

Digital Exclusion: Exploring the Impact of COVID-19 Policies on Elderly Mobility Via a Comparative Study of Australia and China

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Introduction

By the end of 2014, China's tallest building and the world's second-tallest skyscraper was built in Shanghai's financial district of Pudong, named Shanghai Tower. A jewel in the heart of the district, it symbolises the success and wealth of the district. In 2015, Pudong's gross domestic product achieved USD \$113.5 billion (CEIC, 2023). Despite this prosperity, at the same time, older people were crowding out an already-strained public health system and were relying on family members for long-term care. Likewise, in Australia, both the public and private health systems are over-pressured by the elderly due to the cultural tendency to place them in assisted living facilities. For both countries, the situation of older-population groups has been overshadowed by rapid social progress centred on the middle class, which is often seen as the main priority for development and the main driver of economic growth. This global urban development trend, which does not consider or support marginalised groups, was amplified by the sudden appearance of the COVID-19 pandemic. Contrary to the heated academic debate about the effectiveness of governments in controlling the spread of COVID-19, this article focuses on the social impact of government policies, particularly on older people. Through a comparative study of Australia and China, the paper discusses changes in the day-to-day mobility of older people during COVID-19 and how other disadvantaged groups were affected by these changes. The first section identifies the hidden skill requirement for smartphone and technology use behind Australian and Chinese government policies. It analyses the impact of these needs on the elderly's mobility from transportation and healthcare perspectives. The second section discusses how Australia and China reproduce and re-emphasise women's role as an unpaid care workforce in response to constraints on older people's mobility. Through emphasising the role of technology, digital exclusion and gender, this essay emphasises the disproportionate effect of COVID-19 on marginalised populations and the lack of inclusive policies in both countries that address intersecting factors.

Methodology

The aim of this paper is to explore the social impact of COVID-19 from a micro perspective, examining how older people's mobility was limited by the COVID-19 policy and how they and other social groups responded to it. In order to explore and understand the behaviours and interactions of different social groups, the theoretical basis of this paper is built upon initial personal experiences of the authors, followed by an indepth literature analysis relating to the fields of public health, human security and digital analysis, and applying the acquired knowledge to a COVID-19 context. China and Australia were chosen as the focus of this paper due to their similar approaches to the pandemic while having different political structures and political ideologies. By examining the similarities and differences in the impediments to the mobility of elders in the two countries, the paper emphasises that the urban development trend of neglecting

marginalised groups is global. In addition, it aims to show how policies oriented towards economic interests and efficiency may lead to the sacrifice of inferior groups, regardless of the political structure of the country.

Digital exclusion and how it affects the elderly in China and Australia

Due to the social distancing norms and worldwide lockdowns, the surge in the use of digital technologies became inevitable during and after COVID-19. In both Australia and China, older people are facing difficulties adapting to new ways of working and living, as smartphone use has gone from optional to mandatory under government policy. On 11 March 2020, China's State Council launched a mini app called 'telecommunication data-based travel itinerary card' to help employers and community management departments check whether people have visited any epidemic-stricken areas in the past 14 days (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2020). Without the card, people were not allowed to enter shopping malls, workplaces and public transportation. Answering the question 'Is the "itinerary card" accessible to everyone?', China's State Council replied, 'As long as you have a mobile phone' (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2020). The social isolation experienced by older people during COVID-19 deepened as smartphones became essential for tracking contacts and accessing public spaces (Australian eSafety Commissioner, 2018; Tsetoura, 2022). Based on these two key policies, the following paragraphs discuss the influence of these policies on elder mobility.

Australia's perspective

In Australia, the COVID-19 pandemic emphasised the essentiality of smartphones and deepened the social isolation experienced by older Australians (Australian eSafety Commissioner, 2018). As digital technology became integral for accessing services and maintaining social connections, seniors lacking digital literacy or smartphone access found themselves increasingly marginalised (Australian eSafety Commissioner, 2018). The pandemic exacerbated this issue as smartphones became mandatory tools for contact tracing and accessing public spaces (Tsetoura, 2022). Consequently, many older individuals experienced heightened social exclusion, resulting in feelings of loneliness and detachment from societal activities.

China's experience

The introduction of a 'telecommunication data-based travel itinerary card' in China has led to a significant reduction in social interaction among the elderly population. The unmet need for social interaction during lockdowns became a primary source of complaints about COVID-19 policies among older individuals (Liu *et al.*, 2021). This reduction of social interaction was led by the limited access to urban green spaces, park and shopping facilities, as well as public transportation due to the inaccessibility of itinerary cards and mobile phones. In addition, the mobility of the elderly was further restrained by the social pressure from other social groups. Blame and verbal abuse from younger generations became a distressing reality for many older individuals, particularly for what was perceived as their 'inappropriate' use of mobile phones (Sina, 2020). In the research about elderly mobility during the COVID-19 in Kunming, one interviewee described his experience of being asked to scan a code on a bus, which he failed to do because his phone was not a smartphone, saying, 'I told the driver, he asked me to get out [...]. I argued with the driver. Then suddenly those passengers shouted at me and drove me out' (Liu *et al.*, 2021: 8). Elders are hence described as 'uncooperative', 'trouble making' and 'selfish'. Behind these descriptions shows the trend in which the right to the city became increasingly determined by social groups' efficiency and their adherence to social order.

Older persons, however, were considered merely passive order-breakers. It was government policy that denied the right of the elderly to enter the city and rationalised that denial by reinforcing the trend.

Intersectional analysis of digital exclusion: Who pays for the emerging problem of mobility of the elderly?

In China and Australia, policies during COVID-19 promoted the digital exclusion of older people, ultimately leading to their exclusion from public spaces and reduced mobility due to restrictions on public transport. On the other hand, it has been argued that the spread of digital technologies benefitted older people by providing more efficient and cost-effective healthcare. The COVID-19 pandemic prompted a significant shift towards e-health in Australia (Tsetoura, 2022). Meanwhile, e-health played a pivotal role in managing the healthcare crisis during the pandemic in China (Cheng *et al.*, 2020). The nation rapidly adopted e-health solutions, leveraging its advanced digital infrastructure to respond to the healthcare needs of its massive population. However, for the elderly population, online contact was perceived as a poor substitute for human interaction (Liu *et al.*, 2021). In both countries, while e-health improved healthcare access and reduced the need for in-person visits, the elderly – who may be less familiar with digital technology – encountered challenges in using these services (Cheng *et al.*, 2020). The digital divide became a barrier to accessing essential healthcare information and services, potentially leading to disparities in health outcomes among older populations.

In the context of declining mobility of the elderly and inaccessibility of e-health, the need for family caregivers has been recreated and emphasised. One consequential effect of the pandemic is the transformation of unpaid family caregivers into ‘responsible citizens’ charged with meeting the needs of the older generation without state support (Akhter *et al.*, 2022). For both China and Australia, an imbalance in unpaid care labour emerged during COVID-19, primarily falling on women – whether they were daughters or daughters-in-law of the elderly people they cared for (Liu *et al.*, 2021; WGEA, 2016). In Australia, unpaid care labour has long been a focal point in feminist economic discussions, with its monetary value in that country estimated as USD \$650.1 billion per year, equivalent to 50.6 per cent of the country’s GDP (WGEA, 2016). In China, traditional family cultures and the concept of ‘Xiao’, a Confucian virtue promoting modesty and obedience to family elders, played a pivotal role in shaping the mobility of both younger and older generations during the COVID-19 period (Liu *et al.*, 2021). Older people increasingly moved in with their families due to growing insecurity, and the familiarity of younger family members with smartphones eased their worries about daily necessities (Liu *et al.*, 2021). In both countries, changes in the daily mobility of older people as a result of COVID-19 policies have worsened the situation for other disadvantaged groups as well, as they have further exacerbated women’s inequalities in the labour market, making it a challenge to strike a balance between paid and unpaid work.

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the importance of considering the impact of policies on the mobility and wellbeing of older people during the pandemic. It shows that digital exclusion, emphasised by policies implemented in China and Australia during the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately affected marginalised populations, especially older people. The paper also argues that digital exclusion reinforces structural gender inequalities and underscores the need for age-inclusive policies that address intersecting factors to promote equitable access to technology and public spaces (WGEA, 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic

has presented an opportunity for governments to re-evaluate their approach to older people's mobility and work towards creating more age-inclusive policies that prioritise their human security and wellbeing.

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