

Science, Strategy, and Critique in Mediatized Health Communication: A Review of the 2nd Panel Session at MHM 2026

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Abstract

The second panel session of the 9th International Academic Conference on Medicine, Humanity and Media and Doctoral Symposium took place on the afternoon of 18 July 2026 at the School of Journalism and Communication, Peking University. The session was titled Health Communication in the Age of Mediatization: Science, Strategy and Critique (Part I). RUI Jian, Professor at the School of Journalism and Communications, South China University of Technology, chaired the session. YANG Zheng, Associate Professor at the School of Communication, Suzhou University, co-chaired the session. Both also served as discussants. Five studies examined trust in generative artificial intelligence (AI) for health, popularity cues and message framing in women's exercise intentions, and puffery in short videos on traditional Chinese medicine. They also addressed temporally differentiated threat appeals and expectant fathers' support for breastfeeding, as well as the visual design of AI-doctor interfaces for older users. The commentary converged on parsimony in model specification, experimental-stimulus construction, the interpretability of engagement indicators, and the incorporation of contextual particularity into theoretical explanation. The open discussion distinguished phenomenon-driven from theory-driven research. This distinction bears directly on how locally grounded scholarship can generate propositions that travel beyond the immediate case.

Keywords: health communication; mediatization; generative artificial intelligence; threat appeals; theory-driven research

Introduction

Mediatization has reorganised the conditions under which health knowledge circulates. Recommendation algorithms, short-video platforms, conversational AI systems, and the visual grammar of interfaces now mediate between institutional expertise and lay publics. They do so in ways that are neither uniformly enabling nor uniformly distorting. Research in this field therefore carries a double obligation. It must describe emerging communicative practices with methodological precision and explain them in terms that hold beyond the immediate case. The second panel session of MHM 2026 was organised around this tension, which recurred throughout the exchange between presenters and discussants.

The session took place on the afternoon of 18 July 2026 in Lecture Hall 113 at the School of Journalism and Communication, Peking University. Its theme was Health Communication in the Age of Mediatization: Science, Strategy and Critique (Part I). RUI Jian, Professor at the School

of Journalism and Communications, South China University of Technology, and YANG Zheng, Associate Professor at the School of Communication, Suzhou University, served as panel chairs and discussants. Presentations were delivered by Jörg Matthes of the University of Vienna, XIANG Xinchun of Wuhan University, Wanqing Wang of the University of Macau, LIU Jiaqi of the University of California, Santa Barbara, and ZHANG Wanting of South China Normal University.

Trust in generative artificial intelligence for health in Austria and Japan

Jörg Matthes opened the session with *What Leads to Trust in Generative AI for Health? Cross-Country Evidence on Playful and Information-Seeking Use*, a joint project with Miho Iwakuma of Kyoto University and colleagues. He began from the technology's ambivalence. Conversational systems make scarce expertise available at negligible cost and allow users to raise questions that they might hesitate to put to a physician. At the same time, the advice they provide may be overgeneralised. Disclosure of personal health information raises privacy concerns, and the training corpora shaping their outputs remain largely opaque to the people who rely on them.

Rather than treating use as a single quantity, the study distinguished two modes. Information-seeking use begins with a specific need and ends when an answer is obtained. Playful use has no such terminus. Users explore the system, test its limits, and move back and forth in dialogue, thereby acquiring a working sense of what the technology can do. The model positioned negative health conditions as antecedents of both modes and trust in physicians as a moderator of these relationships. Trust in generative AI for health purposes was the outcome. Digital health literacy was expected to attenuate the path from use to trust because better-informed users might contextualise machine-generated information more critically and follow it more cautiously.

The comparative design paired Austria with Japan because the settings differ in technological climate and health-care systems. European publics tend to approach AI through the vocabulary of risk and regulation. Japanese public discourse has been more receptive, and the technology occupies a larger role in everyday life. Quota samples of 500 respondents were recruited in each country. The 642 respondents who reported using generative AI for health purposes were retained for a moderated-mediation analysis.

The Austrian results indicated that negative health conditions predicted information-seeking use regardless of trust in physicians. Both modes of use predicted higher trust in generative AI, and digital health literacy left these paths largely intact. The Japanese pattern was similar, with two additions. Negative health conditions also predicted playful use, and trust in physicians positively predicted both modes. These findings indicate that confidence in medical professionals may itself encourage engagement with the technology. Contrary to expectations, playful use raised trust more strongly among respondents with high digital health literacy. Matthes interpreted this pattern as a sign that experienced users obtain more usable material from exploratory interaction.

Matthes was explicit about the design's limits. The cross-sectional data could not support causal claims, the two use orientations were broad and would benefit from experimental validation, and

the two-country comparison did not establish generalisability. His substantive conclusion was nevertheless consistent across settings. Generative AI is entering health information repertoires as an additional source rather than as a competing one. Its use did not erode trust in medical professionals. The survey evidence instead pointed to a complementary rather than substitutive relationship between the two.

Professor RUI suggested that the rationale for comparing Austria with Japan could be stated more fully. He also recommended controlling for respondents' prior medical knowledge and experience. Associate Professor YANG asked which generative AI systems respondents had in mind. He noted that domestic and US systems are used in noticeably different ways across the two settings. He further suggested that AI literacy might capture the relevant individual difference more precisely than the broader construct of digital health literacy.

Popularity cues, message framing and women's exercise

intention

XIANG Xinchuan of Wuhan University presented Psychological Mechanisms and Information Cues: The Influence of Popularity Cues on Women's Exercise Intention, written with QIAN Yiwei and LUO Chen. The study began from a readily observable platform phenomenon. A search for fitness content on social media can display women's bodies, experiential accounts, and motivational text simultaneously. This raises two questions that point in opposite directions. How can social media effectively encourage women to exercise, and can content organised around appearance and body shape have adverse psychological consequences?

Female undergraduates were the population of interest. Rates of overweight and obesity in this group have continued to rise. Successive national policies, including the Healthy China 2030 Planning Outline and the National Fitness Plan, have made voluntary physical activity central to weight management. Young women may also attend more closely than other groups to appearance- and body-shape-related information. The idealised bodies repeatedly displayed in fitness content may therefore produce body dissatisfaction and appearance anxiety. They may also shift exercise motivation away from health.

The study used the MAIN model as its principal framework. The model distinguishes four classes of interface cues in digital media: modality, agency, interactivity, and navigability. Agency cues indicate a message's source and trigger heuristic judgements about credibility and expertise. The authors argued that popularity metrics, such as likes, saves, and comments, are forms of collective approval left by other users. They therefore function as indirect source warrants, placing them among agency cues and activating bandwagon heuristic processing. Upward social comparison and appearance anxiety were introduced as mediators. At the content level, message framing was divided into an outcome frame, which emphasised changes in body shape and physical condition, and a process frame, which emphasised the experience of exercising.

A 2×2 between-subjects online experiment was conducted. In the high-popularity condition, likes, saves, and comments were set in the tens of thousands. In the low-popularity condition, they were set in the tens. Stimulus texts differed by frame, and the accompanying images were

produced with a generative tool and displayed in the interface style of the relevant platform. Measures were adapted from established scales for the Chinese context. Physical activity level was included among the control variables, and the reported reliability and validity tests were satisfactory. G*Power indicated a minimum sample of 171, and 346 valid responses were obtained. The analysis used Models 6 and 83 of the SPSS PROCESS macro.

The main effect of popularity on exercise intention was not significant. Popularity cues did not therefore act directly on intention. Their influence operated through psychological mediation and followed two paths of opposite sign. In one indirect path, high popularity strengthened upward social comparison, which raised exercise intention. In a serial path, appearance anxiety triggered by upward social comparison lowered intention. Message framing significantly moderated the process. The effect of high popularity on upward social comparison and both indirect paths were significant only under the outcome frame. The authors concluded that a promotional strategy based on traffic alone was ineffective. They further argued that popularity cues are double-edged, whereas a process frame can redirect attention away from body shape and reduce the likelihood of comparison and anxiety. The study extended the MAIN model to exercise promotion and offered practical guidance for university campaigns and independent content creators.

Professor RUI commended the methodological discipline shown in a study completed at the undergraduate level. He noted that, because the main effect was unsupported and the conclusions rested on indirect paths, multiplied coefficients reduce the size of the estimated effects and leave room for alternative mechanisms. He therefore advised caution in making causal claims. He also observed that outcome-frame stimuli emphasising improvements in physical and mental condition without acknowledging the effort involved might shape participants' responses. Associate Professor YANG raised two further points. First, because the two indirect paths point in opposite directions, the study offered no unambiguous practical implication. This made its theoretical contribution difficult to specify. He recommended collecting reflexive qualitative data, such as women's accounts of their reactions to heavily liked fitness posts, and reducing the number of mediating paths. Second, the stimuli differed in text length, appeal, and hashtags. These differences meant that any effects could not be attributed to framing alone. He suggested controlling for reading time and comprehension difficulty.

Puffery, engagement and expressed trust in short videos on traditional Chinese medicine

Wanqing Wang of the University of Macau then presented Heuristic-Systematic Dissociation in Digital Health: How Puffery in TCM Videos Shapes Engagement and Trust on Douyin, written with Angela Chang. The study began from a discrepancy that is readily observed but harder to explain. Viewers of short videos on traditional Chinese medicine often write in the comment section that they trust what they have watched, but they decline to like, share, or save the video. The distance between expressed trust and behavioural endorsement was the study's object.

The study was situated in a large and rapidly digitalising market. Traditional Chinese medicine is both a component of Chinese cultural life and a commercial sector of considerable scale. Its presence has shifted rapidly towards short-video platforms. In this environment, verifiable health

knowledge circulates alongside claims that cannot presently be adjudicated. These include verbal promises, unqualified assertions, emotionally charged appeals, and absolute superlatives. Following the advertising literature, the study treated such claims as puffery. The consequences may fall unevenly because older viewers with lower digital literacy are the most exposed to them.

The heuristic-systematic model supplied the analytical frame. Heuristic processing is fast and low in cognitive cost. It relies on surface cues, such as apparent source credibility, and was linked to behavioural engagement, including the low-effort actions of liking, sharing, and saving. Systematic processing requires greater cognitive investment and yields more articulated judgements. It was linked to expressive engagement in the comment section, where viewers put their trust or distrust into words. The study therefore asked which types of puffery appear in these videos, how they are associated with behavioural and expressive engagement, and how additional cues condition that association.

The study adopted a mixed-methods design. In March 2025, 371 valid videos and approximately 4,800 comments were collected from Douyin. Optical character recognition was used to capture on-screen text. Coding followed a human-machine hybrid procedure on an AI-assisted platform. The machine generated an initial category framework and performed automated coding. Three human coders then revised the output through three rounds of definition refinement and pilot testing. A final reliability test confirmed strong agreement.

Three central findings emerged. First, puffery was prevalent and concentrated in commercially oriented content. It was most frequent in videos presenting traditional Chinese medicine knowledge, followed by practitioner introductions and cultural promotion and wellness concepts. Rates were lowest in videos about specific therapies. Verbal promises were the most common type, followed by assertions, emotional appeals, and absolute superlatives. Second, videos containing puffery received significantly fewer likes, shares, and saves. Yet they accounted for roughly 65% of comments expressing trust. Binary logistic regression showed that verbal promises and emotional appeals significantly increased the likelihood of such comments. Fewer clicks thus coexisted with more expressed trust. Third, cues signalling scientific support and expert endorsement moderated these patterns. They mitigated the negative association between puffery and behavioural engagement while weakening its positive association with expressed trust. After correction, 17 interaction terms remained statistically significant.

Wang interpreted the dissociation as the simultaneous operation of both processing routes. Upon detecting persuasive intent, viewers may withhold low-cost behavioural signals. Yet cultural resonance and emotional framing may still prompt them to voice endorsement. Wang identified a practical concern. Verbal trust may be especially legible to recommendation systems, allowing a sense of unverified authority to gain visibility even as behavioural endorsement declines. She also noted several limits. Positive comments do not uniformly express trust because some convey general cultural affirmation rather than a judgement about content. The study also covered a single platform and cultural context, and its sampling procedure favoured popular material.

Professor RUI concentrated on measurement. He recalled limiting his own outcome measure to likes because comments and shares can accumulate around content that audiences find objectionable as readily as around content that they endorse. He invited the authors to explain their rationale for using a composite set of indicators. He also suggested that the heuristic-systematic model could be integrated more substantively into the analysis. Associate Professor YANG raised an epistemological question. Judgements about exaggeration presuppose a

standard, and categories within traditional Chinese medicine do not map neatly onto biomedical ones. Whether local medical knowledge is admitted as health knowledge therefore conditions the coding scheme. He added that emotional appeal would preserve analytical neutrality better than emotional manipulation. He also recommended bringing the case's epistemological particularity into the interpretation.

Temporally differentiated threat appeals and expectant fathers' support for breastfeeding

LIU Jiaqi of the University of California, Santa Barbara joined the session online to present *Fear Appeals in Family Context: Temporal and Relational Processes in Child-Related Health Messages and Their Effects on Chinese Expectant Fathers' Support Intention*, completed with collaborators at Tongji University and Tsinghua University. The study was situated in the Chinese breastfeeding context. China's breastfeeding rate is comparatively low by international standards, at about 29.2%. The consequences of breastfeeding extend well beyond infancy into adolescent health.

Fathers were selected as the target group because their role in breastfeeding is often overlooked. Their involvement can materially affect the choice and duration of feeding, and they can provide practical, informational, and emotional support. Under prevailing family structures and conventional gender roles, fathers are often absent from family health matters yet continue to exercise considerable authority over household decisions. This mismatch supplied the study's point of departure.

The study extended the Extended Parallel Process Model (EPPM) in two ways. The first extension concerned the temporal dimension of threat. Existing work has largely treated threat as a static whole, whereas the health consequences of breastfeeding can be both short- and long-term. Drawing on construal-level theory and research on temporal framing, the study separated short-term from long-term threat. The second extension addressed the family perspective. Family communication and family systems theory treat the family as an interacting whole rather than a collection of isolated individuals. The study therefore examined how a father, conventionally treated as a third party, enters a family health matter from a partner's standpoint.

A $2 \times 2 \times 2$ between-subjects experiment was conducted with 354 Chinese expectant fathers recruited at obstetric hospitals in several provinces. Controls included the age of the respondent and partner, education, income, marital status, month of pregnancy, and the respondent's history of having been breastfed. Both short-term and long-term threat influenced fear and anxiety. Long-term threat produced the stronger effect, and the two combined aroused anxiety most strongly. In the subsequent path, only anxiety significantly predicted issue involvement. The corresponding path from fear was not significant, whereas issue involvement in turn raised support intention. The interaction between efficacy and threat was not significant, although efficacy directly predicted support intention.

The presentation yielded three implications. First, once threat was differentiated temporally, long-term threat was more strongly associated with emotion than short-term threat. This pattern ran counter to the hypothesis but was consistent with a long-term orientation widely noted in the

Chinese context. Second, for breastfeeding, fear did not appear sufficient to drive information seeking and action. Anxiety instead sustained a problem-oriented demand for information. Fear may produce a sense of powerlessness and lead to avoidance. Third, when a health-message recipient is not the person performing the behaviour, emotional arousal appeared to operate through issue involvement before becoming support. Fathers and mothers occupy different psychological distances from the same health matter. The presentation argued that this difference belongs in the analytical framework of persuasion research in family settings.

Professor RUI recommended a more parsimonious model. He noted that additional paths make the intervening mechanism harder to explain and that simpler models often carry greater explanatory force. He suggested that the rationale for placing issue involvement after fear and anxiety should be stated more fully. He also asked for fuller explanation of the mechanisms through which short-term and long-term threat predict the two emotions. Associate Professor YANG questioned the ordering of variables. The literature supports both emotion arousing involvement and involvement arousing emotion. He noted that data from a single experiment cannot settle the sequence and that the rationale for the proposed chain requires further theoretical argument.

Visual design of artificial intelligence doctor interfaces and older users' social perception

ZHANG Wanting of South China Normal University presented *Do I Prefer Cool and Simple Ones? The Dual-Path Effects of Visual Design on Older Adults' Perceptions of and Usage Intentions Towards AI-Doctor Interfaces*, written with LUO Yue of Guangdong Polytechnic Normal University and ZENG Changcong of Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts. The study approached health communication through visual communication. As AI medical platforms develop, users increasingly obtain health information and consultation through digital interfaces. Older users face particular challenges of operability and system intelligibility. Existing research has largely worked within the technology acceptance model and focused on instrumental factors, such as ease of use and satisfaction. It leaves open the question of how visual cues in an interface shape older users' social perceptions.

Two theoretical perspectives guided the study. The stereotype content model holds that social objects are evaluated along the dimensions of warmth and competence. In this health communication setting, these dimensions were represented by perceived empathy and perceived authority. Perceived empathy concerned whether users felt that the AI doctor understood and cared about them. Perceived authority concerned whether they regarded it as authoritative and professional. Social vision theory further holds that people form social judgements from an object's visual cues and that these judgements shape behavioural intention. Such judgements remain malleable and context-specific. Colour tone was treated as a basic, rapidly processed visual cue. Visual information complexity, defined by the number, density, and organisation of interface elements, was treated as a situational moderator.

A pilot study with 100 older participants showed that low-, medium-, and high-complexity interfaces were reliably distinguishable. The main experiment used a 2×3 between-subjects design. It crossed cool versus warm colour tones with three levels of complexity. A total of 308

participants were randomly assigned to one of six conditions. They reported perceived empathy, perceived authority, and usage intention. Manipulation checks were satisfactory.

Colour tone significantly influenced usage intention and perceived empathy, with the effect attributable to warm tones. It had no independent effect on perceived authority. More importantly, tone and visual information complexity interacted significantly on all three outcomes. Warm interfaces outperformed cool ones only under high complexity. Under low and medium complexity, the effect of tone disappeared. Moderated-mediation analysis confirmed that, under high complexity, warm tones strengthened both perceived empathy and perceived authority. Each positively predicted usage intention.

The authors concluded that an effective AI-doctor interface should communicate emotional care and professional information simultaneously. The study extended the stereotype content model and social vision theory from interpersonal settings to intelligent health communication. It also identified an asymmetric pathway in social cognitive processing. Perceived empathy was elicited mainly by affective cues, whereas perceived authority required affective and informational cues in combination. In practical terms, the study recommended using warm tones in moderation to convey care alongside a deliberate configuration of informational complexity. The limitations included the restricted range of visual cues, because typography, icons, and avatars were not included. The relatively static stimuli also left genuinely interactive tasks untested, and the China-only sample invites cross-cultural comparison.

Professor RUI considered the study well developed and offered two suggestions for publication. Readers commonly assume that older people make little use of AI medical services. The paper would benefit from addressing that assumption directly. He also suggested explaining the cognitive and psychological characteristics of older users and their relevance to the chosen theoretical framework. He further recommended extending the work to interactive settings because judgements formed from a static interface may differ from those formed in use. Associate Professor YANG made a related point. Where the discussion only lightly considers older users' cognitive characteristics, the conclusions can read as applying to the general population. The group-specific contribution is thereby weakened. He added that behavioural cues might outweigh static visual design in genuine interaction and could even reverse the direction of the tone effect. This possibility should be acknowledged in the discussion.

Open discussion: from phenomenon-driven to theory-driven research

The formal commentary was followed by an open discussion on the problem of treating theory as an external template. A participant observed that quantitative research sometimes obtains data first and looks for a theory afterwards. Theory then becomes a wrapper rather than a source of the research question. The participant asked how such a design shortfall might be remedied at the writing stage.

Professor RUI replied that the difficulty concerns research design rather than writing. A study should begin with a problem internal to a theory. Decisions about which variables to add, remove, or adjust should follow from that problem rather than from a post hoc search for an explanatory

frame. He also suggested asking whether the problem is worth solving. When hypotheses are unsupported, recovery remains possible. Post hoc analysis can sometimes yield an account more persuasive than the original model, making the discussion a site of theoretical work. As review standards become more exacting, a second study can test the explanation advanced in the first.

Associate Professor YANG added that writing becomes considerably easier when a study begins with a theoretical problem rather than a phenomenon. A study that sets out to revise a theory can then identify a suitable phenomenon for examination, allowing the discussion to follow naturally. A study that begins from a phenomenon must find a theory later and may stall during writing. He acknowledged that this approach presupposes wide theoretical reading, which can be a real constraint for researchers early in their training.

The discussion then shifted to the pace of doctoral research and the pressures of institutional assessment. Both discussants argued that theoretical sensitivity should be cultivated alongside data-driven work. Difficulties of interpretation encountered during writing should be treated as occasions for that training, and the aim should be a body of representative work able to withstand scrutiny. The conversation also addressed the construction of an independent Chinese knowledge system. The discussants noted that international journals have become increasingly cautious of studies that use China merely as a case for testing the applicability of existing theory. They argued that a more promising direction is to advance propositions grounded in Chinese experience that can nonetheless enter dialogue with the wider scholarly community.

Conclusion

Taken together, the five studies mapped several sites at which mediatization reorganises health communication. They considered conversational AI as an addition to health information repertoires, platform metrics as a source of psychologically opposed exercise-motivation pathways, and promotional language as a source of dissociation between behavioural endorsement and expressed trust. They also examined message design directed at a family member who is not the actor and interface features that carry social meaning for older users. Methodologically, the panel leaned towards experimental and computational designs.

The commentary also converged on three recurring concerns. First, it emphasised parsimony. As mediation paths multiply, estimated indirect effects diminish and the mechanism becomes harder to defend. A simpler model may therefore offer greater explanatory force. Second, the discussants stressed precision in measurement and stimulus construction. This included the choice of engagement indicators and the control of confounds across experimental materials. Third, they returned to the relation between case and theory. When the chosen context does not enter the explanatory framework, a study may describe an effect that could have occurred elsewhere. Its case-specific contribution then remains underdeveloped. The discussants treated the theoretical significance of context, rather than its use as a setting, as a central standard. This principle frames a wider question for the field concerning the alignment of locally grounded knowledge production with international scholarly dialogue. The paper by XIANG Xinchuan, QIAN Yiwei, and LUO Chen of Wuhan University received the session's Outstanding Paper Award.

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The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Note

This report is based on the audio record of the session and on the presenters' own summaries of their work. Figures and results reported here are those stated by presenters during the session, and several of the studies were presented as work in progress. Readers wishing to cite any of the studies described should contact the respective authors directly.

References

Reference list not supplied with the manuscript. Add a complete, checked list and ensure every in-text source claim is cited before submission.