The Sociopsychological Motivations and Intervention Strategies for Digital Hoarding Among Young People

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Abstract

As digitalisation advances, digital hoarding among young people has become increasingly prominent, emerging as a significant phenomenon affecting both their digital quality of life and mental wellbeing. This paper adopts a logical framework of 'behavioural definition - motivational analysis - strategy proposal' to systematically explore the essence, manifestations, sociopsychological motivations, and guidance pathways of this behaviour. Research indicates that youth digital hoarding exhibits characteristics including object diversification and fragmentation, complex motivations, unconscious behavioural patterns, and dual impacts. It manifests specifically in three hoarding forms: information resources, social data, and digital artefacts. Its emergence results from the synergistic interplay of three factors: psychological needs stemming from individuals' lack of security and pursuit of control; environmental triggers such as social information anxiety and peer pressure for group identification; and technological enablers including reduced digital storage costs and algorithmic recommendation incentives. Based on this, this paper proposes a tripartite guidance strategy of 'individual psychological adjustment - social environment optimisation - digital technology regulation'. This offers theoretical reference and practical guidance for helping young people establish rational digital resource management concepts, construct healthy digital lifestyles, and promote the sound operation of the digital society.

Keywords

Youth Population, Digital Hoarding Behaviour, Sociopsychological Motivations, Guidance Strategy, Digital Literacy

1. Introduction

With the rapid advancement of digital technology and the comprehensive proliferation of the internet, human society has entered an era of profound digital penetration. As a core production factor and life resource, digital information has profoundly reshaped young people's cognitive patterns, behavioural models, and social logic. Against this backdrop, 'digital hoarding' has emerged as a distinct social phenomenon: Young people, through mobile phones, computers and other terminal devices, collect and store various digital resources-including documents, images, videos, and social media records-without restraint. Even when these resources remain unused for extended periods, they resist clearing or deleting them [1]. This excessive hoarding leads to issues such as device slowdowns and inefficient information retrieval. In more severe cases, obsession with collecting digital resources impairs normal study, work, and interpersonal interactions.

This digital hoarding is not merely a matter of 'storage habits'; it reflects the psychological adaptation challenges and social interaction conflicts faced by young people during the digital transformation period. Moderate accumulation of digital resources can support learning, work, and social needs. However, excessive hoarding not only causes visible problems like disorganised digital spaces and wasted time and energy, but may also foster hidden psychological distress such as anxiety, paranoia, and fear of missing out. This can even create a vicious cycle of 'hoarding - anxiety - more hoarding,' severely impacting young people's real-life quality and social adaptability. Currently, academic research on digital hoarding remains in its infancy. Existing studies predominantly focus on phenomenological descriptions or single-dimensional causal analyses, lacking systematic deconstruction of the socio-psychological motivations within youth populations [2]. Moreover, no targeted and actionable guidance strategy framework has yet been established. Therefore, delving into the essential characteristics and socio-psychological roots of youth digital hoarding behaviour, while proposing scientifically sound and effective guidance pathways, will not only enrich theoretical research in fields such as digital behavioural psychology and youth sociology, and refine analytical frameworks for studying youth behaviour in the digital age. It will also provide practical guidance for enhancing youth digital literacy and fostering healthy digital lifestyles, holding significant theoretical value and practical significance for promoting the comprehensive development of young people and the sound functioning of digital society.

2. The Essence and Manifestations of Youth Digital Hoarding

Comprehensively understanding youth digital hoarding requires progression from defining its essence to examining its concrete manifestations: first, establishing core definitions to delineate the boundaries and fundamental attributes of this behaviour, clarifying its distinctions from traditional hoarding to lay the groundwork for subsequent analysis; Building upon this, we further distil the unique manifestations of this behaviour within the youth demographic, highlighting

characteristics that distinguish it from other groups to clarify its intrinsic nature; finally, we translate these abstract traits into concrete, perceptible behavioural scenarios, illustrating the diverse forms of youth digital hoarding in real-world contexts. This process anchors theoretical understanding in practical application, forming a comprehensive cognitive journey from superficial to profound, and from abstract to concrete.

2.1 Core Definition of Digital Hoarding Behaviour

Digital hoarding refers to a complex behavioural pattern wherein individuals, driven by specific psychological needs within digital environments, persistently and extensively collect and preserve diverse digital information resources. Despite these resources possessing minimal practical utility or remaining long-term idle, individuals refuse to screen, organise, or delete them. This leads to digital space congestion, diminished information management efficiency, and potential adverse effects on both psychological well-being and real-life functioning. Unlike traditional physical hoarding, digital hoarding involves intangible, replicable resources stored at minimal cost. Its behavioural vehicle centres on electronic devices and online storage spaces, requiring no physical space or maintenance costs associated with material accumulation. Its core characteristic manifests as a behavioural loop of "collect - storing - hoarding.‘ The psychological tendency of ’unwillingness to delete‘ serves as the key distinguishing marker between normal digital storage and hoarding. While normal storage centres on the purpose of ’use," digital hoarding manifests as an irrational resistance to deletion, persisting in retention even when resources serve no practical purpose.

2.2 Core Characteristics of Youth Digital Hoarding

Youth digital hoarding exhibits distinct group specificity, primarily encompassing four core features: Firstly, the diversification and fragmentation of hoarded objects. As digital natives, young people rely heavily on digital platforms for living, learning, working, and socialising. Their hoarded digital resources span categories such as study materials, work documents, entertainment content, and social records, often existing in fragmented forms-scattered screenshots, brief voice messages, unstructured documents, and disjointed knowledge points [3]. These resources typically lack systematic organisation, hindering effective utilisation. Secondly, the complexity of behavioural motivations. Unlike simple resource-hoarding needs, youth digital hoarding often intertwines multiple motivations: emotional attachment, seeking security, and craving social recognition. They may accumulate learning or work resources to cope with academic or workplace pressures, store social data to preserve emotional memories, or collect trending resources to gain group recognition. Thirdly, the unconscious nature of the process. Most young people's digital hoarding lacks clear planning or selection criteria, manifesting as habitual ‘one-click saving,’ ‘batch downloading,’ and ‘saving-then-forgetting.’ They often lack rational awareness of the scale or actual value of their hoarded content, only becoming conscious of their hoarding when device storage warnings prompt them. Fourthly, the dual nature of its effects: in the short term, digital hoarding may satisfy psychological needs, provide convenient resource reserves, and alleviate pressures stemming from information anxiety and uncertainty. However, long-term excessive hoarding leads to digital clutter, increases information retrieval costs, wastes time and energy, and may trigger negative issues such as digital anxiety, decision paralysis, and social isolation, potentially impacting mental wellbeing.

2.3 Primary Manifestations of Youth Digital Hoarding

Youth digital hoarding exhibits diverse forms, categorisable into three types based on hoarded objects and contexts: Firstly, information resource hoarding, This is the most prevalent form, encompassing indiscriminate downloading of educational materials, industry reports, e-books, and online course videos for study or work purposes; extensive storage of entertainment content such as short videos, images, music, and films; and collection of lifestyle information including wellness tips, fashion advice, financial management methods, and travel guides. Some young people store far more information than they actually utilise, with many resources never consulted after download or even forgotten about [4]. Second, social data hoarding, manifested in preserving all chat histories-including trivial pleasantries and promotional messages-alongside social media updates, likes, and comments. This extends to backing up numerous group photos, video call records, and voice messages, treating digital interactions as repositories of emotional memories. Individuals resist deleting any digital traces linked to others, persistently retaining all records of digital engagement even when contact has ceased [5]. Third, Digital item hoarding encompasses collecting diverse mobile applications, computer software, gaming accounts, virtual items, emoticons, wallpapers, and themes. Even when unused for extended periods, individuals resist uninstalling or deactivating these. Some youths exhibit an ‘app collecting compulsion,’ installing over a hundred applications on their phones, most of which remain idle, serving merely as symbols of ‘possession.’ Additionally, there exists the accumulation of novel digital items such as virtual currencies and digital collectibles.

3. Sociopsychological Motivations Behind Youth Digital Hoarding

The emergence of youth digital hoarding stems not from a single factor but from the interplay of internal psychology, external environment, and technological conditions. Individual psychological needs form the core catalyst for this behaviour. Young people's lack of security and sense of control in real life constitute the intrinsic driving force behind hoarding. The socio-cultural environment exerts external influence, reinforcing these psychological needs by fostering an atmosphere of information anxiety and transmitting group identity norms, thereby catalysing their transformation into tangible actions. Concurrently, advancements in digital technology provide the necessary objective conditions: reduced storage costs and algorithmic recommendation systems render unrestrained hoarding convenient and feasible.

These three elements interact synergistically, progressively intensifying to jointly facilitate the emergence and proliferation of youth digital hoarding.

3.1 Individual Psychological Needs: Deficit of Security and Pursuit of Control

Individual psychological needs constitute the intrinsic core motivation behind young people's digital hoarding behaviour. Within a rapidly evolving digital society, youth confront multiple challenges including academic competition, career pressures, and social uncertainty. Accelerated life rhythms and an uncertain future have made a deficit of security a pervasive psychological state. Digital resources, functioning as ‘controllable virtual assets,’ offer psychological compensation for this insecurity: the vast storage of information creates a psychological hint of ‘being prepared for any eventuality.’ Young people perceive that hoarded resources may prove useful in future studies, work, or daily life, thereby alleviating anxiety and fear about the unknown. The hoarding of social data and emotional digital traces represents young people's defence against present uncertainties by preserving ‘past certainties.’ They view these digital traces as materialised carriers of emotional memories, seeking psychological solace through revisiting these digital recollections to fill emotional voids in reality.

Simultaneously, digital hoarding serves as a crucial avenue for young people to pursue a sense of control. In real life, they often confront numerous uncontrollable factors-such as the unpredictability of career development, the complexity and volatility of interpersonal relationships, and the rapid transformation of social environments-where this lack of control triggers psychological discomfort [6]. Within the digital realm, however, young people can autonomously decide on the collection, storage, and retention of digital resources. This autonomy, free from reliance on others and external constraints, provides absolute control over the digital environment. Such control effectively compensates for the lack of mastery in reality, yielding psychological satisfaction and a sense of accomplishment. Furthermore, some young people exhibit ‘perfectionist tendencies’ and ‘loss aversion psychology,’ believing that deleting any digital resource may result in ‘potential loss.’ They fear that they might need the resource at some future point and be unable to retrieve it. Consequently, they pursue a ‘foolproof’ state of perfection through the comprehensive hoarding of digital resources. This mindset further reinforces hoarding behaviour, establishing a ‘better to have too much than too little’ hoarding logic.

3.2 Sociocultural Context: Information Anxiety and Peer Pressure

The sociocultural environment serves as an external catalyst for youth digital hoarding. The current societal backdrop, characterised by both an ‘information explosion’ and the rise of ‘knowledge-as-a-service,’ has bred widespread ‘information anxiety.’ Media and public discourse relentlessly emphasise that ‘information is wealth’ and ‘knowledge changes destiny,’ linking information access directly to personal advancement [7]. This has plunged young people into ‘knowledge panic’ and ‘fear of missing out,’ fuelling anxieties about being left behind by the times or surpassed by others. knowledge changes destiny,‘ and ’failing to learn means falling behind.‘ This directly links information acquisition capabilities to personal development prospects, plunging young people into ’knowledge panic‘ and ’fear of missing out." They worry that missing crucial information will lead to being left behind by the times or surpassed by others. This anxiety drives young people to seek psychological reassurance through ‘massive information hoarding,’ fostering the erroneous belief that ‘hoarding equals mastery’ and ‘possession brings peace of mind.’ They equate information accumulation with self-improvement, thereby entering a cycle of unrestrained collection-convinced that greater resource accumulation enhances their competitiveness, leading to ever-expanding digital hoards while neglecting the practical utility of these resources.

Moreover, peer pressure significantly influences young people's digital hoarding behaviour. Youth groups exhibit strong social needs and a desire for collective belonging, where sharing and exchanging digital resources has become a vital means of social interaction and social capital for contemporary young people. Within youth-dominated social circles such as campuses and workplaces, ‘possessing abundant digital resources’ is perceived as a symbol of capability and social advantage. Some young people hoard scarce information, exclusive materials, and popular resources to gain peer recognition and envy, thereby enhancing their influence and presence within the group. Simultaneously, influenced by group conformity, when peers widely engage in digital hoarding and regard it as a normal lifestyle, young people internalise this as their own behavioural norm. They then actively or passively join the hoarding ranks to avoid group exclusion and gain a sense of belonging. For instance, among students, when peers share study materials or resources for postgraduate or civil service examinations, young people habitually save everything. In the workplace, colleagues sharing industry reports or work templates are saved even if not immediately needed - a practice that both maintains social relationships and represents a passive choice under peer pressure.

3.3 Digital Technology Enablement: Reduced Storage Costs and Algorithmic Recommendation Inducements

Advancements in digital technology have provided the objective conditions and technical underpinnings for young people's digital hoarding behaviour, serving as a significant catalyst for its emergence. On one hand, advances in digital storage technology have drastically reduced storage costs: the proliferation of cloud storage services like Baidu Cloud, Alibaba Cloud, and Tencent Weiyun enables young people to access substantial storage capacity at minimal or no cost. Simultaneously, the storage capacity of mobile phones and computers has surged from tens of gigabytes to several terabytes. This continuous expansion of electronic device storage alleviates concerns about insufficient space. This combination of ‘low cost’ and ‘high capacity’ has diminished young people's inclination to filter content and their

awareness of storage costs, making unrestrained hoarding feasible [8]. Since storage incurs negligible expense, there is little incentive to invest time and effort in sorting or clearing files, fostering a habit of 'saving everything on impulse and never deleting anything'.

Concurrently, algorithmic recommendation systems intensify this hoarding behaviour. Platforms like WeChat Official Accounts, Douyin, Xiaohongshu, and Zhihu analyse users' preferences, browsing histories, and bookmarking habits to continuously push tailored digital content, operating on a 'the more you like it, the more we push it' logic. This precision targeting continually stimulates young people's collecting urges, perpetually placing them in a state of 'having new resources to collect.' This creates a vicious cycle of 'recommendation - collection - hoarding.' Simultaneously, platform features like 'favouriting,' 'liking,' and 'downloading' are designed for one-click simplicity, lowering the operational threshold for hoarding and further reinforcing this habit. Moreover, the replicability and accessibility of digital resources enable young people to readily acquire shared content through channels like WeChat groups, Moments, and cloud storage links. This ease of access further normalises hoarding behaviour, allowing rapid accumulation of vast digital collections and driving continuous escalation of hoarding practices.

4. Guidance Strategies for Youth Digital Hoarding Behaviour

Given the complex causes of youth digital hoarding, guidance efforts must adopt a multi-dimensional, collaborative approach. The core foundation lies in addressing individual psychological factors: dismantling the cognitive misconceptions and psychological dilemmas underlying hoarding behaviour, thereby helping young people establish rational digital resource management principles. Building upon this, external safeguards for behavioural transformation should be provided by optimising the socio-cultural environment to foster a healthy digital lifestyle and establishing a multi-faceted support system. Concurrently, leveraging the positive influence of digital technology through enhanced product design and strengthened technical interventions can objectively guide young people towards cultivating sound digital habits. These three approaches, working in tandem yet each with distinct emphases, simultaneously address root causes while offering external support and technological safeguards, thereby forming a comprehensive guiding synergy.

4.1 Individual Psychological Adjustment: Strengthening Cognitive Reconstruction and Behavioural Management

Addressing the individual psychological roots of youth digital hoarding requires adjustment at both cognitive and behavioural levels to help young people establish rational digital resource management concepts. Regarding cognitive restructuring, young people should be guided to correctly understand the value of digital resources and the nature of hoarding behaviour. Through digital literacy education and mental health awareness campaigns, they should learn to distinguish between 'essential resources' and 'idle resources,' adopting resource management principles that prioritise 'quality over quantity' and 'use over ownership'[9]. This helps dismantle misconceptions such as 'hoarding equals security' and 'deletion equals loss.' Simultaneously, young people should be guided to confront underlying feelings of insecurity and control needs in real life, recognising that digital hoarding offers only temporary psychological compensation without addressing root causes. They should be encouraged to seek fulfilment through tangible social interactions, skill development, and cultivating interests, thereby reducing psychological dependence on digital resources. Furthermore, case studies and psychological counselling can help young people understand the potential harms of excessive digital hoarding, strengthening their intrinsic motivation to change behaviour.

Regarding behavioural management, cultivate scientifically sound digital resource management habits among young people: promote the concept of 'digital minimalism', guiding them to adopt the principles of 'collecting only what is needed, regularly clearing out, and utilising efficiently' in their digital lives to reduce meaningless resource accumulation; Encourage young people to establish a management mechanism of 'categorised storage - periodic clearance - precise retrieval'. This includes organising resources by type (academic, professional, personal, recreational), setting monthly or quarterly 'digital clearance days', and promptly deleting idle, duplicated, or worthless resources; Guide young people to adopt the 'collect only what is needed' principle, clarifying usage purposes and scenarios before gathering digital resources to avoid indiscriminate hoarding. For instance, plan study schedules before downloading learning materials, and preview core content before bookmarking articles to assess necessity; Simultaneously, establish a 'digital hoarding alert mechanism'-such as regularly reviewing storage usage, calculating idle resource ratios, and tracking the disparity between collected and utilised resources-to enable young people to monitor their behaviour in real time and promptly adjust hoarding tendencies. Furthermore, for young people exhibiting severe digital hoarding accompanied by significant psychological distress, professional psychological interventions such as mindfulness training and cognitive behavioural therapy can alleviate anxiety, cultivate rational decision-making abilities, and gradually free them from the burden of digital hoarding.

4.2 Optimising the Social Environment: Fostering a Healthy Digital Culture and Supportive Atmosphere

Enhancing the socio-cultural environment provides robust external support for guiding young people's digital hoarding behaviours. On one hand, a wholesome digital cultural ethos should be cultivated: media and public discourse must abandon the propagation of 'information anxiety,' avoiding excessive sensationalisation of 'knowledge panic' and 'fear of missing out'[10]. Instead, they should champion a digital lifestyle philosophy centred on 'rational collection, efficient utilisation, and measured streamlining,' guiding the public towards a correct understanding of digital resources' value and emphasising the quality rather than quantity of resource utilisation. Through public awareness campaigns, themed activities, and educational articles, disseminate knowledge about the potential harms of digital hoarding and

scientific resource management methods. This will heighten societal awareness and understanding of the phenomenon, reducing blind acceptance and imitation of such behaviour. Simultaneously, encourage role models across sectors to champion a ‘digital minimalism’ lifestyle. By sharing resource management expertise and demonstrating the advantages of a simplified digital existence, young people can be guided towards healthier digital habits.

On another front, a multifaceted social support system should be established: Schools should incorporate digital resource management into digital literacy curricula, designing tailored content for different age groups such as university students and young professionals. Through case studies, practical exercises, and group discussions, students should develop scientific digital resource management skills to prevent digital hoarding at its source. Businesses should enhance digital literacy training for employees, guiding young professionals to manage work-related digital resources efficiently, optimise workflows, and boost productivity. Concurrently, employers must monitor staff's digital wellbeing to prevent excessive digital hoarding stemming from workplace pressures. Families should observe young people's digital habits, using dialogue to understand the psychological motivations behind their digital behaviours. They should encourage a balance between digital and real-world engagement, promoting offline social interactions, physical exercise, and hobbies to reduce reliance on digital spaces. Furthermore, social organisations and psychological counselling institutions should be encouraged to conduct public welfare initiatives addressing digital hoarding. These should provide psychological counselling, behavioural guidance, and group support services to young people in need, forming a multi-stakeholder support network involving schools, families, enterprises, and society. This will provide comprehensive safeguards for guiding young people's digital hoarding behaviours.

4.3 Digital Technology Regulation: Optimising Platform Design and Technical Interventions

Leverage the positive impact of digital technology by employing technical regulations to guide young people towards rational digital resource management. Regarding platform design, optimise the functional settings of digital products to strengthen positive guidance: Content platforms may incorporate ‘resource value assessment’ features, offering young people filtering recommendations based on timeliness, utility, and relevance to aid judgement on whether resources warrant saving. Storage functionality should include ‘idle resource alerts,’ ‘storage capacity warnings,’ and ‘duplicate resource detection,’ prompting young people to clear unused, near-full, or duplicated content. Simultaneously, streamline resource deletion processes to lower psychological barriers to removal, such as introducing ‘batch deletion’ or ‘one-click clearance of idle resources’ to reduce hoarding driven by perceived deletion hassle. Additionally, incorporate a ‘digital hoarding health metric’ into platform interfaces, visually presenting data on resource collection, usage, and clearance to encourage awareness of personal hoarding tendencies.

Regarding technological interventions, artificial intelligence can enable precise guidance: algorithms analyse hoarding characteristics such as frequency, types, and proportion of idle resources to provide personalised resource management advice, including recommended clearing tools, optimised storage categorisation schemes, and resource utilisation techniques. Develop specialised digital resource management tools, such as intelligent classification software, idle resource identification systems, and digital resource organisation assistants, to help young people efficiently screen and organise digital resources while reducing management costs. Concurrently, strengthen regulations on algorithmic recommendation technologies, guiding platforms to fulfil their social responsibilities by optimising recommendation logic to reduce indiscriminate or excessive push notifications. This prevents overstimulation of young people's collecting urges through features like ‘push frequency limits’ and " interest diversity recommendations‘ to guide young people towards rational browsing and content collection. Furthermore, technological means can enhance the sharing efficiency and accessibility of digital resources by establishing unified resource-sharing platforms. This enables young people to swiftly obtain required resources, reducing hoarding behaviour driven by ’fears of resource scarcity.‘ Simultaneously, encouraging youth participation in resource sharing and secondary utilisation fosters a digital resource ecosystem characterised by ’on-demand access, efficient utilisation, and mutual sharing."

5. Conclusion

A research framework centred on young people's digital hoarding behaviour has been established, encompassing “behavioural definition, motivational analysis, and strategy formulation”. This framework identifies the behaviour's characteristics, including diverse and fragmented objects, and complex motivations. It manifests in three forms of accumulation: information resources, social data, and digital artefacts. The emergence of this behaviour results from the synergistic interaction of individual psychological needs, socio-cultural environments, and digital technology empowerment. The proposed guiding strategy-comprising individual psychological adaptation, social environment optimisation, and digital technology regulation-offers theoretical reference and practical guidance for fostering healthy digital lifestyles among youth and ensuring the sound operation of digital societies.

The study retains limitations, notably insufficient empirical support. Future research may explore behavioural variations across different groups, deepen analyses linking behaviour to mental health, and refine the precision of guidance strategies. This would provide more diverse references for constructing universal guidance models, thereby aiding responses to the emerging characteristics and challenges of this behaviour within the digitalisation process.

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