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# The Reading Needs and Influencing Factors of Chinese Elderly Adults in National Reading Activities

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**Abstract:** With the acceleration of the aging process in China, reading as a means of addressing the spiritual needs of the elderly cannot be disregarded. Exploring the current situation and the factors that influence reading among the elderly is essential for establishing a national reading society. Based on the principle of supply equilibrium of demand, this study uses the method of questionnaire and interview research with older adults over the age of 60 as the research target to explore the current situation of reading needs, reading intention, and reading habits among the elderly in China, as well as their affecting factors. The results of this study showed that the elderly people in China have a high willingness to read and some awareness of reading consumption, but a low willingness to consume reading at the same time. The initiative of reading behavior of the elderly people is not strong in their daily life. The study also discovered that the reading behaviors of the elderly in China are influenced by factors such as education level, firmly established reading style, few reading channels, high reading costs, and so on. It was also concluded that the supply of electronic reading material, as well as the reading needs of the elderly, are currently out of sync with the traditional reading service system.

**Keywords:** The Elderly, Reading Needs, Reading Intention, Education Level, Consumption

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## 1. Introduction

The elderly population in China is growing annually as a result of the country's aging society. The number of elderly people aged 60 and above in China has reached nearly 264 million in 2020, accounting for 18.7% of the total population [1]. Making a good living environment for the elderly has emerged as a critical issue for the social development of China. Currently, there is a problem of insufficient attention, consideration, and provision for the spiritual needs of the elderly, whether in the family, society, or government [2]. The definition of the spiritual needs of the elderly varies among academics. Some scholars regard spiritual needs as synonymous with spiritual support [3], focusing on the emotional and psychological comfort of kinship needs such as care from their children [4]. Some scholars also summarize the spiritual needs of older people as psychological needs, social and leisure needs, and cultural, recreational, and learning needs [5, 6]. According to data from the Chinese Longitudinal

Healthy Longevity Survey (CLHLS), 69.6% of older people expect their community to offer places and activities that satisfy their needs for spiritual comfort, and 67.9% demand that their communities provide them with places to meet their spiritual and cultural entertainment needs. However, 86.1% of older people live in areas without access to necessary services. The spiritual and cultural needs of them are gravely underserved [2]. With the development of national reading activities, the reading of the elderly as one of the ways to meet spiritual and cultural needs has also received increasing attention and concern from society. Improving the elderly reading service system is an important initiative to actively respond to the development of an aging society, and is conducive to enhancing the sense of access and happiness of the elderly. With the rapid development of digital technology, academics have advocated encouraging the promotion of older people to learn to read digitally using smart devices. The reality is that older people have difficulties in using and reading digital products, and the digital divide is significant [7]. Traditional media are widely used among older

people in comparison to the ubiquitous digital media [8]. The perceived discrepancy between the reading needs of older people, who are adapting to digital capabilities, and the reading services offered by digital developments cannot be ignored. The importance of focusing on and understanding the expanding older reading population has far-reaching consequences for developing a national reading society [9]. This research studies the reading demands, accessibility, and effects of the elderly in China using literature analysis and questionnaire survey methods. It investigates the issues and solutions of digital reading in order to address the spiritual and cultural requirements of the elderly and improve their reading literacy.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Research Design

A questionnaire based on the supply balance principle was administered with the objective of addressing the following questions:

- 1) Are the reading needs of elderly people influenced by their habitation and ability to read?
- 2) Is willingness to read a factor in the reading habits of elderly people?
- 3) What is the relationship between the willingness of elderly people to read and the reading market?

### 2.2. Study Objects and Data Collection

According to Article 2 of the *Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of Elderly People*, the starting age for the elderly in China is 60 years old. As a result, the respondents for this study were chosen to be those over the age of 60, and 201 genuine questionnaires were acquired.

*Table 1. Characteristics of the respondents.*

Variables	Levels	Frequency	Proportion/%
Age	60-70	129	64.18
	Over 70	72	35.82
Sex	Males	71	35.32
	Females	130	64.68
Habitation	City	58	28.86
	Town	67	33.33
	Rural area	76	37.81
	Illiteracy	50	24.88
Education level	Primary school	52	25.87
	Junior high school	44	21.89
	Senior high school	26	12.94
	Bachelor's degree	19	9.45
	Bachelor's degree or above	10	4.98
Total		201	100.00

Table 1 indicates that the habitation of the respondents of this survey covers cities, towns and rural areas, and the proportion of the three items is basically balanced. Educational attainment is divided into six categories ranging from low to high, from never having received systematic education to having a bachelor's degree or above, with primary school and above accounting for nearly 60% of the sample, which shows that a high proportion of the sample

meets the objective conditions for reading.

## 3. Analysis and Evaluation of Results

### 3.1. Reading Needs and Willingness of Older People

Older people have a wide range of leisure and entertainment options after retirement as a result of less work pressure and having more spare time. In Question 9, "What is your main form of recreation?" The percentage of respondents who chose "The interactive category: chatting with other elderly people or neighbors" was 84.08%, and 66.17% of elderly people chose the item of "The chess and card category: chess, mahjong, etc." Elderly people who chose "The community sports category: singing and dancing, exercising, hiking, travelling, etc." accounts for 58.21% and the proportion of "The home recreation category: watching TV, listening to the radio, raising plants and animals, doing housework, etc." was 53.73%. It can be concluded that the main types of leisure for older adults are socializing and healthy exercise, followed by leisure activities at home, with only 32.34% of respondents choosing study and research activities, including reading. It demonstrated that elderly adults have reading behaviors to a certain extent in their daily lives but lack initiative and motivation to read. In terms of willingness to read, results indicate that elderly adults recognize the importance of reading and that the majority of them have a desire to read. In response to the question "Would you like to read some publications in your daily life? (Q12)" 51.74% of older people responded "Yes", while "Do you think that enriching the lives of older people through reading is needed? (Q21)", approximately 95% of older people responded "Very needed" and "Somewhat needed", accounting for 32.34% and 63.19% respectively. In general, the reading situation of elderly people can be characterized by a willingness to read but a low motivation to read.

Willingness to read has an impact on reading behaviors, in terms of influencing the willingness of older people to read, the correlation between habitation, education level and reading recognition and reading behavior was analyzed using *Pearson Correlation Coefficient* to describe the strength of the relationship. The relevant statistics results are shown in Table 2.

*Table 2. Correlations Between Habitation, Education Level and Reading Recognition and Reading Behavior.*

	Habitation	Education level
Reading recognition	0.008	-0.345**
Reading behaviors	-0.214*	0.291**

\* p<0.05 \*\* p<0.01.

It can be seen from Table 2 that the correlation coefficient between habitation and reading behavior is -0.214 and shows a significant negative correlation at the 0.05 level. Results indicated that there was no correlation discovered between habitation and reading recognition. Moreover, the correlation coefficient between education level and reading recognition is -0.345, which is significant at the 0.01 level. It shows that education level and reading recognition have a significantly

negative correlation. The correlation coefficient between education level and reading behavior is 0.291, with a significant level of 0.01 indicating a significant positive relationship. Results showed that the higher the literacy and reading levels of older people, the more reading behavior they exhibit.

### **3.2. Traditional Reading Styles of Older People**

With the diversification of the publishing industry, a wider range of reading options is available to older people. The highest percentage of respondents answered "Paper-based publications" in response to the multiple-choice question "Which of the following ways do you use to read? (Q17)" accounting for 88.56%. In addition, reading picture books and visiting libraries for offline reading accounted for 68.16% and 35.82% respectively and the proportion of reading on their mobile phones was 30.35%, the lowest percentage, indicating that offline traditional paper publications, or easy-to-read picture books, are the main form of reading for older people.

Because of problems such as failing eyesight, slow response, and unfamiliarity with the operation of computers, mobile phones, and other smart devices, the digital reading skills of older people have gradually diminished. In addition, older readers are less information literate, slower to accept new things, and have difficulty searching for the information they need from the vast number of digital resources [9], digital reading is not the most convenient and appropriate way for older people to read. In response to the question "Do you know how to use a smartphone? (Q7) " Only 15.92% of respondents were proficient in using smartphones, while the majority of them were not proficient or even did not know how to use smartphones, accounting for 84.08%. Moreover, 47.76% of respondents believe that the intelligent society does not make life easier, which indicates an imbalance between the supply of digital reading and the reading needs of older people. Therefore, the development of digital technology needs to break down the limitations of visuals on reading for older people [10], using technology to improve their quality of life.

### **3.3. Consciousness and Behaviors of Reading Consumption**

According to the results presented above, traditional paper books are preferred by the elderly. In terms of access to books, the biggest percentage of respondents (33.33%) purchase or order books from bookstores. The proportion of books acquired with the assistance of family members and borrowed from others was 27.36% and 20.9% respectively, and less than 10% of older people do online book purchasing or read in libraries. The results of the questionnaire also show that 70.15% of respondents prefer to buy books as compared to borrowing them. It shows that older people have a variety of means of accessing books, but prefer the traditional offline purchase. In addition, 43.78% of older people responded "yes" to whether they would be willing to spend money on books, while 60.7% of older people have not purchased reading material for themselves and most

respondents (78.61%) would like to have reading material available for free. It shows that older people have a higher willingness to read and a certain awareness of reading consumption, but a low willingness of reading consumption.

According to Alice M. Scales and Shirley A. Biggs, family members' lack of interest in older people's reading lives has an impact on the reading interest of older people [11]. During the interviews, we also found that home reading environments and conditions can also influence older people's consciousness and behaviors of reading consumption. It was discovered that some of the elderly people's books came from their children or grandchildren, and those with a long-term reading habit had family members with a higher literacy level, whose family education valued reading, and who had a strong family reading environment. Children consciously purchase books suitable for older people and family consumption can drive older people's consumption awareness and behaviors. Some older people reported that new books are more expensive and will not buy new books due to frugality but occasionally buy second-hand books. One of the reasons older people are hesitant to spend money on reading is the high cost of books. Rising prices for paper-based reading materials have decreased older people's willingness to purchase books and their enthusiasm for reading [9]. In addition, 89.55% of respondents chose "poor eyesight" in the multiple-choice question "What are the barriers that affect your reading? (Q19). According to 46.27% of respondents, libraries and other reading places are not easily accessible, and 15.92% of respondents believe that there is a lack of environment and resources for reading, while only 27.36% of seniors find current bookstores very convenient. Combined with the above findings of fewer older people buying books online and reading in libraries, it is clear that purchase access and the cost of reading affects older people's reading consumption behaviors. Moreover, the current public facilities such as libraries do not meet the reading needs of older people. Although electronic reading provides a rich variety of reading modes, it lacks the advantage of traditional reading modes in which the reader has a real sense of reading, which is the barrier that the development of electronic reading needs to overcome.

## **4. Conclusions and Recommendations**

The reading of the elderly is an important part of the national reading society and is of great significance to building a nation of avid readers. According to the results and analysis of the questionnaire and interview conducted for this article, older people have a high willingness to read and a certain awareness of reading consumption, but the willingness to consume reading is not high. It is concluded that the reading behaviors of older people are influenced by their education level, the cost of reading, public reading facilities, and the home reading environment. Moreover, reading is anchored in traditional books and there is an imbalance between supply and demand for electronic reading to support the reading of the elderly.

In the background of the intelligent digital society, it is necessary to construct a reading service guarantee system for the elderly conforming to China's actual conditions, in order to meet their reading needs and provide them with healthy and rich spiritual and cultural services [12]. To meet the reading needs of the elderly and to improve their reading literacy, the elderly reading service system should be improved.

#### **4.1. Improving the Reading Environment and Enhancing Reading Behaviors of Older People**

The first thing we need to do is to emphasize the atmosphere of reading at home. In addition to providing emotional and psychological companionship to the elderly, children should understand their reading needs and help them in selecting and purchasing appropriate books to enrich their lives in their old age through reading. Apart from the family side, we should also promote reading activities for the elderly, bring into full play of the productive role of public libraries, city bookstores and other reading places, and organize a variety of reading activities regularly according to the reading preferences of the elderly.

#### **4.2. Developing "Digital Reading +" and Innovative Reading Models for Older People**

Reading can be challenging for older readers due to a limited selection of books and challenges with electronic reading. Despite being a trend in social development, digital reading cannot currently replace traditional reading. As a result, the combination of digital reading and traditional paper reading is more appropriate for the elderly. Publishers should plan their book selections for older readers based on their reading needs, and a various range of reading materials with rich content should be published [13]. It is necessary to address the issue of reading barriers for elderly readers by increasing the number of easy-to-understand reading publications in terms of content and developing books and magazines suitable for the elderly in terms of font size, color, graphics, and other forms. Moreover, the development of an audio reading market for older people and innovative reading formats should also be encouraged.

In addition to the lack of reading resources, the cost of reading has also been an important factor influencing older people's reading behaviors and consumption in recent years. We can make use of public cultural undertakings to reduce the

pricing range of such newspapers and magazines, and set up discounts and promotions for the elderly to purchase books, in order to stimulate their willingness to purchase books and reading enthusiasm [9].

#### **4.3. Improving Access to Public Reading Facilities**

At present, the construction of public libraries, community rooms and reading rooms in China has made some achievements while reading facilities for the elderly are underdeveloped. Public reading rooms can be set up for older groups, with accessible facilities, large print books, magnifying glasses, and other tools as well as facilities to support older people's reading needs [14]. Furthermore, older people have limited mobility and difficulty accessing public reading facilities, resulting in the low utilization of public reading facilities. Public reading facilities such as libraries and city bookstores can collaborate to provide as-needed newspaper delivery and regular book distribution services. Reading resources for older people can be provided in the form of mobile reading stations to meet the needs of older people reading at home [15]. For example, the New Rain Community in Jiansheng Town, Chongqing, has launched an activity with the theme of "Mobile Bookstore, Delivering Books to You". Volunteers deliver books to elderly readers by understanding their reading needs in advance. In comparison to fixed public reading places, this type of service is more flexible and convenient, solving the difficulties of older people who want to read but are not comfortable doing so. It also effectively encourages older people to use public reading resources. In addition, we can also make use of big data analysis and the convenience of digital reading to grasp the reading needs of different regions and groups of older people, provide and recommend relevant books in order to make mobile reading purposeful and effective, and ultimately promote the reading literacy and drive the development of reading for older people by reading to build a modern and diversified scientific reading system for all.

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## **Appendix**

Questionnaire on the reading habits of older people:

1. What is your age group?
  - A. Under 50
  - B. 50-60 (Please jump to Q4)
  - C. 60-70 (Please jump to Q4)
  - D. Over 70 (Please jump to Q4)
2. Do you think intelligent society makes your life easier?
  - A. Yes
  - B. No

3. Do you think the aging society has triggered social contradictions? (e.g. disturbing noise of square dance; the occupation of transportation resources because of the preferential fares for the elderly; social problems caused by re-employment of the elderly, etc.)

- A. Yes
- B. No

\*Please fill in this question and finish your answer.

4. What is your gender?

- A. Male
- B. Female

5. What is your place of residence?

- A. City
- B. Town
- C. Rural area

6. What is your education level?

- A. Illiteracy
- B. Primary school
- C. Junior high school
- D. Senior high school
- E. Bachelor's degree
- F. Bachelor's degree or above

7. Do you know how to use a smartphone?

- A. Proficient
- B. Not proficient
- C. Unable to use

8. Do you think intelligent society makes your life easier?

- A. Yes
- B. No

9. What is your main form of recreation?

- A. The home recreation category: watching TV, listening to the radio, raising plants and animals, doing housework, etc.
- B. The community sports category: singing and dancing, exercising, hiking, travelling, etc.
- C. The chess and card category: chess, mahjong, etc.
- D. The study and research category: reading, doing research, practicing calligraphy, attending senior citizen college, etc.
- E. The interactive category: chatting with other elderly people or neighbors
- F. Others

10. Are you willing to spend on books?

- A. Yes
- B. No

11. Do you have books, newspapers, periodicals and other books suitable for the elderly in your home?

- A. Yes
- B. No

12. Would you like to read some publications in your daily life?

- A. Yes
- B. No

13. Have you purchased reading materials for yourself?

- A. Yes
- B. No

14. Do you like to buy or borrow books?

- A. Buy
- B. Borrow

15. Have you ever bought a second-hand book?

- A. Yes
- B. No

16. Do you have old books at home that you would like to send to a second-hand bookshop for recycling?

- A. Yes
- B. No

17. Which of the following ways do you use to read?

- A. Paper-based publications

- B. Picture books
  - C. Offline reading in libraries
  - D. On mobile phones
  - E. On computers
  - F. Others
18. What is the main way you obtain books?
- A. Purchase or order books from bookstores
  - B. Purchase or order books online
  - C. Read in libraries
  - D. Borrow from others
  - E. Acquire books with the assistance of family members
19. What are the barriers that affect your reading?
- A. No interest and habit of reading
  - B. Poor eyesight
  - C. Lack of reading resources
  - D. Lack of reading places and environments
  - E. Reading places are not easily accessible
  - F. Others
20. Would you like to have free reading material?
- A. Yes
  - B. No
21. Do you think that enriching the lives of older people through reading is needed?
- A. Very needed
  - B. Somewhat needed
  - C. Normal
  - D. Not very needed
  - E. Not needed
22. Do you think the current bookstore is convenient?
- A. Very convenient
  - B. Somewhat convenient
  - C. Normal
  - D. Not very convenient
  - E. Not convenient
23. If there were mobile reading stations where you could buy and borrow books and collect used books at any time, would you make use of them?
- A. Yes
  - B. No

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