The Youth Reference

Research Report on Internet Use among Minors in China (2021)

Newsletter from All-China Youth Federation

NOTE

This e-magazine is a product of All-China Youth Federation, China Youth Daily and China International Youth Exchange Center to introduce the youth work and youth development in China on a regular basis. We hope that it can provide you with updated information about Chinese youth, youth policy and youth programs, and we sincerely look forward to feedbacks and suggestions from friends all over the world.

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Abstract Edition

The Internet has become a vital tool for minors nowadays in learning, socializing and entertaining, casting a far−reaching impact on their growth. Since 2018, All −China Youth Federation (ACYF) and China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) have conducted annual surveys on internet use among minors, and published research reports based on the surveys, aiming to reflect a comprehensive and objective picture regarding the characteristics of their internet usage and online life.

In November 2022, the Research Report on Internet Use among Minors in China (2021) was jointly launched by ACYF, CNNIC, and China Youth New Media Association. The Report, based on the previous research framework has taken a total of 41,264 valid questionnaires (including 26,349 from minors, 13,283 from parents, and 1,632 from teachers) which covered students from primary, junior and senior high schools and vocational schools in 31 provinces , autonomous regions and municipalities directly under the Central Government. The report focuses on minors' internet penetration, network access environment, internet use characteristics, education and supervision, cybersecurity, protection of rights and interests, etc. Targeted work suggestions were put forward after making key judgement on the changing trends of minors' internet use and problems.

I. Core Data

1. Internet Penetration

· In 2021, there were 191 million underage internet users[1] (hereinafter referred to as "the users") in China, with the internet penetration rate of minors reaching 96.8%[2].

· In 2021, the internet penetration rate of urban minors was 96.7%, and that of rural minors was 97.3%. For primary school students, urban minors' rate was 0.8% higher than that of rural minors. For students in junior high schools and above, rural minors' rate was a little bit higher than that of urban minors.

· In 2021, the internet penetration rate of Chinese elementary school students stood at 95.0%, increasing 2.9% compared with 2020, displaying a trend of younger age in internet access.

2. Internet Access Environment

· Among the users[3], 90.7% used mobile phones to connect to the internet, while 21.7%, 19.9%, and 16.4% respectively use new devices such as smart desk lamps, smart speakers, dictionary pens etc.

· 86.7% of the users had their own devices to access the internet, 3.8% higher than 2020.

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[1] *The survey was conducted among students under 18 years old in elementary schools, junior and senior high schools, vocational high schools, and secondary technical schools, while groups under six years old or non−students are not included.*

[2] *According to the data from China Statistical Yearbook 2021 published by the National Bureau of Statistics, the population of minors in elementary schools, junior and senior high schools, secondary vocational education (adult education excluded) totaled 197 million.*

[3] *The proportions of "underage internet users" as referred here in the report are all based on the 191 million underage internet users.*

• As for average online time per day, 66.0% of the users spent less than half an hour on weekdays, and 51.8% of them spent less than one hour on holidays. Only 8.7% of them spent more than two hours per day on an average weekday, and 9.9% of them spent more than five hours per day on an average holiday, down 2% to 3% compared to 2020.

• 19.5% of the users considered themselves to be dependent or relatively dependent on the internet, down 0.1% compared to 2020, and 42% considered themselves not dependent on the internet, up 3.3% compared with 2020.

3. Internet Usage

• 88.9% of the users often accessed the internet for learning[4], 1.0% lower than 2020.

• 62.3% of the users often played online games, 0.2% lower than 2020.

• 47.6% of the users often watched short videos online, 1.7% lower than 2020.

4. Education and Supervision of Minors' Internet Usage
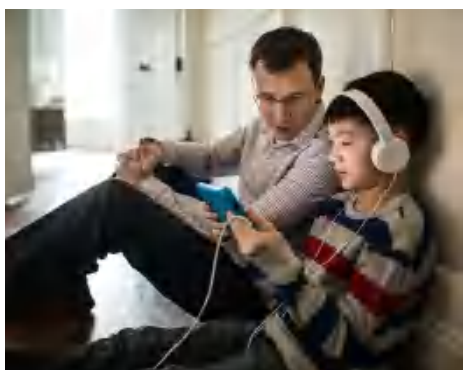
• 91.2% of the parents carried out a certain program of cybersecurity for their children, and 84.6% of the teachers mentioned courses on cybersecurity in schools which were offered to the students.

• 54.0% of the parents required their children to get online under their supervision, while 79.7% of the parents would arrange online entertainment time with their children.

• 48.2% of the users set the teenage mode themselves, and 47.3% of the parents set the teenage mode for their children.

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[4] *Online learning includes using the internet to do homework, review , recite words, answer questions, take online courses, etc.*

· 25.5% of the users claimed that they have encountered cybersecurity incidents during the past six months, down 1.7% from 2020.

· 79.8% of the users had certain knowledge of how to safeguard their online rights and to report inappropriate online behaviors, 5.7% higher than 2020.

· 66.3% of the users paid attention to new policies and regulations related to minors' online behaviors.

II. Main Findings

1. Internet penetration rate of minors continues to rise, and internet dependence has slightly declined. In 2021, the internet penetration rate of minors in China stood at 96.8%, with an increase of

1.9% compared with 2020. Their excessive use of internet has been contained to some extent. For average online time per day, 8.7% of them spent more than two hours on weekdays, and 9.9 % of them spent more than five hours on holidays, respectively 2.8% and 2.3% lower than 2020. Minors regarded themselves as less dependent on the internet, and fewer parents felt their children as heavy online users. 42% of the users regarded themselves as not dependent on the internet, 3.3% higher than 2020; 27.3% of the parents regarded their children spending too much time online, down 4.5% compared with 2020.

2. There was an urban –rural discrepancy in internet use of minors, and the education and supervision regarding rural minors' online behaviors were relatively inadequate. Thanks to the penetration of mobile internet into rural areas, the gap between the urban and rural areas in terms of internet penetration rate of minors was largely closed. However, major differences lie in internet usage between urban and rural minors, mainly showcased in rural minors' less variety of online devices, longer time online, more use of entertainment apps, and less use of learning and information apps. For instance, apart from the use of mobile phones, the proportions of the use of laptops, pads, smart watches by rural minors were all significantly lower than those of urban minors. For those minors who spent five hours or more online per day on average on holiday, the proportion of rural minors was 3.9% higher than that in urban areas. For

those minors who often played online games and watched short videos, the proportions in rural areas were 6.0% and 8.3% higher than those in urban areas respectively. For those who often used the internet to take online courses, surf to obtain news information, the proportions in rural areas were 8.9% , 6.8% , and 5.0% lower than those in urban areas respectively. According to the survey, over 40% of rural minor

internet users did not live with their parents who went out to work , 20% higher than in urban areas. As a result, more rural minors needed to use cell phones to keep in touch with their families, and moreover, their online behaviors lacked supervision and restraint from their parents. Only 38.3% of rural minors were under their parents' supervision on online duration limit, 10.4% lower than in urban areas.

3. Preliminary results have been achieved for internet platform regulation, and further extension and perfection of the teenage mode is needed. A chapter on internet protection has been added in the newly revised Law on the Protection of Minors, in which requirements on minor protection have been set out clearly for providers of online services, including

games, livestream, audio and video, social media, etc. Compared with 2020, the proportions of the users who often listened to music, played games, watched videos and live broadcast online declined in various degrees in 2021. Teenage mode has been launched on online platforms for videos, short videos, social media, games and so on since 2019, playing a positive role in lowering minors' internet dependence and limiting their access to unhealthy information. As the survey showed, although 85.9% of the minors and 91.6% of the parents were aware of the mode, less than 50% of them set such mode, 40% of the parents regarded it not effective enough, and 10% of the users were unsatisfied with the mode. Games accounts of minors were under stricter regulation, while 31.9% of minors used their parents' accounts to play games.

4. More attention is needed since video platforms, an important channel to obtain information, have a formative influence on minors' shaping of values. Video and short video platforms have become one of the main channels for minors to get news events and major news, and the content of which would exert a subtle influence on minors' values and ideas. Nearly half of the minors get information on major social events via video and short video platforms such as Douyin, Kuaishou, Bilibili, a slightly higher proportion than from official media websites. Nevertheless, minors were not capable enough to distinguish reliable information sources from unreliable ones. Less than half of the users could consciously distinguish

between officially released short videos or videos released by we-media. 38.3% of the users encountered undesirable or negative information online, in which flaunting personal wealth or family background (21.2%), propagating getting profit by others' toil or an attitude of lying flat (16.3%) were among the highest proportions in negative information.

It is worth noting that with online platforms being under supervision, undesirable information such as bloody violence, instigation to crime, distortion of history, obscenity and pornography has been effectively contained, but meanwhile it cannot be underestimated of the influence of negative information on minors' worldview, outlook on life and values.

5. The cybersecurity environment continues to improve, while newly emerging risks need to be reckoned with. Due to the implementation of a series of internet environment rectification projects, and more efforts paid by parents and schools on minors' cybersecurity education and supervision, the cybersecurity environment continues to be ameliorated, and the network literacy among minors has been enhanced. For instance, 25.5% of minors encountered cybersecurity incidents in the past six months, 1.7% lower from 2020; 79.8% of them knew how to defend their own rights or report infringement that do harm to them online, 5.7% higher than 2020; 66.3% of them in

their daily lives paid attention to new policies and regulations related to minors online. Meanwhile, there emerged some new risks in cybersecurity. First, some of the users had little sense of precaution when surfing online, with 20.0% of them having little knowledge regarding how to prevent internet fraud, information leakage, rumors circulating online, etc., and the younger their age, the weaker such senses. Second, network traps were also upgraded with the times. Compared with 2020, the proportion of the users encountering traditional problems continues to decline, which include accounts or passwords being stolen, computers or mobile phone attacked by virus. Yet the proportion of them facing new problems full of tricks in various forms slightly increased, such as different online fraud, and personal information leakage. Third, there were information security risks lying in new online devices. Devices with multiple functions such as smart watches, smart desk lamps, smart speakers, dictionary pens have become more and more popular among the users. But 56.0% of the users, 56.8% of parents, and 79.0% of teachers have concerns about the information security risks since there are no general standards on information content and privacy security of such devices.

6. It is crucial to foster the network literacy of parents as minors' online behaviors were largely moulded by their families.

Minors access the internet mostly at home, and parents' supervision and guidance directly impact their online behaviors and habits. The degree of their dependence on the internet is mostly determined by whether their parents set a time limit for online duration, and whether they live together with their parents. For those whose online behaviors were often supervised by their parents, 10% of the users regarded themselves as dependent on the internet, 27.4% lower than those whose online behaviors were beyond parents' supervision. For those who lived together with their parents, 16.2% of the users regarded themselves as much dependent or comparatively much dependent on the internet, while for those who lived with one parent or other relatives, such proportions rose to 22.4% and 21.3% respectively. Parents' own online behaviors and network literacy also made a direct impact on the users. Among families where parents often played mobile games or watched short videos, the proportions of minors spending more than two hours online per day on an average weekday, and more than five hours per day on average holiday were 5.6% and 8.5% higher respectively than the families where parents did not often play mobile games or watch short videos. 31.9% of minors used their parents' accounts to play games. 26.8% of parents claimed their limited knowledge about internet, 7.4% did not know how to surf the internet, and 25.3% regarded themselves as dependent on the internet, which inevitably impaired the effectiveness of their supervision of their children's online behaviors.