



# "Global Citizens" or "Youth in the Walled City": An Analysis of News Consumption Behavior among Urban and Rural High School Students

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**Abstract.** In recent years, with the development of mobile Internet, the mass consumption of news has shown new behavioral characteristics. People can choose different platforms, different content, etc. according to their own needs, especially contemporary teenagers who are "Internet natives". They have been exposed to the complex and diverse news ecology by using mobile media devices at a young age. They have their views and a set of behavior habits on the cognition and use of news. Through focus group interviews, this study conducted semi-structured interviews with 48 middle school students from urban and rural areas respectively, and investigated their cognition, usage, and orientation of news from four dimensions to summarize the differences between urban and rural middle school students in each dimension and try to make simple attribution.

**Keywords:** Adolescents; News use; Urban-rural differences; Media literacy

## 1 Introduction

China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) released the "Research Report on Internet Usage among Minors in China in 2021," which reveals that as of 2021, the number of underage internet users in China reached 191 million, with a high internet penetration rate of 96.8%. Mobile phones were identified as their primary device for internet access. In terms of information sources, video platforms such as Bilibili, Kuaishou, and TikTok have become important channels for minors to obtain news about major events, accounting for 48.7%. [1] It is evident that unlike the traditional media era, today's minors are more accustomed to obtaining information through the internet, especially video platforms. Consequently, their perspectives on news and its consumption are inevitably different.

Researchers have focused on the group of middle school students, who have significant exposure to news. However, the study found that there are differences between urban and rural areas in terms of middle school students' views on news, news consumption behaviors, and attitudes towards news engagement. If they can be taught to

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correctly use and interpret news, participate in news dissemination and discussions during their middle school years, and enhance their media literacy, it will not only benefit their physical and mental well-being but also foster a stronger sense of civic consciousness and social responsibility.

## 2 Literature review

Today's young people are more inclined to bypass traditional news media and utilize the internet to create a "social + news" mode of news consumption. They establish direct channels with the outside world through social media, such as browsing their friends' posts on their mobile phones, following each other on Weibo, and sharing their thoughts. [2] The main characteristic of this news consumption closely related to social media is that news users have the freedom to navigate between using and not using news, serious news and entertainment news, news media and social networking sites, and different media platforms. News consumption becomes more flexible and versatile. [3]

At the level of news dissemination and organization, the relationship between news media, news platforms, and news consumers is becoming more loosely connected. News users are no longer just recipients of information but can participate in the news construction process through three ways: contributing content, distributing content by acting as communication nodes, and indirectly influencing content through audience data. [4] Similarly, middle school students also engage in news consumption and participation in this new manner.

Current research on media usage and news consumption among Chinese adolescents can be broadly categorized into two aspects. Firstly, there is research on the characteristics of adolescents' daily news consumption. Secondly, there is research on how the media literacy of adolescents in specific life and learning environments influences their perspectives, national identity, political expression, and the factors that contribute to these characteristics. For example, earlier studies indicated that adolescents tend to prefer entertainment news and sports news, and are often uninterested in serious and highly specialized news. [5] Specifically, adolescents aged 12 to 20 tend to consume news based on their preference, showing a greater interest in news related to celebrities and animation. [6] Scholars have also summarized the overall situation of adolescents' news consumption, pointing out three main characteristics: weak civic consciousness, diverse and fragmented consumption channels, and although there is interactivity in their news consumption within new media, it is still passive. [7]

Media literacy is one of the essential qualities for modern citizens and is of great importance in the education of adolescents. The fundamental purpose of media literacy education is to cultivate citizens for democratic societies [8], with a primary focus on minors. This is mainly because minors have limited social experience, are easily influenced by the media, and often lack the skills to navigate complex media environments [9]. The usage and exposure to media will impact adolescents' national iden-

tity[10], their attention to public issues[11], political expression, and political efficacy[12]. Therefore, we should pay attention to guiding adolescents' news consumption behavior.

The "Research Report on Internet Usage among Minors in China in 2021" shows that there are urban-rural differences in minors' internet usage. Although the urban-rural gap in internet penetration among minors has been largely narrowed, rural minors have relatively single Internet access devices, are more prominent in using the Internet for a long time, and have a higher proportion of using leisure and entertainment applications and a lower proportion of using learning and information applications.[1] Therefore, when examining adolescents' news consumption behavior and media literacy, it is still necessary to consider urban-rural factors.

Currently, there is limited research on the media literacy of adolescents in urban and rural areas, particularly during the period of 2014-2018 when internet penetration was not widespread, and urban adolescents had much higher media exposure than their rural counterparts. The unequal distribution of media resources between urban and rural areas leads to significant differences in information needs, responses to media information[13], news attention orientation, media usage motivation, and media literacy among residents[14]. Additionally, Zheng Suxia examined the influence of family environmental factors on media use among urban and rural adolescents.[15]

However, there is limited research that considers the school environment as a factor. Although the school environment is highly correlated with regional economic development, its impact on adolescents is unique and representative, profoundly influencing their perception, attitude, and willingness to engage with news. Therefore, the researchers have started to consider the school environment as a factor and focus on its influence on adolescents' news consumption behavior, including the guidance provided by teachers regarding students' news use and information discernment, and news participation and interaction among peers.

Ren Qi conducted a study with samples from relatively developed cities and demonstrated that China's new generation of youth tends to actively participate in news consumption, such as searching for news and verifying its authenticity.[2] This finding challenges the conventional understanding of "adolescent news consumption" in previous research and reminds us to re-explore the news consumption behavior of urban and rural adolescents in the context of further mobile internet penetration. This study aims to conduct interviews with both urban and rural adolescent groups, and through a cross-sectional comparison, provide a more direct and comprehensive analysis and argumentation on this issue.

### **3 Research Question**

Past research has indicated that adolescents are more interested in news related to entertainment, celebrities, anime, and other similar topics. They also tend to have limited rational understanding of the media. In comparison to adults, adolescents have limited critical thinking abilities, and their news consumption process is influenced by more external factors. Each individual grows up in a socialized environment, and therefore,

the news consumption behaviors of different groups of middle school students exhibit distinct characteristics and are influenced by various structural factors. These aspects are worth exploring as they contribute to a notable contrast in urban and rural environments.

Some scholars have identified four dimensions to understand adolescents' media literacy: cognitive ability toward new media, usage ability of new media, analytical and critical thinking skills toward media information, and creativity and participation in media information[16]. This study integrates news information, news consumption, and news literacy, and further examines these four dimensions through four investigation modules and related questions (as shown in Table 1).

**Table 1.** Four dimensions of semi-structured interview

Basic understanding of news	What do you think is news?
	What role does the news play in your life?
Usage habits of news	What platforms or apps do you use to get news?
	How often do you watch the news?
	Do you search for news actively or passively?
News focus orientation and critical thinking	What topics and areas do you focus on in general?
	Do you care about the source of the news when you read it?
	Which form of news do you prefer?
News Engagement Attitude	Do you retweet, like or comment on the news?
	Do you actively discuss news with others?
	For what purpose do you retweet or comment on news?
	Do you think your actions have helped change the situation?

## 4 Research method

This study employed a focus group interview research method, which establish natural relationships with the interviewed students within a short period of time. It also allowed them to speak in a relaxed, free, and authentic manner within their familiar peer groups.

Regarding the selection of research subjects, the researchers chose a total of 48 students from two middle schools, one located in the urban area and the other in a rural town in Zhengzhou City, Henan Province. Most of these middle school students were born after 2005 and were between the ages of 13 and 15, representing a typical group of adolescents.

In selecting the schools, the researchers aimed to capture the most authentic perspectives of interviewees while minimizing the influence of factors other than the urban-rural divide. After conducting a preliminary investigation of middle schools throughout Zhengzhou City and a nearby town, two schools were selected, referred to as W Middle School and S Middle School. W Middle School is located in the urban area of Zhengzhou City and is one of the best middle schools in the city in terms of student sources, faculty strength, and college enrollment rate. S Middle School is a regular middle school in a rural town, with a college enrollment rate similar to the local average. After

communicating with teachers from both schools, it was confirmed that the male-female ratio was relatively balanced, approaching 5:5.

After selecting the two schools, with the assistance of teachers from both schools, the researchers used random sampling to select interview subjects and deliberately controlled the grade and gender ratios. A total of 48 interviewees were confirmed, with an equal proportion of male ( $n=24$ ) and female ( $n=24$ ) students. Additionally, 16 students were selected from each grade level (three grades in total). As the interviewees were all minors, consent was obtained from their parents and teachers in advance. Prior to the interviews, each student had a general understanding of the interview's theme and approximate content and voluntarily decided whether they wished to participate. As a token of appreciation, each interviewed student would receive 50% of the "Social Practice and Volunteer Service" credits designated by their respective schools after the interviews.

In consideration of the relaxed atmosphere created among classmates during interviews and the relevance of the interview topics to the group environment provided by the class, the researchers divided the participants into six groups for the interviews, attempting to place classmates together in the same interview group. All focus group interviews were conducted online through video conferencing. Each focus group interview followed a semi-structured format, lasting approximately 50-70 minutes, and the entire session was recorded. During the interviews, each participant was asked to share their thoughts on the twelve questions related to the four dimensions presented in Table 1. Some continuous statements addressed multiple questions at once, and to ensure logical coherence, the researchers made efforts to present them in their entirety in the analysis.

After the interview, the researcher transcribed the recorded materials and obtained approximately 130,000 words of text. The researcher first classified and coded the materials and conducted a thematic analysis based on the implicit meaning of the questions, in order to clarify their qualitative classification and facilitate the comparative analysis of the similarities and differences in the materials provided by the interviewees from the two schools.

## 5 Results

### 5.1 Basic Understanding of News: Little Difference in Urban-Rural Disparities

Middle school students have different criteria for defining news and determining its scope. Most students distinguish news based on its content, such as *"events of national significance, like meetings between our leaders and leaders from other countries, or commemorative days, etc. - all of these counts as news"* (8th grade, S School, female). Some students consider the scope of news dissemination as an important factor in defining news: *"Usually, international news is more significant, while smaller news would be something like urban news. Even smaller news, like our school celebrating its anniversary, wouldn't be considered news if it wasn't reported by the media"* (9th

grade, W School, female). There are also students who define news based on its communication channels: *"What's on the news broadcast, in newspapers, magazines, or what's trending on Weibo – all of these count as news"* (8th grade, S School, female).

During the survey, it was found that students who mentioned the most basic characteristics of news, such as truthfulness, recent occurrence, and facts, were all from W School. One student stated, *"News should be true."* (9th grade, W School, female). Another student expressed, *"News is an event that has recently happened, and when many media outlets report on it, it becomes news that we can see"* (7th grade, W School, female). However, there were also students who, although they recognized these fundamental criteria for defining news, mixed other forms of cultural practices with the news. One student mentioned, *"I read many articles in magazines like 'VISTA'. I think this can also be considered as news, including research reports and academic papers"* (8th grade, W School, male).

Overall, middle school students have diverse understandings of news. Most students first think of traditional serious news, such as national leaders, international politics, and authoritative news broadcasts like "CCTV news" In addition, the majority of students also include internet news content in various formats within the scope of news. The concept of "professional news" no longer comprehensively encompasses the overall news in the current social environment. Middle school students growing up in the mobile internet era mostly recognize this expanded scope of news.

News media is committed to reducing audience uncertainty through news reporting, reflecting and guiding public opinion, serving society, and guiding life[17]. In this survey, the news perceived by middle school students largely falls within these dimensions.

For most students, news primarily serves the purpose of "keeping informed," and in this aspect, there isn't much difference between the two schools. *"Usually, when we are at school, we only have time to check our phones recess time, or sometimes the news broadcast is played in our classroom, so we get a general understanding of what's happening outside each day."* (Grade 8, W Middle School, male) *"I often check Douyin and the trending on Weibo. Basically, I can catch up on most social events by checking once every half a day."* (Grade 8, S Middle School, male)

In addition to staying informed, news also serves more practical purposes. Many students explicitly mentioned that they actively search or browse news to achieve specific goals, such as seeking life guidance or gathering material for writing. *"Sometimes I pay attention to the news during the COVID-19 pandemic. If there's going to be a lockdown, news on Weibo often spreads faster, and I'll quickly remind my parents to stock up on groceries."* (Grade 9, S Middle School, female) *"Sometimes I feel that many news stories reflect the dark side of society. Every time I come across such news, it makes me think a lot, like contemplating social systems and such. In a way, it broadens my thinking ability."* (Grade 9, W Middle School, female) *"I actively seek out news, as it provides valuable material for writing my paper."* (Grade 7, S Middle School, female) These students mentioned the practical applications of news in daily life, involving aspects such as "serving society" and "expanding thinking," overall considering news to have a positive impact.

However, there is also a group of students who do not actively pay attention to the news in their daily lives and believe that news has little impact on them. However, they may passively receive news information at times, several students mentioned that news broadcasts, like "CCTV news", are played in the classroom during longer breaks: *"Actually, I don't pay much attention to the news broadcasts like 'CCTV News', but if there's something interesting, such as when reporters conduct street interviews, I occasionally take a look."* (Grade 7, S Middle School, female) Some students passively receive news outside of the school environment as well: *"Usually, I watch TV with my grandparents at home. They like to watch 'CITY report' and 'Across the Straits', and although I'm not interested, I would accompany them while having meals."* (Grade 8, W Middle School, female)

It can be seen that most students perceive "watching the news" as something serious, useful, or burdensome, and there are relatively few students who explicitly mention the entertainment aspect of news, despite some students frequently browsing entertainment news. In addition, we noticed that there were a total of five students who explicitly stated, *"I never watch the news at all,"* and they were all from S Middle School, such as: *"I don't really like watching the news. Generally, I don't come across it. I use my phone to read novels or play games."* (Grade 8, S Middle School, male) *"I'm not interested in the news. I find it a bit boring."* (Grade 9, S Middle School, female)

Overall, in terms of a basic understanding of news, there is not much difference between the students from the two schools. Their understanding is generally immature. However, the students from W Middle School have a more diverse perception of the role of news and a relatively positive outlook. On the other hand, the students from S Middle School have a narrower understanding of news, resulting in lower interest and a more passive attitude toward news consumption.

## **5.2 News Source Preference: Urban Students Proactively Focus on News Sources, Rural Students Less Concerned**

Although middle school students have a diverse understanding of news, their knowledge of media is not very profound. Only two students from W Middle School provided clear and accurate responses: *"Television, newspapers, and radio are all considered media. I think the internet should also be considered media because nowadays we communicate and browse information mostly online."* (Grade 9, W Middle School, female) *"I think the scope of media is quite broad. For example, television stations and CCTV are definitely considered media, and there's also self-media. The content creators we follow on platforms like Bilibili are considered We-media."* (Grade 8, W Middle School, female)

Most of the other students could only think of media forms represented by account names and had limited knowledge of media types and institutions. They mostly described their sources of news based on internet content and platform choices. *"I read articles from WeChat official accounts. There are a few accounts that I always follow, and I read every article they publish."* (Grade 9, W Middle School, male) *"Weibo's trending topics are my main source of news, actually I don't really look at other platforms besides Weibo."* (Grade 8, S Middle School, female)

During this process, we also noticed that although students from the two schools have similar preferences on the platform: when it comes to obtaining news from the internet, middle school students tend to use common entertainment and social media platforms and short video platforms such as Weibo and Douyin to browse information. None of the students mentioned official news apps or websites in the interviews. However, in terms of the selection of professional media accounts and brands, students from W Middle School clearly pay more attention to "information sources."

*"I pay attention to the source of the information. For example, when there was news about a forest fire in Chongqing, I initially came across it unintentionally on QQ Space. It said, 'Urgent city-wide assistance needed for the massive fire in Chongqing,' accompanied by a blurry photo. In such cases, I tend to question the authenticity of the photo and would search and verify the information on other platforms to confirm its validity. "(Grade 9, W Middle School, female)*

When asked about the "source of news," 18 students from W Middle School explicitly stated that they pay attention to news sources, while in S Middle School, only 5 students did. Most of the others stated that they would not proactively search or verify information sources because they believe that if there is something significant, various apps will push notifications to them. For example, *"Normally, I don't pay much attention to it (news source). When I come across news, having a general understanding, as long as it's not too outrageous, there should be some basis (in the facts)." (Grade 8, S Middle School, female)*

In comparison, W Middle School has more "proactive searchers" who take the initiative in information filtering. *"I will search for what I want to read, not just limited to recent news, but also past news, as long as it's a topic that interests me." (Grade 9, W Middle School, female)*

Apart from that, there is no significant difference in the reading frequency of news between the students of the two schools. Most students mentioned that they do not have a fixed time or frequency for reading news. Ultimately, this is because their lives are relatively structured, and their exposure to news is usually driven by the purpose of understanding the world or entertaining themselves.

### **5.3 News Focus Orientation: Urban Students Prioritize National Affairs and Social Issues, Rural Students Prefer Entertainment**

In terms of the focus on news content, the students from the two schools share some basic similarities while also exhibiting significant differences. Generally, middle school students have limited knowledge and social awareness, and they do not show much interest in complex and hard news. Instead, they tend to have more exposure to soft news such as sports and entertainment. For example, *"I read news about esports, does that count? I play games myself, so I pay more attention to that." (Grade 8, S Middle School, male)* *"I have a favorite celebrity, so I only read news related to him. I don't really pay attention to other news content." (Grade 7, W Middle School, female)*

At a foundational level, the students from both schools primarily consume news content that is relatively light-hearted and entertaining in their daily lives. However, during the interviews, we also discovered that out of the 24 students from W Middle School,



20 of them mentioned that they read hard news related to society, technology, finance, military, politics, and other topics. It was also emphasized that the school environment has a significant influence on each student's news preferences.

*"Usually, when I open Weibo, I'm actually just reading serialized novels. But when there's a major social event, I pay a lot of attention because my friends and I often discuss these things together." (Grade 8, W Middle School, female)*

*"What I want to mention is Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, which happened during the summer vacation this year. If you ask me whether I used to pay attention to politics, international diplomacy, and military affairs, to be honest, I didn't. But that incident was too significant, and there was a nationwide discussion about it. We discussed it in our class group, and even our teacher asked for our opinions. So I started looking into related informatio such as our country's foreign policy." (Grade 9, W Middle School, male)*

It can be observed that students from W Middle School, driven by their sense of social responsibility and justice, or their need for social engagement, are willing to actively learn about certain events and even sustain their interest in topics they previously didn't pay attention to. They use such events as opportunities to change their news preferences and explore new content and social issues. Particularly noteworthy is that students from W Middle School show more interest in international news, including the Russia-Ukraine conflict, The Assassination of Shinzo Abe, and the Mahsa Amini protests. In contrast, students from S Middle School hardly mention international news. In terms of news consumption, students from S Middle School have narrower interests and are more driven by entertainment purposes and personal interests.

*"To be honest, I don't really care about it because I feel like these things are too far away from me." (Grade 9, S Middle School, female)*

Regarding the presentation format of news content, differences between the two schools' students were also observed. Many previous studies have shown that youngsters prefer more relaxing and entertaining formats, such as short videos. However, this finding aligns only with what we observed in S Middle School. For example, a male student from S Middle School stated, *"As far as I know, none of our friends or classmates really follow the news. We all just use Douyin and Kuaishou (Chinese short video apps), which allow us to directly share interesting content with our peers." (Grade 9, S Middle School, male)*

On the other hand, for W Middle School, more students mentioned "in-depth reporting" and "investigative reports." For them, once they become interested in a particular topic, they feel the need to delve deep and understand the complete picture of the event. Several students mentioned the discussions that took place in their class about the "Sinking of the Sewol ".According to these students, their geography teacher briefly discussed the event in class and encouraged them to "search for relevant news materials to the best of their abilities," which sparked great interest and discussion among many students.

*"I have a deep impression of this incident because many students in our class got involved. Most of us were driven by curiosity." (Grade 9, W Middle School, female)* "I remember that class was on Thursday, and even after we went home for the weekend, we were still discussing it in our group chat. Students collected various news reports,

*photos, and videos related to the incident and shared them in the group. Each time it would trigger a wave of discussion. On Friday, our whole class watched a documentary about investigating that incident called "That Day, the Sea." (Grade 9, W Middle School, male) "At that time, I even searched for a lot of information from foreign websites and shared them in the group chat... At that time, I even collected a lot of information from foreign websites and shared it in the group, such as the official information released by the South Korean news agency, Yonhap. However, compared to such information, we tend to trust sources that are unbiased and not driven by specific interests." (Grade 9, W Middle School, female)*

Although the above statements not only involve the use of news, they indicate that a considerable number of middle school students have the ability to search, analyze, and think critically about news information. The documentary "That Day, the Sea" presents a scientific analysis of the Sewol ferry incident, incorporating empirical analyses from various disciplines such as politics, geography, and physics, rather than being a purely sensational and emotionally driven documentary. Interestingly, other students also expressed that compared to other news, in-depth news reports are "more interesting" and "more useful": *"I don't want to see people arguing with each other online. Instead, I enjoy reading in-depth investigative reports that provide a comprehensive understanding of the causes and consequences of events. I believe that such reports, which have been thoroughly researched and verified, provide reliable information." (Grade 8, W Middle School, female)* It can be seen that the news preferences of current urban middle school students cannot be simply defined as "shallow" or "entertainment-oriented."

#### **5.4 News Engagement Attitude: Urban Students More Active, Rural Students Relatively Passive**

Consistent with their proactive approach to searching for news, the students at W Middle School also prefer to actively engage with news online. Compared to simply browsing news information, actions such as liking, commenting, or sharing better reflect the initiative of news consumers and their participation in the news dissemination process. Most students stated that their primary purpose in participating in news dissemination is to express themselves and speak up for justice. For example: *"I will (like, share, comment), and I think I do it quite frequently. Especially commenting, I really enjoy expressing my opinions online, whether it's sharing my serious thoughts or just saying something silly... Anyway, I'm quite active on the Internet." (Grade 7, W Middle School, female) "If I see something unfair or someone doing something wrong, I will speak up. Of course, when I'm surfing the web, it's all about having fun, and moreover, on the Internet, whoever has the loudest voice has the advantage. If there's something that requires speaking up for justice, I definitely won't ignore it." (Grade 8, W Middle School, female)*

Some students also repost news with the purpose of helping others, while commenting is seen as a way to "record their current thoughts": *"On platforms like Weibo, I would write a short comment or two to record my thoughts at the time. Sometimes I repost news or other people's help-seeking posts because platforms like Weibo can only*

gain visibility through popularity. I feel that by reposting, I can help increase the visibility." (Grade 9, W Middle School, male)

It can be seen that when they engage in activities such as reposting news, they hold the belief that their small actions can also bring about changes in the discourse. Overall, students of W Middle School have a proactive attitude toward news consumption. They not only believe that their engagement with the news can have an impact and change the course of discussions, but they also actively interact with other individuals and drive others to participate. For example, one student stated: *"I directly repost some news that I see on Douyin to my friends and ask them to comment and repost as well. For example, there was an incident of violence in Tangshan, and many people were whitewashing the attackers on Douyin. So, in the comments section, I would mention or repost it to my friends so that they can also help with the comments."* (Grade 8, W Middle School, female)

Some students believe that interacting with other news consumers through the comments section is necessary. They said: *"I believe that everyone's voice is important. Different people will have different opinions on a news event. If I don't speak up, who knows if someone else shares the same view? So, of course, we should repost and comment. If someone agrees with your opinion, they will like the comment, then more people will see what you said, which proves that everyone thinks the same way!"* (Grade 8, W Middle School, male)

In contrast, among the interviewees from S Middle School, only 5 of them expressed a positive attitude toward participating in news dissemination. The other students explained their reasons for not wanting to engage in activities such as reposting, liking, or commenting while browsing the news. Overall, these reasons can be categorized into three types. The first type includes students who are accustomed to browsing news on social media platforms like Weibo and Douyin. They consider their online social relationships as an extension of their offline interpersonal networks. As a result, they tend to be more cautious in their online behavior, presenting a relatively performative version of themselves. Therefore, when they engage in actions like reposting, liking, or commenting, which leave a trace on their personal account's homepage, they prefer to "perform" rather than openly participate in the news that truly interests them.

*For example: "I rarely like posts, and I don't comment or repost. I have many friends who follow my account, and I prefer to share my own content. When you repost, comment, or like something, it shows up on your homepage. I don't really want everyone to know that much about me. So, basically, if I can avoid leaving a trace online, I will."* (Grade 9, S Middle School, female)

The majority of other students believe that their voices hold little weight and that reposting or commenting is futile. *"I don't really do much (reposting, liking, or commenting). It seems like it doesn't matter, right? Unless you're an internet celebrity with many fans."* (Grade 8, S Middle School, male)

Furthermore, as China has entered a pluralistic society based on diverse interests, social issues have become increasingly complex in recent years. In many discussions about public events, negative trends have emerged online, such as mutual attacks and rumors. Many students, out of self-protection, often choose to remain silent, only browsing news without actively participating or interacting. For example: *"I don't want*

*to argue with others, so I generally don't say much. I just read the news, and pass by." (Grade 9, S Middle School, female)*

Similarly, in contrast to the news discourse environment described above in W Middle School, there is little news discussion among students in S Middle School. Therefore, there is also less active searching for news driven by group discussions. *"Usually, I don't do that. I feel that my friends and I mostly discuss things happening around us, after all, the events covered in the news seem distant from us." (Grade 8, S Middle School, female)* *"I don't really like discussing news with friends. Sometimes their opinions may differ from mine, and that's not fun. It could even strain our relationship." (Grade 9, S Middle School, female)*

## 5.5 Conclusion and Discussion

Overall, the situation presented by the students at S Middle School in the survey aligns with previous research: they demonstrate a relatively immature understanding of news, typically passively consume news, prefer soft news over hard news, only focus on the content they are interested in, enjoy light and entertaining presentation formats such as short videos, have a generally weak media literacy, and exhibit low or even zero engagement in news dissemination.

The underlying reasons can be attributed to their daily life and learning environment. These students in rural middle schools often face greater academic pressure than their urban counterparts. Under such educational pressure, teachers in these schools provide limited guidance on topics that students are concerned about. The role of teachers and schools in teaching students how to gather and filter information through media is also minimal. In fact, S Middle School even has a strict policy prohibiting students from bringing electronic devices like phones to school to avoid distractions during class. However, researchers found that such restrictions often lead to a rise in prohibited behavior. Even if some students only have access to their phones when they return home, they tend to seek more interesting content such as novels or games rather than "news." For these middle school students, the expectations from parents and teachers are for them to "learn about national and societal events through official media." Therefore, their understanding of news is often limited to serious news closely related to national and social development or professional news produced by party or official media. Additionally, there is not a significant news-oriented atmosphere among their peer groups. On one hand, their media exposure and communication mostly revolve around entertainment content. On the other hand, their media literacy is relatively weak, leaving them unsure of how to deal with complex issues such as fake news and online arguments. As a result, these students mostly lack the motivation to search for, consume, and participate in news. Their news consumption is mainly driven by utilitarian purposes such as "completing assignments" or "accumulating material for essays," rather than a sense of ownership of the news ecosystem.

As for the students at W Middle School, they demonstrate a more diverse understanding of the functions of news, resulting in a more proactive attitude toward it. Their interests stem from a genuine curiosity about news events, and they are usually willing to actively search for news, consume it, and engage with it. These students possess a

foundational yet more widespread media literacy. For example, they consciously differentiate between sources of information, actively participate in news dissemination and commentary, and critically consider the information they receive, engaging in discussions with others. Furthermore, they show a broader interest in "harder" news content and fields, such as international news, technology news, and social and livelihood news, especially events involving injustice, inequality, or significant social controversies. These middle school students are not lacking in patience for in-depth and lengthy readings. On the contrary, they eagerly and actively seek comprehensive and systematic in-depth reporting. This behavior arises from their curiosity and interest, as well as their stronger sense of "citizenship."

The researchers concluded that these conditions primarily contribute to the differences observed at W Middle School: Firstly, the students at W Middle School enjoy greater freedom in using electronic media devices, particularly smartphones. This ensures a higher degree of freedom in information searching and provides students with more opportunities and time to explore the "external society" beyond the confines of the school, enabling them to gain a deeper understanding of other social groups, their ideas, and their advocacies.

Secondly, W Middle School provides effective guidance on critical thinking and media usage. Especially, teachers, emphasize the introduction of real-life examples during lessons and encourage students to independently utilize media for searching, discerning, analyzing, and discussing news information in various forms. This approach greatly facilitates the development of students' critical thinking and civic awareness, which subtly broadens their "news agenda," moving their focus beyond the "trending" on various platforms. The guidance provided through these proactive behaviors and the atmosphere of "every person's opinion matters" form the foundation for students' interest and confidence in news consumption and news engagement.

Thirdly, there is a strong group-driven atmosphere in classes at W middle school. Their news participation behaviors are highly influenced by the attitudes of individuals in their social networks. Through their daily interactions, it is evident that most students do not consider discussions about news as mere theoretical debates. Instead, they view them as opportunities to express their own perspectives and engage in exchanges with others. As a result, an open and inclusive environment for news communication is easily fostered among the students. This atmosphere, in turn, influences individual students, motivating them to actively participate in news discussions and contemplate social affairs within the online world. It encourages them to emphasize the expression of personal viewpoints.

Furthermore, the media environment of major platforms today often has a strong agenda-setting attribute. The content that middle school students encounter on a daily basis has usually undergone algorithmic identification and filtering. In comparison, students in rural areas, due to their weaker media literacy, find it more difficult to break out of this "enclosure." The formation of this enclosure can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, today's youth, as "digital natives," lack fixed time and space for news consumption. Their habits of consuming news are dispersed and arbitrary, making them naturally more prone to being attracted to entertainment-oriented content. Secondly, the discourse environment formed by teachers, parents, and peers is insufficient to provide

them with mature and free conditions for news participation. Especially when there is a weak connection between their peers' social topics and news, individuals within this environment often can only conform to the group's entertainment-oriented topics and a relatively closed, negative news discussion ecosystem.

Therefore, it is expected that efforts should be made to promote media literacy education tailored to rural, with a particular emphasis on cultivating students' positive awareness of news consumption and participation.

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