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Media Representation and Public Discussion of Aging in China: Issue Structure, Sentiment, Platform Distribution, and Temporal Attention

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Abstract

As population aging and digital platform use increasingly intersect, aging-related issues have become more visible across news media, social media, and short-video platforms in China. This exploratory study examines the issue structure, sentiment, platform distribution, and temporal attention of aging-related communication in China's digital media environment. Using the Wisky Intelligent Search and Public Opinion Analysis Platform, we analyzed 14,786 aging-related items collected between March 30 and June 30, 2026, including 9,067 media reports from 374 media outlets. The analysis draws on the platform's descriptive classification, topic clustering, sentiment analysis, channel distribution, and temporal monitoring functions. Four main patterns emerged. First, aging-related communication displayed a broad public-issue orientation, encompassing digital education, age-friendly digital services, health communication, eldercare, and social participation. Second, the corpus was predominantly neutral in sentiment (66.15%), followed by positive (33.23%) and negative content (0.62%); negative items were concentrated around service quality, older adults' rights, health-product marketing, and social support. Third, short-video platforms accounted for 65.56% of all monitored items, while established news media remained important providers of institutional and policy-related information. Fourth, attention fluctuated through recurrent event-related peaks rather than a single sustained burst, suggesting periodic activation of a persistent aging-related issue environment. Taken together, the findings reveal a communication ecology in which capability-oriented narratives coexist with everyday risk concerns and high-volume platform visibility coexists with institutional authority. The study extends digital-aging research beyond older adults' technology use by examining how aging itself becomes publicly visible across a multi-platform media environment.

Keywords: aging; older adults; media representation; public discussion; platformization; China

Introduction

Population aging is increasingly intertwined with digital transformation. Online health information, mobile payments, platform-based public services, social media, and short-video applications have become embedded in everyday life, but older adults do not benefit from these

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developments equally. Research has consistently shown age-related disparities in access, skills, confidence, and patterns of use, while also emphasizing that digital engagement can support social connection, access to services, health management, and participation in later life (Czaja et al., 2006; Friemel, 2016; Hunsaker & Hargittai, 2018; Kebede et al., 2022). In China, the rapid digitization of public and commercial services has made digital inclusion an especially salient aging issue, even as access and use have improved over time (Li et al., 2025; Yao et al., 2021).

Much of this literature understandably asks how older adults access and use technology. Yet aging in a digital society is also a communication problem in a broader sense. Media organizations, public institutions, social organizations, platform creators, and ordinary users continuously define which aging-related problems deserve attention, what forms of later life are made visible, and which risks or capabilities are foregrounded. Media representations matter because they can normalize particular understandings of aging, including narratives of dependency, vulnerability, autonomy, participation, or empowerment. Recent reviews of age in the media show that older adults remain vulnerable to stereotypical and ageist portrayals, while the growing diversity of digital media also creates opportunities for more plural representations (Camacho-Markina & Santos-Diez, 2025; World Health Organization, 2021).

This broader perspective is particularly relevant in a platformized media environment. Public visibility is no longer produced by a single news system. News websites, WeChat, Weibo, mobile news applications, short-video services, online forums, and other channels operate with different production routines, formats, audiences, and distribution logics. Platformization reshapes how public information is organized and circulated, while traditional and social media can follow partly shared and partly distinct rhythms of attention (Neuman et al., 2014; Poell et al., 2019; van Dijck et al., 2018). Accordingly, the public communication of aging should be examined not only in terms of what older adults do with media, but also in terms of how aging-related issues themselves are produced, circulated, and discussed across platforms.

The Chinese context offers a useful setting for such an analysis. Studies have documented persistent inequalities in older adults' digital participation and eHealth literacy (Shi et al., 2023; Yao et al., 2021), as well as the growing role of WeChat and other online channels in health-information seeking (Wang & Zhang, 2023). Internet big-data research has also shown that the concerns expressed by online users do not always align with the emphases of news coverage on the digital divide among older adults (Yuan & Jia, 2021). However, less attention has been paid to the broader issue ecology in which digital inclusion, eldercare, health, education, family responsibility, consumer risk, and social participation are discussed together across multiple media channels.

This study addresses that gap through an exploratory analysis of multi-platform public-opinion monitoring data. Rather than testing a causal agenda-setting model, it uses issue visibility as an organizing perspective: the study asks which aging-related topics become prominent, what concerns appear in public discussion, how sentiment is distributed, and how attention varies across channels and over time. Three research questions guide the analysis:

RQ1. What issues dominate aging-related communication in the monitored online environment, and what types of actors are prominent in this issue space?

RQ2. What sentiment profile and concrete concerns characterize public discussion of aging-related issues?

RQ3. How are aging-related items distributed across platforms and over time during the observation period?

Literature Review

Digital aging, inequality, and health communication

Research on older adults and digital media has developed from a first-level concern with access toward a more differentiated understanding of skills, motivations, usage, and outcomes. Early work showed that age differences in technology adoption are shaped by cognitive resources, prior experience, self-efficacy, and anxiety rather than age alone (Czaja et al., 2006). Subsequent studies described a persistent "grey divide" among older adults themselves, with education, income, technical interest, social context, and life-course experience contributing to unequal Internet use (Friemel, 2016). Reviews now emphasize that older adulthood is heterogeneous and that digital inequality includes not only whether people are online but also what they are able to do online and what benefits they can obtain (Hunsaker & Hargittai, 2018; Kebede et al., 2022).

Digital exclusion can have consequences beyond technology use. During the COVID-19 pandemic, online access became closely tied to information, services, health care, and social connection, exposing a "double burden" of social and digital exclusion for some older adults (Seifert et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2020). In China, policy and research attention to the age-related digital divide intensified as health codes, mobile payments, online appointments, and other app-based services became routine. Studies have highlighted both substantial progress and persistent inequalities across age, residence, education, and socioeconomic position (Li et al., 2025; Yao et al., 2021). Research on eHealth literacy similarly indicates that older Chinese adults' ability to locate, evaluate, and use online health information is shaped by individual, interpersonal, and contextual factors (Qin et al., 2026; Shi et al., 2023).

Existing research shows the substantive importance of digital inclusion, but its typical unit of analysis is the older adult as user. A complementary question is how digital aging becomes a public issue: which aspects of later life are repeatedly represented, which capabilities and risks become salient, and how public institutions and users contribute to that issue construction. This distinction is important because a society can expand older adults' digital access while simultaneously producing narrow or stereotypical public narratives about aging.

Media representation, public visibility, and the construction of aging

Communication research has long shown that media attention helps structure the visibility of public problems. Agenda-setting research demonstrated that repeated emphasis can influence which issues audiences regard as important, while later work in digital environments has shown that attention flows are more reciprocal and complex than a one-way transmission from news media to the public (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Neuman et al., 2014). The present study does not directly test agenda-setting effects because it does not estimate separate causal relationships between media and public agendas. Nevertheless, agenda-setting provides a useful sensitizing framework for examining which aging-related concerns are made visible in a mixed media environment.

For aging specifically, media representation is consequential because it can reproduce or challenge social stereotypes. The World Health Organization identifies media and cultural narratives as important contexts in which age-based stereotypes and prejudice are produced and sustained (World Health Organization, 2021). A recent systematic review likewise found that news media often underrepresent older adults or rely on simplified narratives of decline, dependency, or vulnerability, although more diverse and counter-stereotypical portrayals also occur (Camacho-Markina & Santos-Diez, 2025). These findings suggest that the study of aging communication should move beyond counting references to older people and attend to the kinds of issues and social roles through which aging is publicly interpreted.

The Chinese digital environment adds another layer to this process. Research using Internet big data has shown that public attention to older adults' digital divide can be spatially and temporally uneven and that netizen concerns may diverge from news-report emphases (Yuan & Jia, 2021). Health-information research on WeChat also demonstrates that older adults encounter online information through multiple behavioral pathways, including active seeking, passive browsing, and long-term collection (Wang & Zhang, 2023). Taken together, these studies point toward a broader ecology in which institutional messages, public discussion, and everyday digital practices jointly shape the visibility of aging-related issues.

Platformization and the multi-platform ecology of aging-related communication

Platformization refers to the increasing penetration of digital platforms into social, economic, and cultural life and to the reorganization of practices around platform infrastructures and logics (Poell et al., 2019). From this perspective, platforms are not neutral containers. They shape visibility through technical affordances, content formats, metrics, recommendation systems, and institutional arrangements. The platform society therefore redistributes communicative power across commercial platforms, public institutions, news organizations, and users (van Dijck et al., 2018).

This perspective is especially relevant for aging-related communication because the same issue can appear differently across news reporting, social networking, messaging environments, and short-video platforms. High-volume platforms may amplify everyday stories, practical advice, health information, and emotionally engaging content, whereas authoritative news media may remain central to policy interpretation and institutional information supply. Neuman et al. (2014) similarly showed that traditional and social media attention can be correlated while still following different temporal dynamics. These insights caution against treating cross-platform information volume as a single, homogeneous measure of public importance.

The present study therefore adopts a descriptive, multi-platform approach. It extends earlier Chinese big-data research on the digital divide (Yuan & Jia, 2021) by considering a broader range of aging-related topics and by examining issue structure, sentiment, public concerns, channel distribution, and temporal attention within one monitoring framework. The aim is not to infer algorithmic effects or establish causality, but to characterize the public issue space that emerges when aging is discussed across a heterogeneous platform environment.

Methods

Data source

Data were collected using the Wisky Intelligent Search and Public Opinion Analysis Platform operated by Wenge Group (https://wisky.wengegroup.com). The system aggregates publicly available online information across multiple channels and provides functions for cross-platform retrieval, topic clustering, descriptive classification, sentiment analysis, and temporal monitoring.

The search framework was designed to capture multiple dimensions of aging-related communication. The Chinese-language keyword dictionary included terms corresponding to aging communication, media literacy, Internet literacy, digital participation, information behavior, health-information seeking, digital health literacy, eHealth literacy, online social interaction, age-friendly information services, age-friendly digitalization, and health communication. It also incorporated risk-related terms such as Internet addiction, filter bubbles, online misinformation, health misinformation, and information verification. The intention was to cover digital access, digital use, participation, health communication, age-friendly services, and digital risks within the broader context of older adults and aging.

The data were collected from March 30, 2026, 00:00 to June 30, 2026, 00:00, and the channels included online news media, electronic newspapers, mobile applications, WeChat, Weibo, short-video platforms, video websites, and online forums.

Data analysis

The study organizes the platform-generated descriptive outputs into four analytical dimensions. First, issue structure includes broad content classifications, recurring hotspot themes, and prominent organizations. Second, public discussion includes overall sentiment polarity, summarized netizen viewpoints, and the concrete issues concentrated in negative content. Third, platform structure compares information volume across channels and considers the role of authoritative media in institutional information provision. Fourth, temporal attention describes changes in overall information volume across the observation period.

The analysis is exploratory and descriptive. Topic clustering and sentiment labels were generated by the commercial platform, whose full model parameters and validation metrics are not available to the researchers. Accordingly, these outputs are used to characterize patterns rather than to make causal claims. In particular, sentiment polarity is not treated as equivalent to rationality, political support, or policy approval.

Results

Overall attention and engagement

Between March 30 and June 30, 2026, the monitoring system identified 14,786 aging-related items, including 9,067 media reports from 374 media outlets(Figure 1). An average of 161 items was recorded per day. Aging-related content appeared across news websites, WeChat, Weibo, short-video platforms, mobile applications, and online communities, indicating that the topic was not confined to a single media sector.

Across the monitored corpus, the platform recorded 153,557 reads, 219,201 likes, 22,074 comments, and 4,527 shares. These totals indicate substantial interaction with aging-related content, particularly around age-friendly digital services, older-adult digital education, health information, and eldercare innovation. However, the four metrics should not be treated as directly comparable engagement rates because platform interfaces differ in how views, likes, comments, and shares are exposed and counted.



Figure 1. Overview of aging-related information volume and engagement metrics

Temporal attention: recurring waves rather than a single burst

Information volume showed clear short-term fluctuations. From late March through April, aging-related content increased rapidly and reached the observation period's most prominent peak in mid-to-late April. Overall volume declined in May but remained active, with several smaller secondary peaks. By June, the issue environment had become comparatively more stable (Figure 2).

The monitored peaks coincided mainly with policy announcements, thematic activities, older-adult education initiatives, age-friendly digital practices, and eldercare-service cases. The pattern therefore resembled recurrent activation around events rather than a single crisis-driven spike followed by disappearance. Within the three-month observation window, aging-related communication retained a persistent baseline of visibility while specific events periodically intensified attention.

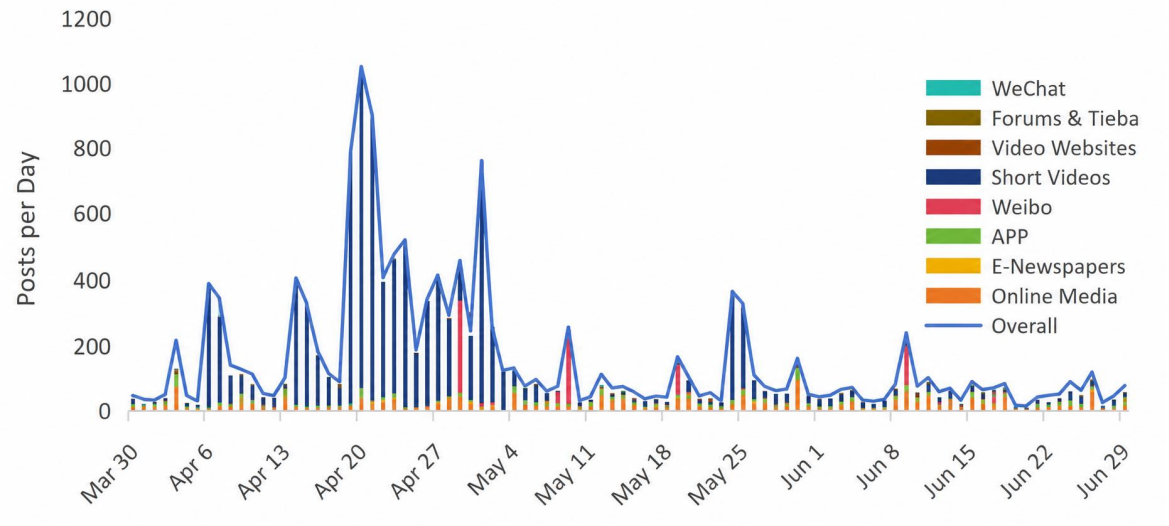


Figure 2. Temporal evolution of attention to aging-related content across communication channels

Issue structure: aging as a public issue spanning capability, services, and participation

In the platform's broad content classification, social-affairs content was the largest category, exceeding 6,000 items. General and technology-related content also accounted for substantial shares, while politics, health, education, daily life, finance, advertising, and agriculture appeared at lower levels(Figure 3) . The distribution indicates that aging-related communication extended beyond conventional eldercare and was embedded in discussions of digital development, public services, education, health, and everyday life.

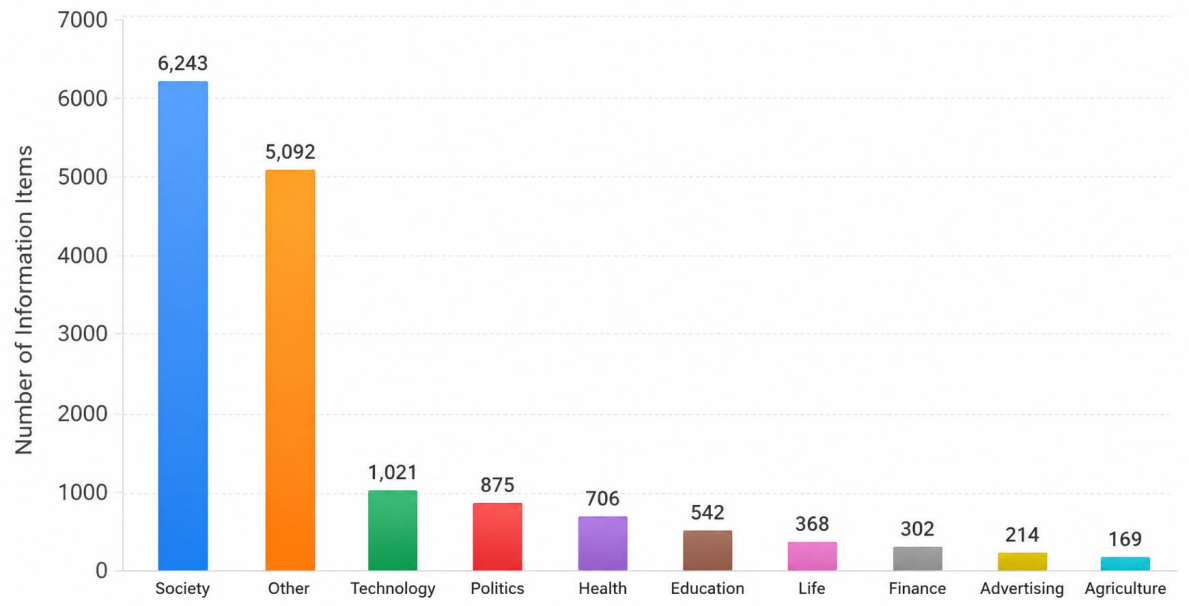


Figure 3. Distribution of aging-related content by topic category

Hotspot themes were more substantively revealing. Older-adult education, digital learning, eldercare services, and social participation formed recurring topic clusters. Events such as lifelong-learning exhibitions, residential eldercare projects, and age-friendly digital initiatives generated temporary increases in attention. These themes suggest that capability building—digital skills, lifelong learning, and social inclusion—was an important component of the observed aging discourse, alongside traditional service and care concerns.

Prominent organizations included national government bodies, the Ministry of Civil Affairs, central administrative offices, aging-related foundations, and educational institutions such as Shanghai Open University. Their presence indicates that the aging issue space had a strong policy and public-service component and was not produced solely through user-generated discussion(Table 1).

Table 1 Main issue dimensions identified in the monitored materials

Issue dimension	Main content	Manifestation in the monitored materials
Digital capability and education	Digital literacy, lifelong learning, digital skills	Older-adult education, digital learning, and related courses frequently appeared among hotspot topics.
Public services and eldercare	Age-friendly digitalization, smart eldercare, care services	Policies, projects, and service innovations were prominent in media and institutional communication.
Health and information	Health-information seeking, health communication, information verification	Health knowledge and digital health literacy formed a visible component of aging-related communication.
Family and social support	Family caregiving, companionship, living security	Public discussion repeatedly addressed family responsibility and social support.
Rights and risks	Service quality, consumer risk, health-product marketing	Negative content concentrated on eldercare institutions, rights protection, and health-product promotion.

Sentiment profile and concrete public concerns

The platform's sentiment analysis classified 66.15% of the corpus as neutral, 33.23% as positive, and 0.62% as negative(Figure 4). This distribution indicates that the monitored aging-related information environment was dominated by neutral and positive polarity and did not contain a large aggregate share of negative content. Importantly, neutral sentiment should not be interpreted as evidence of rational deliberation, and positive sentiment should not be equated with support for a particular policy or position.

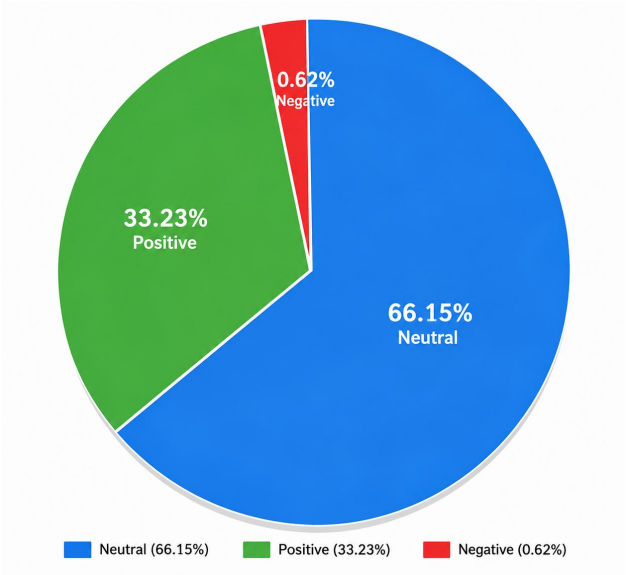


Figure 4. Sentiment distribution of aging-related content in the monitored corpus

The summarized netizen viewpoints nonetheless revealed concrete concerns that are obscured by aggregate polarity. Public discussion included affirmative evaluations of long-term caregiving and attention to older adults' needs, but it also repeatedly addressed family caregiving responsibility, companionship, diet and health, quality of institutional eldercare, and basic living security. These themes brought aging from an abstract policy domain back into family and everyday-life contexts.

Although negative items were rare in proportional terms, they were comparatively concentrated around specific problems: eldercare service quality, protection of older adults' rights, marketing of health products, insufficient social support, institutional management, fee standards, service provision, and promotional claims for supplements or wellness products. The small negative share therefore should not be read as an absence of problems; rather, negative content functioned as a concentrated signal of service, rights, and consumer-risk concerns.

Platform structure: high-volume short-video visibility and institutional news provision

Information volume differed sharply across channels. Short-video platforms accounted for 9,693 items (65.56% of the corpus), followed by online news media with 2,155 items (14.57%), WeChat with 1,187 items (8.03%), Weibo with 888 items (6.01%), and mobile applications with 738 items (4.99%). Forums/Tieba, video websites, and electronic newspapers each accounted for less than 0.4%.

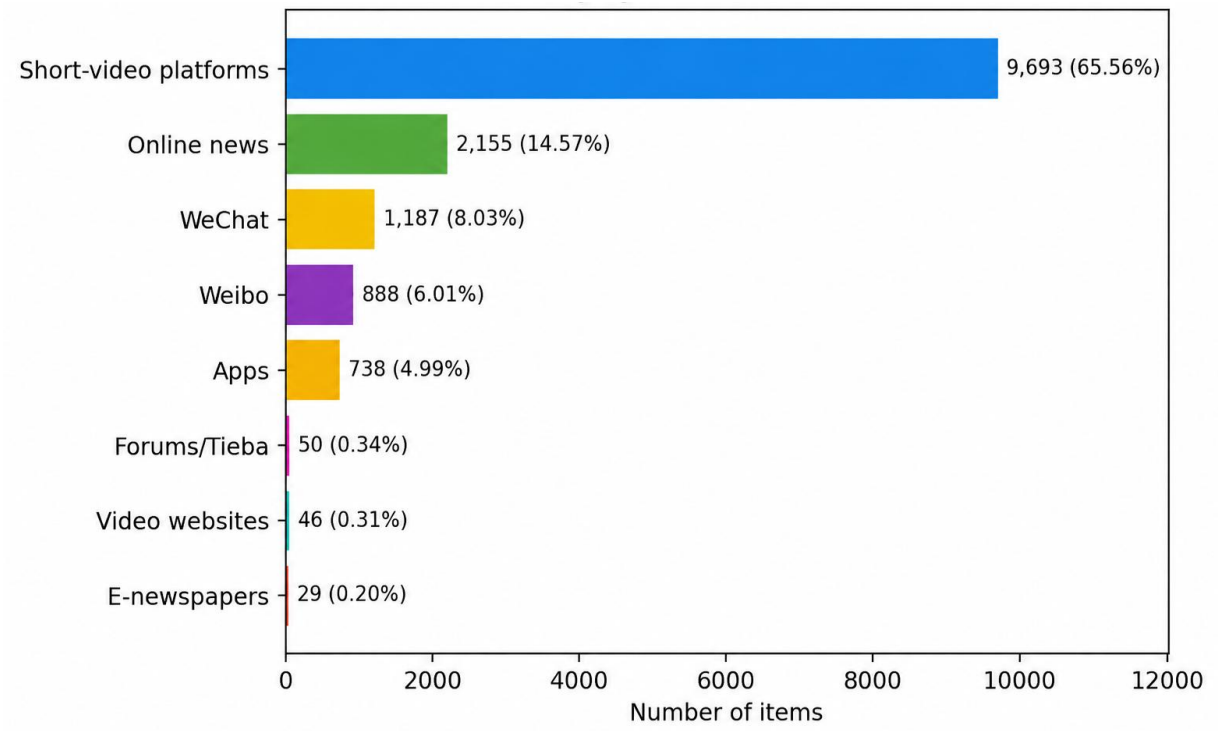


Figure 5. Distribution of aging-related content across monitored channels

Within this dataset, short-video platforms were therefore the largest carrier of aging-related items by count. This finding should not be interpreted as proof of a long-term historical "video turn," because content-production rates, public data availability, and monitoring access differ across platforms. The defensible conclusion is narrower: short-video services had a pronounced numerical advantage in this monitoring corpus and formed a major arena of aging-related visibility during the observation period.

At the same time, the platform's media-volume analysis indicated substantial participation by central and provincial media. Local outlets contributed more regionally grounded reporting on older-adult education, eldercare services, and age-friendly digital practices. The observed ecology therefore combined two forms of visibility: high-volume platform circulation, especially on short-video services, and institutionally authoritative information provision through established news media. For analytical convenience, we refer to this descriptive coexistence as a "traffic–authority" structure; the term does not imply that the two forms have equal influence or that their causal relationship has been established.

Discussion

From older adults as media users to aging as a public issue

The central contribution of this study is conceptual rather than causal. Much research on digital aging examines older adults as users who face barriers to access, skills, or sustained engagement

(Friemel, 2016; Hunsaker & Hargittai, 2018; Kebede et al., 2022). The present findings show why a second level of analysis is also needed: aging itself is communicated as a public issue. Digital inclusion, eldercare, health information, education, family responsibility, consumer protection, and social participation appeared within the same issue environment, with government agencies, media organizations, social organizations, and educational institutions all contributing to public visibility.

This finding is consistent with an agenda-setting view of issue visibility, while also fitting newer work that treats attention in digital environments as distributed across institutional and user-generated channels rather than controlled by a single media agenda (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Neuman et al., 2014). It also complements media-ageism research by showing that the public meaning of aging is not confined to explicit stereotypes. Representation also occurs through issue selection: whether older people appear primarily in contexts of dependency and care, or as learners, digital participants, consumers, citizens, and users of public services (Camacho-Markina & Santos-Diez, 2025; World Health Organization, 2021).

Capability-oriented narratives coexist with everyday risks

A notable feature of the issue structure was the prominence of education, digital learning, age-friendly design, and social participation. These topics portray later life not only through protection and care but also through capability and participation. Such a pattern resonates with research emphasizing lifelong learning, skills, confidence, and supportive environments as conditions for meaningful digital engagement in later life (Kebede et al., 2022). In China, improvements in digital access coexist with persistent usage gaps, making capability development particularly important (Li et al., 2025; Yao et al., 2021).

At the same time, the corpus contained a second, more problem-oriented layer. Family caregiving, eldercare quality, service charges, older adults' rights, health-product marketing, and social support recurred in public discussion, particularly among negative items. This coexistence is analytically more defensible than claiming a historical shift from a "protection" narrative to an "empowerment" narrative, because the present study covers only three months and does not include a historical comparison. The findings instead suggest a dual issue structure in which capability-oriented narratives and everyday risk concerns are simultaneously visible.

Health-information concerns are especially important in this respect. Prior studies have shown that older Chinese adults' eHealth literacy varies with education, Internet experience, social support, and perceived credibility of online information (Qin et al., 2026; Shi et al., 2023), while WeChat-based health information is encountered through multiple forms of seeking and browsing (Wang & Zhang, 2023). The prominence of health products, information verification, and consumer risk in the present corpus therefore reflects a broader challenge: digital inclusion increases opportunities for health information access but also increases exposure to uncertain information environments.

Platformed visibility and the "traffic–authority" structure

The short-video share of the corpus is the most striking platform-level result, but it needs careful interpretation. Platformization research stresses that platforms organize visibility through infrastructures, metrics, interfaces, commercial incentives, and distribution mechanisms (Poell et al., 2019; van Dijck et al., 2018). Accordingly, a high item count cannot be reduced to audience

preference alone. It reflects a combination of content supply, platform affordances, data accessibility, monitoring coverage, and user activity.

Nevertheless, the imbalance matters descriptively. Short-video services constituted a major site in which aging-related content became visible, while central and provincial media retained a strong role in policy communication and institutional information supply. This combination suggests a platform ecology in which volume and authority are not necessarily located in the same channel. The "traffic–authority" label captures this coexistence without assuming that high-volume short-video content is more influential than authoritative news or that institutional media control the wider conversation.

This interpretation also helps position the study relative to Yuan and Jia (2021), who found that online public attention and news-report emphases on older adults' digital divide were not fully aligned. The current data similarly point toward multiple communicative centers, but the present analysis does not directly compare issue rankings across media and public subsets. Future work with item-level data could test whether particular topics originate or peak in different channels and whether platform-specific issue structures systematically diverge.

Aging-related attention as recurrent activation

The temporal pattern showed repeated waves rather than a single sustained surge. Mid-to-late April produced the largest peak, followed by smaller increases in May and a more stable June. This resembles the complex attention dynamics described in digital agenda-setting research, where traditional and social media may react to shared events while maintaining partly different rhythms (Neuman et al., 2014). In the present study, event-related activation around education, age-friendly digital initiatives, policy communication, and service innovation appears to have periodically raised the visibility of a longer-term public issue.

This pattern is useful for distinguishing aging-related communication from purely crisis-driven topics. Aging is a durable structural condition, but public attention to it is episodic. The empirical implication is that long-term issues may remain visible through a sequence of smaller events rather than through continuous high-intensity coverage. Because the present dataset does not separately model media and public attention over time, however, it cannot establish who led whom or whether one platform caused attention to rise elsewhere.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, the observation period was approximately three months. The data can describe patterns within that period but cannot establish long-term historical change. Claims such as a completed "video turn," a durable transformation in aging narratives, or sustained growth in public attention would require longitudinal evidence across substantially longer periods.Second, the corpus was obtained from a commercial public-opinion monitoring platform. Different channels vary in public accessibility, data openness, content-production frequency, and the provider's collection coverage. Information volume should therefore not be interpreted as a population estimate of the true amount of aging-related communication on each platform.Third, topic clustering and sentiment classification partly rely on proprietary platform algorithms. Because full model specifications and validation metrics are unavailable, these outputs should be treated as exploratory descriptive indicators. The especially low proportion of

negative sentiment warrants future validation through manual coding or an independent text-classification model.

This study intentionally prioritizes rapid use of existing aggregate data. Item-level analysis would allow stronger tests of media–public agenda differences, topic-specific sentiment, platform heterogeneity, and temporal lead–lag relationships. Those analyses are important next steps, but they are beyond the descriptive scope of the current study.

Conclusion

This study shows that aging-related communication in China's digital media environment is broader than a narrowly defined discussion of eldercare or older adults' technology use. During the observation period, public visibility was organized around digital capability and education, age-friendly services, health information, eldercare, family support, rights, risk, and social participation. The overall sentiment profile was dominated by neutral and positive content, but negative items concentrated around concrete service, rights, and consumer-risk concerns. Short-video platforms accounted for a large majority of monitored items, while authoritative news media remained prominent institutional information providers. Attention also fluctuated through recurrent event-related peaks rather than a single burst.

Taken together, the findings support a shift in analytical focus from asking only how older adults use media to asking how aging itself is made publicly visible across a platformized communication environment. The resulting issue space combines capability and vulnerability, everyday experience and institutional discourse, and high-volume platform circulation with authoritative information supply. This broader perspective can help communication, public health, and aging research better understand how digital societies define the opportunities and problems associated with later life.

Statement

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