

# Gender Digital Divide and China's International Communication based on Cuban Women's Media Use

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## ABSTRACT

The Belt and Road Initiative has entered its tenth year of existence, and cooperation with Latin America has gradually deepened, with global initiatives pointing the way for developing countries. While international cooperation and exchanges have become closer, the idea of "equality" has always been highly valued, but it is important to point out that the gender digital divide still exists in countries in the middle of the Internet access level, which needs to be solved in order to better promote development. Cuba, as an important partner of China's Belt and Road initiative, has gender differences in media empowerment brought about by the digital divide, and the main factors affecting it are the underdeveloped local economic situation, insufficient infrastructure construction, and the segregation of dissemination of knowledge and access to information, etc. This paper mainly uses semi-structured interviews. In this paper, we use semi-structured interviews to explore Cuban women's media use and explain the specific manifestations and causes of the gender digital divide, so as to jointly promote the implementation of the "One Belt, One Road" Initiative, and provide development momentum for the realization of the concept of a community of shared destiny for humankind.

## KEYWORDS

Gender Digital Divide; International Communication; Cuba; Media Use.

## 1. THE GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDE AND INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION

### 1.1. ICT and the Gender Digital Divide

This study focuses on gender differences in Internet access and use among female residents of Cuba. ICT (Information Communication Technology), as an important technological tool for the development of communication, is seen as an important tool for connecting people and political institutions in developing countries, as it helps to connect people in developing countries to the outside world by means of access to the Internet through various media. However, even though ICT has worked to reach women in marginalized countries and regions, the women who have benefited from it are mainly middle class and highly educated women (Gray et al., 2016).

The concept of digital divide has been defined as the difference between or within countries and groups in terms of access to ICTs and lack of access to ICTs. The gender digital divide, as a refined branch of the digital divide, is essentially a specific reflection of the "digital divide" between male and female groups (Garcia, 2011).

While digital skills open the way for further learning, women continue to lag behind in the acquisition and use of digital skills. Literature and research indicate that women's access to and use of ICTs is

less prevalent and less capable than men's, and the gender digital divide continues to be a significant and important issue, reinforced by the UNICEF report *Bridging the Gender Digital Divide* released in 2023, which highlights the need to revisit the gender digital divide and to find policy responses to it.

## **1.2. Belt and Road Initiative and International Communication**

The Belt and Road concept was put forward by President Xi in 2013, with the aim of building a community of interests, destiny and responsibility based on mutual political trust, economic integration and cultural inclusion, relying on bilateral or multilateral mechanisms between China and the countries concerned, and on effective regional cooperation platforms. The foundation of the Belt and Road between China and Latin America has been in place for 10 years, and the heat of cooperation continues to rise, with Latin America becoming an indispensable participant in China's "Belt and Road" construction process (Montoya & Delgado, 2019; Jenkins, 2022). The pace of China's investment in the construction of Latin American countries is also accelerating.

Current international communication research on the Belt and Road theme focuses on three main areas: first, developing existing basic theories, formulating strategies for the innovative development of international communication, and advocating diversified international cooperation in order to develop "international communication" programmes with Chinese characteristics (Huang, 2016; Costa, 2020; Chen, 2021). Secondly, through foreign media reports, we analyse the feedback of public opinion in different countries, as well as the strategies and shortcomings of China's external communication through traditional media or social media reports on China's international communication (Kuteleva, 2023; Abbasi, Huang & Rao, 2021; Cao & Qiaoan, 2023). Thirdly, we formulate national communication strategies through representative works or large-scale events, such as films, Asian Games, traditional Chinese sports, etc (Ye & Starkey, 2018; Ke, Maharam & Yahaya, 2021).

However, most of these paths to reach out are considered from the perspective of the transmitter, rather than from the audience's perspective of how they receive and understand the content. This paper focuses on Cuban women's use of the media and seeks to find innovative ways of international communication through the Belt and Road approach to enhancing cooperation.

## **2. RESEARCH METHODS**

The present study has conducted a qualitative analysis methodology of the local Cuban population. Therefore, this study chose to seek answers through in-depth interviews, using a semi-structured approach to formulate the outline of the interviews, which provided space for open-ended ideas and expressions from the interviewees. The outline focuses on basic personal background information (gender, age, education level, area of residence, occupation and number of children), and the open-ended questions are centered on the themes of access to and use of ICT technologies in the media and perception and experience of media use. This paper focuses on a semi-structured interview approach to research, with in-depth interviews with seven women and three men in Cuba. Conducted between July to August in 2023, the interviews lasted between 45 and 65 minutes. Due to time and other objective constraints, the interviews were mainly conducted remotely, using Zoom as the main interview channel. The interviews were conducted in Spanish and English.

This paper adopts semi-structured interviews, which mainly contain three aspects: firstly, the basic information of the interviewer, secondly, the media usage, including the type, frequency and preference of the interviewee's media usage, and thirdly, the gains and difficulties in the process of media usage.

### **3. GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDE IN CUBA**

#### **3.1. Differences in Types of Media**

The most frequently used medium mentioned among the respondents was mobile phones, followed by television.

Television is a common medium in Cuban homes, and it is the one most often used in the home, as people like to sit in front of the sofa and watch it together.

On the one hand, the fact that Spanish is the lingua franca of Cuba and that local television channels are broadcast in Spanish means that there is no language barrier for the local population, making television a medium that women use more frequently; on the other hand, television's ease of use, entertainment and cost-effectiveness make it more attractive than radio and newspapers. Firstly, access to television does not require the purchase of smartphone-like traffic packages, which means that there is no ongoing monthly expense; secondly, the audio-visual medium provides more sensory stimulation than paper or auditory media, and Cuban women watch television dramas for recreational purposes.

Cell phones are becoming more and more popular among the Cuban population, but the interviews revealed that the popularity of this medium is still increasing.

The mobile phone is a media that has not been around for very long, and some Cuban women do not even have a smartphone, but rather a "phone" that only has the ability to make calls and send text messages (Jonnathan).

#### **3.2. Differences in Media Functions and Needs**

##### **3.2.1. Limitations of Economic Conditions**

Although the interviewees were positive about the high frequency of cell phone use during the interviews, they also mentioned that many Cubans currently own cell phones that are not touch-screen smartphones, but only phones with calling and texting capabilities. Because cell phones have different price points locally, with smartphones being more expensive, people choose to have cell phones with basic texting and calling capabilities because they are relatively inexpensive.

In addition, its high network costs make accessing the internet a costly affair. Local residents purchase network cards for mobile internet access, which basically takes up anywhere from 20-50% of a month's salary or living expenses.

##### **3.2.2. Limitation of Infrastructure**

According to the accounts of the interviewees, although there is Internet access in Cuba today, the network does not have full coverage and most cell phones have Internet access at the 3G level. After going out, one needs to access the Internet in areas with Wi-Fi coverage; only a few Cubans have Wi-Fi in their homes, and utilizing a router for Wi-Fi access is an extreme luxury. Many people have problems with weak signals and slow Internet speeds when they are out and about. A number of interviewees also mentioned that the Internet is sometimes affected by weather-related disasters (e.g., typhoons), which can lead to problems such as inability to use the Internet.

##### **3.2.3. Resistance to Media Use**

A number of interviewees mentioned that there was a period of psychological construction encountered during the initial use of cell phones, and there were even some female interviewees who had been using smartphones for no more than 2 years. Because of their unfamiliarity with new things, they were unable to accept and adapt to them. In the process of learning, the complexity of smartphone functions also made the learning process slow, and one respondent even gave up for a period of time

after purchasing a cell phone and realizing that she was often unable to master it. At the same time, some women also mentioned that they did not have time to use it because they were too busy with household chores or studies, as it took a long time and the time cost was too high.

### **3.3. Women's Digital Visions: Rewards and Problems at the Same Time**

Although communication technologies have not yet reached the desired level of development in Cuba, emerging elements such as the Internet and social media have had a positive impact on women in the region.

Firstly, it promotes solidarity among women. The use of social media has enabled them to communicate with people from different countries. Yoh, the interviewee, mentioned that she joins women's groups on social media platforms, where women's topics are discussed, others share gender inequality issues they encounter in the workplace or in their lives, or things that cause them distress, and the group discusses the issue and seeks solutions. In this aspect, one can see the difficulties that women are currently experiencing and the opportunities that the Internet brings for women to unite and help each other. Yoh believes that "on social platforms, these issues will be taken seriously, and I'm sure that on the Internet, these issues will be noticed by more people".

Secondly, it helps women to access information and improve their economic income. Maura, a student at the Confucius Institute at the University of Havana, talks about her most frequent function of using her smartphone is to access information for her studies. Her coursework requires her to look up information through the Internet, as well as some Chinese characters she doesn't recognize. "The cell phone improves my study efficiency in this respect, I can look up information anytime and anywhere". Another interviewee, Sheila, a psychology student at the University of Havana, mentioned that her family is not rich, but she uses her cell phone to trade on the Internet, "you need to set up groups through social media, and advertise your goods by messaging them, the prices are opaque, and buyers who need them will ask in a private message, and then you can agree on a location to trade on the site to make the transaction", she says she is earning extra money to live on and hopes to achieve financial independence soon.

Thirdly, it creates an emotional connection that transcends space and fulfills social needs. Some women mentioned that their family members are not in the same place as they are and that they can connect with them through video calls to enhance their relationship. Yoh mentioned that she enjoys making friends and that she socializes and chats with others through the Whatsapp software, which she finds very convenient, and meets very chatty people who can provide her with emotional value. However, she also mentioned some gender issues in social media platforms, "they [some of the males] would fake personal information, especially pretending to be girls to chat with me, and even send me their pictures without asking, which made me feel very uncomfortable". Therefore, there are some drawbacks of social media platforms and the socialization problems faced by women as well as privacy issues need to be further addressed.

## **4. INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION PATH OF BELT AND ROAD**

There is still much room for improvement in the use of the digital media in Cuba, and the gender digital divide between men and women does exist and has not developed overnight. It can be seen in traditional media such as paper. With the development of information technology, media such as smart phones will widen the gap.

At the same time, the digital divide for Cuban women is characterized by a lack of infrastructure; on the one hand, the high economic cost makes them prefer inexpensive cell phones, and on the other hand, the slow speed of the Internet prevents them from experiencing the convenience of a smartphone. After the interviews, all the respondents were asked to indicate that they would like to see the government or the country optimize its infrastructure. At the same time, China and Cuba, as

partners in the Belt and Road, should see this as an opportunity to work together and increase their construction and investment in infrastructure after signing the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). Specifically, the following measures are envisioned to be taken forward for implementation.

#### **4.1. Strengthening Information Infrastructure to Benefit Local Women**

According to the interviews and analyses conducted for this study, Cuba still suffers from inadequate infrastructure, including a lack of stable communication signals, low communication prices and easy access to the Internet. These can be an obstacle to social and economic development, as well as exacerbating the digital divide for local women.

The Belt and Road cooperation, with infrastructure development as the direction of development, can be targeted to promote the development of Cuban women, and can also improve the development imbalance between countries or regions. At the same time, the initial success of the previous construction of our head communication companies in Cuba has promoted the media iteration of the Cuban people, and it is all the more important to deepen the cooperation and pay attention to how to reduce the cost of media use for the local population, and the maintenance of local communication hardware facilities.

#### **4.2. Collaboration with Local Media for Economic Empowerment**

The financial situation of women is also an issue that was frequently mentioned in the interviews, and is also one of the important factors in the development of local women. China's digital media development has a lot of experience to draw on in this regard, and in this regard, exchanges and cooperation between China's digital media experience and local media could be developed. Television, a popular medium in Cuba, could create special programmes to focus on people's livelihoods and enhance the dissemination of information and knowledge, and digital e-commerce platforms could be established to set up unified channels for transactions and expand the number of people who use them, as well as "live streaming" to promote the industrial chain and enhance women's economic independence.

#### **4.3. Universal Education to Enhance Media Literacy**

The low level of education among the interviewees directly contributes to their rejection of and resistance to the use of the media. Through education and popularisation activities, such as public lectures on the use of the media and sharing of teaching experience, knowledge and ideas can be disseminated to the general public, and compulsory education can be vigorously developed so that more women can have access to learning opportunities.

### **5. CONCLUSION**

The gender digital divide is a problem that is the result of a combination of historical factors, cultural factors and social realities, and it hinders social development and progress. It was therefore imperative to strengthen international cooperation and to launch a positive, long-term response in all areas and on all fronts. With the Belt and Road Initiative, China is promoting the building of a global community of human destiny and providing solutions for developing countries. This not only contributes to global common development, but is also part and parcel of building a "credible, lovely and honourable China".

The problem of the gender digital divide faced by Cuban women stems mainly from the current situation of local economic underdevelopment and female inequality. In order to solve this problem, the spread of information infrastructure is an important part of the solution, and education and the development of the digital economy are also key contributors. This is what China's international

communication should look for, that is, to realise the goals of the Belt and Road and the Community of Human Destinies through local women's development.

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