet Network Information Center on August 28, 2023, as of June 2023, the total number of Internet users in China has reached 1.079 billion, of which 24% are students. As the most active group in the network, young people have strong learning ability, strong curiosity, active thinking, and high acceptance, and their gender role concepts are easily influenced by the network environment. At the same time, the current gender role dislocation of adolescents is not an isolated phenomenon. On May 20, 2010, Sichuan Daily published a survey on the phenomenon of “feminization of male students” jointly conducted by the newspaper and Sichuan Online. According to the study, 98% of the respondents said that there is a phenomenon of “feminization of male students” around them^[7].

3.2. Analysis of the impact of the online environment on the adolescent gender role identity

In traditional society, the shaping of gender roles is often influenced by family, school, and other traditional factors. In the online environment, adolescents have access to a wider range of gender role types and ways of expression. They can exchange gender concepts and share gender experiences with others through online platforms. This helps them develop a more independent and confident gender role identity. On the contrary,

gender stereotypes and sexism also exist in the Internet environment, which can lead to misleading and negative effects on the gender role identity of adolescents. Over-indulgence in the online environment may also cause adolescents to become disconnected from real society, affecting the normal development of their gender role identity.

3.3. Adolescent physical and mental changes easily lead to gender role identity anxiety

Gender role socialization runs through the entire adolescence, which is an important process affecting the physical and mental development of individuals, not only related to the development of adolescent mental health but also will have an important impact on their future development. At present, the academic anxiety about adolescent gender role identity is mainly manifested in two aspects. On the one hand, it is reflected that with the development of society, higher requirements are put forward for individuals, and the changes in some gender role concepts and expectations will cause the contradiction of subjects' self-expectations. On the other hand, in the interaction with peers, the ideal gender role and peer pressure can also cause anxiety about gender role identity. Adolescents tend to pay more attention to their peers' evaluation of themselves, and in group interaction and communication, gender role identity contradictions between themselves and others are easy to cause anxiety ^[8].

4. Challenges and crises

4.1. Expand the scope of gender role cognition and enhance gender role autonomy

The internet provides adolescents with a relatively free and equal platform for communication, as well as rich sources of information, enabling them to independently choose and express their gender role identity, thereby enhancing their gender role autonomy. At the same time, it also allows them to be exposed to gender role patterns from different cultures and groups, thereby broadening their understanding of gender roles and forming a more inclusive and diverse gender perspective.

4.2. Increasing gender role confusion, exacerbating gender stereotypes and discrimination, leading to online violence

The diverse gender role patterns in the online environment may make adolescents feel confused and uneasy, making it difficult for them to form a stable gender role identity. On social media platforms, stereotypical descriptions of male and female role positioning, behavioral norms, and personality traits are often seen. These descriptions limit adolescents' understanding and cognition of gender roles, making it difficult for them to break free from traditional gender stereotypes. Adolescents can also become victims of online violence due to factors such as gender, appearance, and personality. They may face insults, humiliations, and threats from unfamiliar netizens, and even have their personal information leaked online, putting them at greater security risks.

5. Countermeasures and suggestions

In the Internet era, the life and study of adolescents in the network environment has become a phenomenon that cannot be ignored. Therefore, this paper will analyze the countermeasures and suggestions for the formation of gender role concepts among adolescents in the online environment from several aspects such as schools, families, and social environments.

5.1. In schools, the combination of “teaching according to gender” and “androgynous” education should be implemented

School is an important place for adolescents to learn and for them to achieve gender role socialization. Schools play an important guiding and leading role in the formation of gender role concepts among adolescents. The physiological and psychological differences between men and women can never be denied. Margaret Mead, an American gender studies expert, once said “Throughout history, our culture has relied on many artificial differences, the most obvious of which is the difference between the sexes, creating wealth and different values”^[9]. The school’s gender education mode, education content, teachers’ gender role concept, and gender role consciousness all have an important impact on the shaping of youth gender roles.

5.2. In the family, parents should enhance their awareness of gender role education and establish correct gender role models

Parents’ awareness of gender role education and gender role views have a latent influence on the formation and the impact of the transformation of adolescent gender roles. Therefore, parents must pay attention to their gender role behavior in daily life. The development of gender role behavior in adolescents often does not require special guidance from parents but is unconsciously formed through observation in daily life. Research shows that both fathers and mothers have a higher proportion of gender role deviations in their children when their gender roles deviate. Children’s perception of ambiguous gender roles from their parents can affect their understanding and imitation of gender differences^[10]. Therefore, in the process of gender role education for adolescents, parents should pay attention to teaching through words and deeds.

5.3. Standardize mass media and optimize the social environment

In today’s world where various media are prevalent, mass media, as the mainstream media, has an undeniable responsibility for the formation of gender roles among young people. Relevant departments should strengthen the guidance and control of mass media, make reasonable use of the positive effects of literary works and celebrities to spread the correct gender culture, form the correct social atmosphere, and create a good social atmosphere for the cultivation of youth’s gender role concept.

6. Conclusion

Through descriptive research, this paper introduces the influence of the Internet environment on adolescents’ gender role identity and analyzes the countermeasures. Although there has been a lot of research on the gender role identity of adolescents in the Internet environment at home and abroad, there are still some shortcomings. Most of the studies focus on theoretical analysis or qualitative description, and the underlying reasons such as social and cultural background and family factors are not deeply discussed. The formation of adolescent gender role identity in the network environment is also facing certain challenges, and corresponding suggestions are also given based on the actual situation. To sum up, it is hoped that with the rapid development of the Internet today, young people can critically understand the impact of the Internet environment on gender role identity and establish a correct concept of gender roles.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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