

Action Paths for the Social Participation of People with Disabilities under Digital Empowerment: A Study Based on Group Work Intervention

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of the digital social transformation, digital technology has emerged as a crucial medium for individuals with disabilities to overcome physical limitations and expand their social participation. However, the digital divide and social exclusion continue to impede their participation effectiveness. This paper adopts group work as an intervention approach. By constructing an intervention framework centered around technology adaptation, capacity enhancement, social support, and participation empowerment, and integrating the current digital literacy status and social participation needs of individuals with disabilities, it explores the practical pathways of group work in bridging the digital divide and stimulating participation motivation. The research reveals that through mechanisms such as peer assistance, situational simulation, and empowerment, group work can effectively improve the digital skills of individuals with disabilities, build supportive networks, and promote their in-depth transformation from digital inclusion to social participation, thus providing practical references for the innovation of social work services for individuals with disabilities in the digital age.

Keywords

Digital empowerment; individuals with disabilities; social participation; action pathways; group work.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

As digital technology pervasively penetrates social life, digital scenarios such as intelligent services and online platforms have become core arenas for social participation, offering new possibilities for people with disabilities to transcend physical limitations and participate equally in society. The "14th Five-Year Plan for Disability Protection and Development" explicitly proposes to "strengthen digital literacy and skills training for persons with disabilities to help them better adapt to the development of the information society", highlighting the policy orientation of digitally empowering the social participation of people with disabilities. The "Overall Layout Plan for the Development of Digital China" issued by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council also emphasizes the need to consider the needs of special groups and promote the inclusive and universal benefit of digital services. However, due to factors such as physiological dysfunction, lack of digital skills, and insufficient support systems, people with disabilities face a digital dilemma of "not knowing how to use, not daring to use, and not using well." The digital divide further exacerbates their social marginalization, restricting their equal participation in fields such as education, employment,

and social interaction. According to the "Statistical Bulletin on the Development of the Work for Persons with Disabilities in China 2024" released by the China Disabled Persons' Federation, the digital skills mastery rate among people with disabilities in China remains significantly lower than that of the non-disabled population, with only a minority able to achieve deep social participation through digital platforms.

Social work, as a professional practice centered on empowerment and social support, holds inherent advantages in services for people with disabilities. Group work, with its unique value of peer support, interactive learning, and collective empowerment, has become an effective vehicle for enhancing the digital literacy of people with disabilities and activating their motivation for social participation. Domestic communities have already carried out disability inclusion practices using group work models, proving this method's significant effectiveness in improving the social skills of people with disabilities and strengthening their social support networks. Based on this, this paper focuses on the perspective of group work intervention to explore action paths for the social participation of people with disabilities under digital empowerment, providing professional solutions for solving the digital inclusion dilemma of people with disabilities and promoting their equal social participation.

1.2. Research Significance

1.2.1. Theoretical Significance

This research enriches the interdisciplinary study of digital social work and disability services, constructs a theoretical framework for group work intervention in the digital empowerment of people with disabilities, expands the application boundaries of social work in digital social governance, and provides a new professional perspective for research on the social participation of people with disabilities. Existing research on the mechanisms and practical models of group work in promoting the social inclusion of people with disabilities still requires further development. This study can further deepen theoretical understanding in this field.

1.2.2. Practical Significance

Through group work intervention practices, this research aims to form replicable and scalable models for enhancing the digital skills and empowering the social participation of people with disabilities. This will help bridge the digital divide, improve the quality of social participation for people with disabilities, and promote their higher-level social inclusion in the digital age. This practical exploration can also provide specific guidance for community workers carrying out services for disabled persons, optimize resource allocation, and improve the targeting and effectiveness of services.

1.3. Literature Review

1.3.1. International Research Status

International research on the digital empowerment of people with disabilities started earlier, focusing on the role of digital technology in improving their quality of life and emphasizing the combination of technological adaptability and humanistic care. In terms of intervention methods, emphasis is placed on peer learning in group formats and community support. By establishing digital mutual aid groups and skills training workshops, researchers aim to enhance the digital capabilities of people with disabilities and promote their social participation. For example, the United States has established inclusive education groups for children with intellectual disabilities, enhancing their social confidence and learning abilities through interaction with non-disabled children; community employment support groups in the UK provide one-stop employment services for people with disabilities, significantly improving employment stability. Concurrently, research focuses on digital ethics and rights protection. The "World Report on Disability and Digital Inclusion" published by the World Health Organization emphasizes the need to eliminate barriers to digital participation for people with

disabilities through technological innovation and policy guarantees; the United Nations, in its report "Disability Inclusion in the Digital Transformation," proposed building a full-chain digital support system. Furthermore, research targeting specific types of disabilities is more in-depth. For instance, Fels D I explored the acceptability of emotional subtitles in sign language, providing a technical reference for digital information access for the deaf and hard of hearing; Dobransky K et al. focused on the information-seeking behavior of deaf and hard of hearing individuals, analyzing the impact of the digital environment on their social participation.

1.3.2. Domestic Research Status

Domestic research primarily focuses on describing the current situation and analyzing the causes of the digital divide among people with disabilities, discussing policy recommendations and technical countermeasures for improving digital literacy. However, there is a lack of empirical research on social work intervention, especially exploratory studies on action paths from the perspective of group work. Yang Caiyun pointed out that the current inadequate accessibility adaptation of digital government affairs restricts the service access and social participation of disabled groups, necessitating the construction of targeted service mechanisms; Xie Yuhong et al., through a study on rural employment service projects for disabled persons, emphasized the importance of skills training and resource linkage for their social participation but did not address digital empowerment scenarios. Although Zhang Zengjie et al.'s research explored paths for social work intervention in improving the digital literacy of disabled persons, their analysis of the specific operational models and mechanisms of group work was not sufficiently in-depth. Overall, existing research tends to focus on macro-level governance strategies, with insufficient attention paid to micro-level professional service models. This fails to fully leverage the professional advantages of social work in empowerment and support network construction, making it difficult to effectively solve the practical dilemmas of digital inclusion and social participation for people with disabilities.

1.4. Research Approach and Methods

1.4.1. Research Approach

This paper takes the core contradiction between digital empowerment and social participation of people with disabilities as its starting point. It reviews the current situation and dilemmas of social participation for people with disabilities in the digital age. Based on group work theory and empowerment theory, it constructs a group work intervention framework. Through empirical intervention practice, it analyzes the intervention effects and mechanisms of action, ultimately refining the action paths for the social participation of people with disabilities under digital empowerment.

1.4.2. Research Methods

- a) Literature Review Method: Systematically reviews relevant literature on digital empowerment, social participation of people with disabilities, and group work intervention, including policy documents, academic papers, and research reports, laying a theoretical foundation.
- b) Empirical Research Method: Selects people with disabilities from a certain community as research subjects, conducts group work intervention practice, and collects data through observation, interviews, and questionnaires to evaluate intervention effects.
- c) Case Analysis Method: Draws on the practical experience of group work disability inclusion in Lanhu Community, Ezhou, conducting in-depth analysis of typical cases to refine replicable practice models.

2. Core Concept Definition and Theoretical Basis

2.1. Definition of Core Concepts

2.1.1. Digital Empowerment

Digital empowerment refers to the process of enhancing the capability level of individuals or groups, expanding their action space and development opportunities, and achieving individual development and social inclusion through the application of digital technology. In this paper, digital empowerment specifically refers to helping people with disabilities overcome physiological and social limitations, enhance their adaptability and applicability in digital scenarios, and thereby promote social participation through methods such as digital skills training, digital tool adaptation, and digital support network construction. This aligns with the connotation of digital empowerment proposed in the "Report on the Development of Digital Accessibility for Disabled Groups (2024)" by the China Academy of Information and Communications Technology.

2.1.2. Social Participation of People with Disabilities

Social participation of people with disabilities refers to their equal participation in various areas of social life, including education and learning, employment and entrepreneurship, social interaction, and public affairs. It is a core manifestation of their equal rights and realization of self-worth, and also a key indicator for measuring the degree of social inclusion of people with disabilities. This conforms to the definition of the development rights of people with disabilities in the national standard "Classification and Grading Criteria of Disability".

2.1.3. Group Work Intervention

Group work is one of the core methods of social work. It involves forming groups of individuals with common needs and helping members enhance their abilities, solve problems, and promote development through group interaction, peer support, and professional guidance. In this paper, group work intervention focuses on enhancing the digital skills and empowering the social participation of people with disabilities, achieving empowerment goals through structured group activities. Its operational logic aligns with the values and practice norms of the social work profession.

2.2. Theoretical Basis

2.2.1. Empowerment Theory

Empowerment theory posits that an individual's difficulties stem from power deprivation and capability deficiency. The core of social work is to stimulate individual potential, enhance self-efficacy, and help them gain the ability and resources to change their situation through professional intervention. In the digital empowerment of people with disabilities, empowerment theory emphasizes improving their digital application abilities and social participation confidence through skills training, psychological support, and resource linkage, facilitating a transformation from passively receiving help to actively participating. This process must consider the enhancement of power at the individual, interpersonal, and environmental levels.

2.2.2. Social Support Theory

Social support theory indicates that individual development and adaptation are inseparable from the support of social networks. Good social support can effectively alleviate difficulties and improve well-being. In the process of digital empowerment and social participation for people with disabilities, support networks composed of family, peers, community, and professional institutions can provide technical guidance, emotional support, resource matching, and other services, helping them overcome digital difficulties and integrate into social life. Group work is precisely an effective means to build and strengthen the social support network

for people with disabilities. The emotional support and information sharing among group members can significantly improve their state of isolation.

2.2.3. Symbolic Interaction Theory

Symbolic interaction theory emphasizes that individuals construct self-cognition and social relationships through interaction with others. The group, as an interactive setting, can promote mutual understanding and support among members, fostering positive self-cognition. In digital empowerment groups, people with disabilities share experiences and exchange insights through peer interaction, gradually overcoming digital anxiety, enhancing confidence in digital application, and thereby expanding the interactive space for social participation. This aligns with the practical logic of group work based on social learning theory abroad.

3. Current Situation and Dilemmas of Social Participation of People with Disabilities under Digital Empowerment

3.1. Analysis of the Current Situation

Currently, some progress has been made in the digital empowerment and social participation of people with disabilities. Some individuals have achieved online learning, remote employment, and social networking through digital technology, with digital tools becoming an important bridge connecting them to society. Typical cases of digital products and services suitable for the elderly and disabled promoted by the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology and five other departments also show that adaptive digital technology can effectively improve the quality of life and participation ability of people with disabilities. However, overall, the level of digital inclusion for people with disabilities remains low, and the degree of social participation is insufficient: Most people with disabilities have weak digital skills, only capable of basic communication operations, and find it difficult to use digital platforms for deep social activities like education and employment; the accessibility adaptation of digital services is inadequate, such as web pages lacking screen reader functionality for visually impaired individuals and a lack of video subtitles for hearing-impaired individuals, restricting their digital participation; the support system for digital participation of people with disabilities is imperfect, lacking professional skills training and continuous technical support, making it difficult for them to sustain participation in digital scenarios and social life. The report from the China Academy of Information and Communications Technology points out that the construction of digital accessibility for disabled groups in China still faces issues like regional imbalance and imprecise technology adaptation, affecting the actual effect of digital empowerment.

3.2. Core Dilemmas

3.2.1. Digital Skills Gap: Insufficient Capability Hinders Participation Foundation

People with disabilities face greater difficulty learning digital skills due to physiological obstacles. Coupled with a lack of targeted training, their digital literacy is generally low. They struggle to use digital tools proficiently and cannot effectively utilize digital resources to participate in social activities, creating a capability dilemma of "not knowing how to use." Research by Philip S et al. also found significant shortcomings in digital skills like computer operation among people with disabilities, a problem more pronounced among middle-aged and older disabled groups.

3.2.2. Psychological Cognitive Barriers: Anxiety and Fear Hinder Participation Motivation

Some people with disabilities, having long been on the social periphery, experience feelings of inferiority and timidity. They develop fear and resistance towards digital technology, worrying

about operational errors or being ridiculed by others, and lack confidence in digital participation, falling into a psychological dilemma of "not daring to use." This psychological barrier is particularly evident in social participation, leading people with disabilities, even those with basic digital skills, to be unwilling to actively participate in online social interactions and public affairs discussions.

3.2.3. Lack of Support System: Insufficient Resources Limit Participation Effectiveness

The digital participation of people with disabilities lacks a comprehensive support network. Inadequate family support, absent community services, and limited professional institution involvement mean they do not receive timely help with digital skills improvement or technical problem-solving. Even if they master basic skills, they struggle to apply them consistently, facing a resource dilemma of "not using well." Although China has established institutions like the Joint Innovation Lab for Accessibility, recruiting disabled representatives to participate in digital product R&D, a normalized support mechanism has not yet been fully established nationwide.

3.2.4. Digital Environmental Barriers: Inadequate Accessibility Affects Participation Equality

The accessibility design of existing digital platforms and services lags behind, failing to fully consider the physiological characteristics of people with disabilities. Lack of functions like voice navigation, large-text modes, and sign language interpretation means people with disabilities encounter barriers in digital scenarios, hindering their equal enjoyment of digital dividends. While the "Three-Year Action Plan for Promoting Employment of Persons with Disabilities (2025-2027)" emphasizes improving the digital environment for employment and entrepreneurship of people with disabilities, policy guarantees in other participation areas like education and social interaction still need strengthening.

4. Practical Framework for Group Work Intervention in Digitally Empowering Social Participation of People with Disabilities

4.1. Intervention Goals

4.1.1. Short-term Goals: Enhance Digital Skills, Alleviate Psychological Anxiety

Through group activities, help participants master basic digital skills, become familiar with common digital platform operations, overcome digital fear, and enhance confidence in digital participation.

4.1.2. Medium-term Goals: Build Support Networks, Promote Digital Inclusion

Rely on the group to form peer support networks, link resources from families, communities, and enterprises, provide continuous technical support and emotional care for participants, and encourage their active engagement in digital scenarios.

4.1.3. Long-term Goals: Activate Participation Motivation, Achieve Social Inclusion

Through empowerment, enhance participants' awareness and ability for social participation, promote their equal involvement in education, employment, social interaction, and other areas of social life, realize self-worth, and achieve social inclusion. This aligns with the legislative spirit of the "Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Persons with Disabilities" guaranteeing their right to equal development.

4.2. Intervention Objects and Group Formation

4.2.1. Intervention Objects

Select 15-20 people with disabilities aged 18-60, possessing basic communication skills, experiencing difficulties with digital use, and having a willingness to participate socially. The

selection should cover different types of disabilities, including physical, visual, and hearing impairments, to ensure sample representativeness, referencing the object screening criteria used in the Lanhu Community, Ezhou group work.

4.2.2. Group Formation

Form groups using a combination of homogeneity and heterogeneity: homogeneity lies in members all facing digital difficulties and social participation needs; heterogeneity lies in disability type, age, educational background, etc., to promote group interaction and resource complementarity. The group is named the "Digital Peer-Inclusive Life" Empowerment Group. The cycle lasts 8 weeks, with activities held once a week for 90 minutes each.

4.3. Intervention Content and Steps

4.3.1. Ice-breaking and Needs Assessment Phase (Weeks 1-2)

Conduct ice-breaking games, self-introductions, etc., to eliminate unfamiliarity and build trust among members. Use questionnaires, group discussions, etc., to comprehensively understand members' digital skill levels, learning needs, and social participation expectations, clarifying intervention priorities. This process conforms to the needs assessment norms of social work practice.

4.3.2. Digital Skills Enhancement Phase (Weeks 3-5)

Conduct basic skills training: Provide adaptive training for different disability types, such as explaining screen reader usage for visually impaired participants and providing guidance on video subtitles for hearing-impaired participants, helping them master basic skills like communication, payment, and information inquiry, drawing on the adaptability design concepts of digital products suitable for the elderly and disabled. Conduct scenario-based practice: Set up simulated scenarios like online shopping, medical appointment booking, and remote learning, organizing members for hands-on practice. Use peer assistance and social worker guidance to solve operational problems. Organize experience sharing sessions: Encourage members to share learning insights and success stories, enhancing learning confidence and forming a mutual assistance atmosphere, aligning with the practical logic of social learning theory.

4.3.3. Social Support Construction Phase (Weeks 6-7)

Conduct family linkage activities: Invite members' family members to participate in sessions, explaining the importance of digital technology for the social participation of people with disabilities, guiding families to provide support at home, and building a dual support network of the group and family. Facilitate resource linkage: Invite community workers, digital platform volunteers, disabled entrepreneurs/employees, etc., to join the group, providing members with continuous technical support, employment information, social resources, etc., expanding participation channels, referencing the resource integration model of UK community employment support groups.

4.3.4. Participation Empowerment and Summary Phase (Week 8)

Conduct achievement presentation and feedback: Organize members to demonstrate their digital skills application achievements, such as sharing online social activities they participated in or learning outcomes, reinforcing their sense of accomplishment. Develop individual action plans: Guide members to formulate plans for digital skills improvement and social participation based on their own needs, clarifying future participation directions. Conduct group summary and continuation: Help members review the group process, consolidate intervention effects, and establish a member WeChat mutual aid group to ensure the continuity of the support network.

4.4. Intervention Evaluation

4.4.1. Process Evaluation

Evaluate by observing group activity participation, member interaction, skill mastery progress, etc., adjusting intervention strategies promptly to ensure activity effectiveness, employing process evaluation methods common in group work.

4.4.2. Outcome Evaluation

Use questionnaires and interviews to compare changes in members' digital skill levels, social participation willingness, self-efficacy, and other indicators before and after the intervention, assessing intervention effectiveness. Collect feedback from members, families, and the community to summarize practical experience.

5. Practical Effects of Group Work Intervention and Refinement of Action Paths

5.1. Practical Effects

5.1.1. Significant Improvement in Digital Skills

Through systematic training and practical guidance, participants made remarkable progress in applying digital tools. They not only became proficient in operating common software such as WeChat, Alipay, and government service apps but also could independently complete various digital life services like online information retrieval, social media interaction, utility bill payment, medical registration, and transportation booking. The overall digital literacy of the participants was effectively cultivated, successfully crossing the first hurdle of the digital divide and solving the fundamental problem of "not knowing how to use." This practical outcome aligns with the empirical research findings of scholars like Zhang Zengjie, who concluded that systematic training can effectively enhance the digital capabilities of specific groups.

5.1.2. Psychological Empowerment Path: Peer Support and Successful Experiences

This path leverages the unique advantages of group work to establish peer support mechanisms, creating a safe, inclusive, and mutually accepting learning atmosphere among members. In this atmosphere, members freely exchange difficulties encountered in learning and experiences overcoming them, gaining not only practical problem-solving methods but also valuable emotional resonance and support, effectively alleviating the anxiety and isolation caused by unfamiliarity with digital technology. Simultaneously, the project intentionally builds low-threshold platforms for achievement presentation and encouragement, allowing each participant to gain visible sense of achievement and self-efficacy through gradual practice. This self-confidence, nurtured by both external supportive environment and internal successful experiences, successfully activates the intrinsic motivation of people with disabilities to actively explore and utilize digital technology for social participation. This process vividly embodies the logic of symbolic interaction theory, where individual self-cognition and behavioral motivation are continuously constructed and reinforced through meaningful interaction with others and positive feedback.

5.1.3. Support Network Path: Multi-Actor Linkage and Continuous Support

To ensure the effects of digital empowerment can be maintained and deepened over the long term, this path constructs a social support network that extends beyond the training itself, covering multiple levels. This network systematically integrates resources and strengths from different actors: within the group, providing immediate and equal peer support; at the family level, encouraging members to become digital partners, offering daily encouragement and assistance; at the community level, linking with community service centers, libraries, and other public spaces to provide convenient digital equipment and localized support; at the

professional level, involving social workers, rehabilitation therapists, information technology experts, etc., to provide professional guarantees for solving complex technical problems and specific needs. This multi-actor linked network can provide people with disabilities with comprehensive, three-dimensional services ranging from immediate technical guidance and continuous emotional care to extensive resource connection, thus solving persistent problems that may arise during digital inclusion, such as forgetting learned skills or having no one to ask for help, providing a solid and sustainable guarantee for their digital empowerment and social participation.

5.1.4. Participation Upgrade Path: From Digital Inclusion to Social Participation

Using digital inclusion as an entry point, this path gradually expands the social participation scenarios of people with disabilities in a planned manner. Participants are encouraged to apply their digital capabilities from basic social chatting and information browsing to broader fields: for example, participating in digital literacy improvement or interest courses through online education platforms to achieve educational participation; using recruitment websites and remote office software to seek employment opportunities or achieve flexible employment to achieve economic participation; providing feedback on livelihood issues and participating in online community discussions through government service platforms to achieve participation in public affairs. This process realizes a qualitative leap from tool use to social connection, promoting a virtuous cycle where digital empowerment and social participation mutually reinforce and develop synergistically. The ultimate orientation of this path perfectly aligns with the fundamental principle of inclusive and universal benefit emphasized in the Digital China development strategy, which aims to promote digital technology serving social development and ensure that the achievements of the digital civilization better benefit all people, especially vulnerable groups.

6. Conclusion and Outlook

6.1. Research Conclusion

This paper, from the perspective of group work intervention, explored the action paths for the social participation of people with disabilities under digital empowerment. The research shows that group work, through mechanisms such as precision skills training, peer support, and multi-actor linkage, can effectively bridge the digital divide for people with disabilities, alleviate psychological barriers, build support networks, and promote their in-depth transformation from digital inclusion to social participation. The adopted four-dimensional action path of skills empowerment, psychological empowerment, support network, and participation upgrade provides a feasible solution for social work services for people with disabilities in the digital age, highlighting the professional value of social work in the digital empowerment and social participation of people with disabilities. This conclusion not only validates the effectiveness of group work methods in disability services but also responds to the national policy requirements for digital inclusion and the development of disabled groups.

6.2. Research Limitations and Outlook

The sample size of this study is limited, the intervention period is relatively short, and long-term effects require further follow-up evaluation. The needs of different types of people with disabilities vary greatly, and the targeting of intervention plans still needs optimization, sharing commonalities with existing research regarding insufficient innovation and precision in group work models. Insufficient attention was paid to macro-level factors such as digital platform accessibility construction and policy support, failing to form a complete system integrating micro-intervention, meso-support, and macro-guarantee.

Future research could expand the sample range, extend the follow-up period, and deepen research on differentiated interventions for various types of people with disabilities. Strengthen collaboration with digital platforms and government departments to promote the construction of accessible digital environments and policy improvement, constructing a diversified and collaborative digital empowerment system, echoing the development concept of the Joint Innovation Lab for Accessibility. Further expand social work intervention methods, combining case work, community work, and social work administration, to form a comprehensive, multi-level support system for the social participation of people with disabilities, assisting them in achieving higher-quality social inclusion in the digital age.

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