

Aging in the Digital Tsunami: Older Micro-Influencers, Digital Inclusion, and Dynamic Access on Douyin

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Abstract

As China undergoes rapid demographic aging, older Wanghong (influencers over 60) on platforms like Douyin challenge traditional digital inclusion frameworks that conceptualize access as linear progression through motivational, material, skills, and usage dimensions. This study examines how older micro-Wanghong navigate challenges during content creation, revealing critical gaps in existing digital inclusion theory. Drawing on an exploratory qualitative study of 11 micro-Wanghong, we develop the *dynamic access* concept that reconceptualizes digital inclusion as continuous adaptation across three dimensions: motivational resilience (maintaining creator identity despite platform constraints), adaptive skill development (ongoing competency evolution responding to platform changes), and algorithmic navigation (strategic responses to systematic platform exclusions). Our analysis reveals systematic algorithmic exclusion through temporal marginalization (algorithms favoring high-frequency posting patterns that disadvantage older micro-Wanghong's rhythms), knowledge domain restrictions (automated content moderation limiting topics relevant to older adults), and culture misalignment (platform architectures optimized for entertainment conflicting with older micro-Wanghong's knowledge transformation preferences) that create structural barriers independent of individual competencies. Despite these constraints, participants demonstrate sophisticated adaptive strategies enabling sustained creative participation through ongoing platform negotiation rather than static skill application. These findings extend Van Dijk's digital inclusion theory by demonstrating how platform-mediated content creation collapses traditional access boundaries into ongoing negotiation processes. The *dynamic access* addresses temporal dimensions which often assumed in digital appropriation or inclusion theories, positioning meaningful participation as requiring continuous adaptive capacity rather than one-time achievement. We argue that digital inclusion policy must evolve beyond basic access provision toward supporting ongoing adaptation to platform evolution.

Keywords

digital inclusion, dynamic access, older influencers, Wanghong, Douyin, social media, China

Introduction

In China's rapidly digitalizing society, older adults are increasingly transforming from passive technology consumers to active content creators on platforms like Douyin. By 2023, Douyin users aged 50 and above were creating around 23 million videos per day, underscoring the sustained scale of older creators' production (China Daily, 2025). This phenomenon of older Wanghong (网红, internet celebrities) challenges fundamental assumptions about digital inclusion, revealing critical gaps in how we conceptualize meaningful digital participation in platform-mediated environments. While scholarship has extensively documented older adults' struggles with basic technology access and skills (Helsper, 2012; Robinson et al., 2015), the emergence of older micro-Wanghong, those with

more than 10,000 followers operating without professional support, exposes the inadequacy of existing frameworks to capture the complexities of creative digital engagement that requires ongoing adaptation to platform evolution.

This transformation occurs within China's unique socio-demographic context. By the end of 2024, China had about 310.3 million people aged 60 and over, approximately 22%

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of the population, highlighting the scale of aging and the associated policy challenge (The State Council, 2025). At the internet level, the user base is close to gender parity, 50.4% male and 49.6% female as of June 2025, providing a reasonable baseline for interpreting older users' participation (China Innovation Watch, 2025). The convergence of the formally recognized silver-haired economy with the platform-driven Wanghong economy creates new possibilities for older adults' economic and social engagement. Yet this convergence also generates tensions between traditional Chinese expectations of appropriate elder behavior and the performative demands of influencer culture that operates through algorithmic systems optimized for continuous engagement. For the generation of "empty nesters" created by the one-child policy's legacy, digital platforms offer vital channels for social connection and identity expression, yet these same platforms embed temporal logics that systematically challenge older adults' participation patterns (Zhang, 2020).

Despite growing visibility of successful older influencers, we know little about the structural barriers and ongoing adaptive negotiations involved when older adults attempt sustained content creation. This study addresses this gap by examining how Van Dijk's (2005) digital inclusion framework, with its four dimensions of motivational, physical, skills, and usage access, operates when older adults transition from consumers to creators within platform environments that continuously evolve. Through investigating older micro-Wanghong experiences on Douyin, we argue that this transition demands theoretical reconceptualization that accounts for the temporal dimension of platform-mediated participation, where digital inclusion becomes an ongoing process of adaptation rather than sequential achievement.

Our analysis reveals how platform architectures create systematic exclusions that require continuous strategic responses, suggesting that meaningful digital inclusion in creator economies depends not merely on initial access achievement but on sustained adaptive capacity to navigate evolving algorithmic systems. By focusing on micro-influencers who manage these challenges through individual rather than institutional resources, lacking professional management teams, brand partnerships, or platform support available to major influencers, this study offers critical insights into the authentic complexities of achieving meaningful digital inclusion in platform economies where content creation increasingly determines social participation and relevance, yet where the rules of participation continuously shift through algorithmic and policy changes.

To address these gaps, this study integrates digital inclusion theories to explore two main research questions:

Research Question 1 (RQ1). What specific challenges do older micro-Wanghong encounter across different dimensions of access (motivational, physical, skills, and usage) when creating content on Douyin?

Research Question 2 (RQ2). How do their adaptive strategies and persistent barriers suggest limitations in current digital inclusion frameworks that primarily focus on individual capacity-building?

By focusing on micro-Wanghong, this research seeks to offer a more nuanced understanding of their digital engagement, contributing to the discourse on aging, social participation, and digital inclusion. Ultimately, this research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the digital engagement of older Wanghong, providing insights that could inform future strategies for digital inclusion, social policy, and support for older populations in the digital age.

Literature Review

Reframing Digital Inclusion: From Access to Agency

Digital inclusion scholarship has evolved significantly since early binary conceptualizations of the digital divide. Van Dijk's (2005, 2020) influential framework reconceptualized digital inclusion as a multidimensional process encompassing four different kinds of hierarchical access: motivational access (the desire to use digital technologies), material or physical access (device ownership and connectivity), skills access (operational to strategic capabilities), and usage access (purposes and patterns of actual use). This sequential model positioned inclusion as progressing linearly from initial motivation through material provision and skill development to meaningful usage.

However, this framework has attracted systematic critique along three structural dimensions. First, it exhibits pattern confusion by treating all digital engagement as stages on a single continuum. An empirical work by Ghobadi and Ghobadi (2015) demonstrates that the assumed sequential progression fails to capture how different access dimensions interact dynamically, highly motivated users may develop sophisticated skill despite limited physical access, directly contracting the framework's linear assumptions. Second, the framework demonstrates skill underestimation by focusing predominantly on operational competencies while neglecting the complex creative, social, and strategic capabilities required for meaningful digital participation. Third, and most critically, it neglects outcomes – emphasizing usage frequency over whether digital participation yields tangible benefits or enhances social inclusion (A. J. A. M. Van Deursen & Helsper, 2015).

Recent scholarship reveals additional temporal limitations in traditional digital inclusion frameworks. Hunsaker and Hargittai (2018) review of internet use among older adults highlights persistent digital inequalities across access, skills, and usage domains, particularly affecting older populations. While Ragnedda and Ruiu (2020) conceptualize digital capital as accumulated digital competencies and

technologies that can be transferred across contexts, these frameworks suggest the need to consider how technological environments continuously evolve, creating challenges for sustained digital participation that static models may not fully capture.

The tension between Van Dijk's approach and contextual critiques operates across multiple levels. Arora's (2019a, 2019b) work challenges Van Dijk's framework's assumption that digital inclusion follows predictable patterns across contexts, arguing that cultural values fundamentally shape what constitutes meaningful participation. At the empirical level, her research demonstrates how individuals in non-Western contexts may possess full access yet choose strategic non-participation for social preservation, a phenomenon Van Dijk's deficit-based model cannot explain. Recent Chinese scholarship further challenges Western-centric frameworks, with Li and Kostka's (2024) research on China's "gray digital divide" revealing how state-centric models of digital inclusion operate through collective welfare mechanisms, such as community-based digital support systems and family-mediated technology adoption, rather than individual empowerment. Xing and Yao's (2022) rural digital governance framework advocating for "co-construction, co-governance, and sharing" approaches where government departments, social organizations, and citizens participate together through digital platforms to achieve inclusive development outcomes.

Platform-Mediated Participation and Algorithmic Exclusions

The emergence of platform economies intensifies theoretical limitations in traditional digital inclusion frameworks. When digital participation increasingly requires content production, audience management, and algorithmic navigation, Van Dijk's (2005) usage access dimension, developed for an era of comparatively static technologies, websites and communication tools, proves inadequate. The framework cannot distinguish between passive consumption and active creation, a limitation particularly evident when examining older content creators who must continuously adapt their practices to platform changes while managing complex creator identities.

Platform studies scholarship reveals how algorithmic systems create systematic exclusions that operate independently of individual digital competencies. Noble's (2018) analysis of "algorithms of oppression" demonstrates how search and recommendation systems embed biases that systematically disadvantage marginalized groups, while Bucher's (2018) examination of algorithmic imaginary shows how users must develop sophisticated understanding of opaque systems to achieve visibility. Gillespie's (2018, 2020) work on content moderation reveals how platform governance operates through automated systems that reflect corporate priorities rather than user needs, creating structural barriers that individual skill development cannot overcome.

Chinese platform research provides additional insight into how algorithmic systems create age-specific exclusions. Lin and de Kloet's (2019) concept of "unlikely creative class" demonstrates how algorithms prioritize youth-oriented mainstream content, creating systematic invisibility for creators whose content doesn't align with platform optimization logics. Research on short-form video platforms demonstrates how algorithmic systems privilege-specific content patterns, high-frequency posting, immediate audience response, and trend participation, that align with youth-oriented platform cultures (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Schellewald, 2021). These algorithmic biases operate through what appears to be neutral technical optimization but actually reproduces existing social hierarchies through seemingly objective engagement metrics.

Recent scholarship on platform participation demonstrates the complex competencies required for digital creative work. While Duffy and Wissinger (2017) focus on how creators mythologize their precarious labor conditions and must maintain cross-platform tech savvy in an ever-changing digital landscape, their findings point to broader implications. The need to constantly adapt to new platforms and algorithmic changes, rather than applying stable skills, suggests that theoretical frameworks for understanding digital inclusion in creator economies should emphasize ongoing adaptive capacity over sequential skill achievement.

Creative Digital Engagement: The Missing Layer in Inclusion Research

The transition from digital consumption to content creation represents a fundamental shift in agency and participation that current inclusion frameworks fail to capture. Unlike consumption, content creation demands complex technical skills, platform-specific strategic knowledge, aesthetic judgment, and identity management capabilities that operate simultaneously rather than sequentially (Khamis et al., 2017). Recent empirical studies of older content creators reveal how they navigate multifaceted challenges, emotional vulnerability from public exposure, aesthetic decisions about self-presentation, and social negotiations with audiences, that existing digital divide framework cannot adequately theorize (Yan et al., 2024).

The complexity intensifies when content creation evolves into influence-building. Influencer practices require sophisticated strategic usage far exceeding basic digital literacy: understanding algorithmic distribution, building audience trust, managing parasocial relationships, and maintaining consistent brand identity (Khamis et al., 2017). These capabilities align more closely with professional digital marketing competencies than with the functional skills targeted by inclusion initiatives. The limited research on "granfluencers", predominantly examining successful Western cases, celebrates older adults' creative agency while overlooking

structural barriers faced by the majority attempting content creation without institutional support (Farinosi, 2023).

This theoretical gap becomes critical when examining micro-influencers who occupy a liminal space between amateur creators and professional influencers. They face unique challenges: insufficient followings to attract platform support or monetization opportunities, yet enough visibility to experience public scrutiny and performance pressure. Their experiences reveal how current conceptualizations of usage access, treating all digital activities as variations on a single dimension, obscure fundamentally different participation modes requiring distinct theoretical treatment that accounts for the ongoing adaptive labor required to sustain creative engagement within evolving platform environments.

Contextualizing Older Content Creators in China

Understanding older micro-Wanghong experiences requires examining how platform structures and cultural contexts create unique inclusion challenges beyond individual capabilities. Chinese platforms like Douyin embed specific logics that systematically marginalize older creators through algorithmic prioritization of high-traffic, youth-oriented, entertainment-focused content. Older creators' content, often featuring traditional skills, positive energy or slower-paced narratives, faces algorithmic invisibility despite technical proficiency, reflecting systematic design biases rather than individual capability deficits.

The Multi-Channel Network (MCN) system in China provides crucial intermediary support, offering technical training, content strategy, and platform navigation assistance. However, most micro-Wanghong operate independently, lacking access to these institutional resources available to commercially viable creators (Zhao & Liu, 2020). This structural disadvantage compounds individual access barriers, as older creators must simultaneously learn technical skills, decode platform logics, and develop content strategies without professional guidance, while also adapting to continuous platform evolution.

Cultural factors create additional complexity in the Chinese context. Confucian values traditionally venerate older adults, granting them respect and authority (Qi & Qian, 2021). Yet these same values embed expectations of dignified comportment potentially conflicting with influencer culture's performative demands and platform algorithms' optimization for entertainment content. Older adults face competing pressures: leveraging their accumulated wisdom and cultural capital while avoiding behaviors deemed age-inappropriate, creating tension that particularly affects motivational access as individuals may desire creative expression yet fear social judgment.

Intergenerational dynamics further complicate digital inclusion processes. Adult children and grandchildren often serve dual roles as technical supporters and moral supervisors, simultaneously enabling and constraining older adults'

digital activities (Wu & Jiang, 2021). Family members may assist with device setup and basic operations while discouraging content creation as undignified or risky. These relational factors shape not only skill development but also the boundaries of acceptable digital participation, creating social barriers that individual competency building cannot address.

The ascendance of older Wanghong can be attributed to the complementarity between older demographics' attributes and social media characteristics, creating dynamic equilibrium between content creators, audiences, and communication objects (Zhen, 2019). Platforms like Douyin provide stages for self-expression that resonate with older individuals' communication dynamics, supported by the growth of the short-form video sector, which provides both infrastructure and market recognition for older content creators (He, 2019). However, most existing literature focuses on prominent older influencers, overlooking the micro-Wanghong community that faces significant challenges in adapting to evolving platform environments without institutional support.

Methodology

This study adopts an exploratory qualitative design to open a new analytical space around older creators' participation on Douyin. Building on the two research questions introduced in the Introduction, we use semi-structured interviews with 11 micro-Wanghong ($\geq 10,000$ followers; all aged 60+) to surface processes, mechanisms and vocabulary for theorizing *dynamic access*. Through examining these questions, we contribute empirical insights that point toward the need to consider platform-level factors in digital inclusion theory, we aim to understand how older micro-Wanghong exercise agency within digital environments despite potential structural constraints.

Participant Recruitment

Given the increasing presence of older micro-Wanghong on Chinese social media platforms, this study focuses on Douyin as the primary site for investigation to understand the unique experiences and challenges faced by this group. The sampling criteria were based on age and follower count, employing a snowball sampling method to identify suitable participants. Consistent with the Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly of the People's Republic of China, participants were required to be at least 60 years old (Xinhua, 2012). In addition, within the contemporary Wanghong economy in China, "Wanghong" refers to individuals who monetize their online followings (Craig et al., 2021; Han, 2021). Thus, follower count was also a critical criterion, with a threshold of more than 10,000 followers used to capture micro-Wanghong (Gupta & Mahajan, 2020).

Initial participants were identified through a systematic search on Douyin using age-related keywords such as

Table 1. characteristics of Respondents.

Participant	Age	Gender	Follower count	Location (Province)	Previous occupation	Number of children
P1	74	Male	Above 100,000	Chongqing	Farmer	2
P2	61	Male	10,000–50,000	Shandong	Public Servant	1
P3	63	Male	10,000–50,000	Shandong	Military	1
P4	60	Female	Above 100,000	Shanxi	Self-employed	2
P5	64	Male	10,000–50,000	Beijing	Corporate board	1
P6	66	Male	10,000–50,000	Hebei	Farmer	3
P7	61	Male	10,000–50,000	Sichuan	Teacher	2
P8	60	Male	10,000–50,000	Chongqing	Chef	3
P9	62	Female	10,000–50,000	Yunnan	Doctor	1
P10	61	Female	50,000–100,000	Zhejiang	Horticulturist	2
P11	63	Female	10,000–50,000	Chongqing	Department manager	0

“older,” “grandpa,” and “grandma” combined with “creator” or “influencer.” Creators were initially contacted via private message to inquire about their interest in participating in the study; however, this approach yielded limited success due to trust concerns. Subsequently, we observed that older micro-Wanghong regularly engaged in Douyin live streaming. To build rapport, we joined their livestreams as regular viewers and gradually established trust through ongoing interaction. Only after developing this relationship did we invite them to participate in the study. After successfully recruiting four of these individuals, we employed snowball sampling by asking these participants to recommend other older micro-Wanghong in their networks who might be interested in participating.

Snowball sampling was chosen for three specific reasons aligned with our research objectives. First, older micro-Wanghong represent a relatively hidden population that can be difficult to identify through conventional sampling methods, particularly since age is not always explicitly stated in profiles. Second, this approach allowed us to access trust networks among older content creators, which was crucial given potential hesitation among this demographic to participate in academic research. Third, the method enabled us to capture diverse content types through targeted referrals, as we specifically requested participants to recommend others with different content focuses or platform experiences.

We adopted an iterative approach, analyzing transcripts in parallel with data collection. By the ninth interview no new first-cycle codes were generated and subsequent interviews only confirmed existing categories, signaling thematic saturation. Because micro-Wanghong over age 60 constitute a small and hard-to-reach population, an $n=11$ was therefore deemed sufficient to capture the range of experiences relevant to our research questions while allowing in-depth exploration of each case. The goal was to generate in-depth insights to a hard-to-reach and growing population, rather than generalizability.

To ensure anonymity and privacy, pseudonyms were assigned to participants, and only the range of their follower counts at the time of the interview was disclosed. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant university ethics committee before data collection commenced, and all participants provided informed consent.

The socio-demographic characteristics of participants are detailed in Table 1. All participants were aged 60 or above, with the oldest being 74 years old. The sample included a majority of male participants ($n=7$) and four female participants. Two participants had follower counts exceeding 100,000, one between 50,000 and 100,000, and the remainder between 10,000 and 50,000, reflecting varying levels of influence. Geographically, participants were distributed across several provinces, including Chongqing, Shandong, Shanxi, Beijing, and Hebei, indicating diverse regional and cultural representation. All participants were retired, with prior occupations ranging from farming and public service to corporate board roles. Family dynamics varied, with participants reporting between one and three children. However, we acknowledged the gender imbalance in our sample may not accurately reflect the actual gender distribution in this community.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, conducted using an interview guide developed in Chinese to minimize potential biases related to language and comprehension. The interview questions were pilot-tested to ensure validity and reliability. Interviews lasted between 56 and 82 minutes, following an iterative analysis approach.

The semi-structured interviews followed a guide comprising 20 core questions organized into five thematic areas: (1) personal background and motivations for becoming a Douyin creator; (2) technical experiences and challenges related to content creation, including platform navigation,

video editing, and algorithm understanding; (3) social dynamics, including audience interaction, family relationships, and peer connections with other content creators; (4) content creation processes and adaptation strategies; and (5) monetization and self-perception of Wanghong status. Sample questions included: “What motivated you to start creating content on Douyin?”, “What technical aspects of content creation do you find most challenging?”, “How do family members and friends respond to your Douyin activities?”, and “What strategies have you developed to overcome challenges you’ve encountered?”

Each interview began with general questions about the participant’s Douyin journey before progressing to more specific inquiries about challenges encountered and strategies developed. Follow-up questions were used to explore emerging themes in greater depth. The interviewer followed the conversation, probing interesting points with prompts like “Could you tell me more about that?” or “How did that make you feel?”.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase approach to thematic analysis, chosen for its flexibility in identifying patterns within qualitative data while maintaining theoretical sensitivity. Initial coding was conducted via NVivo 14 by the main author independently, with codes generated inductively from the data rather than using a pre-existing coding framework. This inductive approach allowed themes to emerge organically from participants’ experiences rather than being constrained by predetermined categories, though the researchers remained theoretically sensitized to active aging concepts.

The coding process yielded 142 initial codes, which were then collated into potential themes through an iterative process of discussion and refinement between researchers. Emerging themes were reviewed in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set to ensure they accurately reflected participants’ experiences. NVivo 14 software was used to organize and manage the coded data, facilitating the identification of patterns across different participant characteristics (e.g. gender, region, and follower count).

Through this process, three major themes emerged, each theme was then analyzed in relation to our research questions about challenges and strategies, with particular attention to how they connected to digital inclusion theory. For example, codes related to “memory difficulties,” “physical limitations,” and “knowledge gaps” were grouped under the theme of “age-related challenges,” while codes such as “family support,” “peer learning,” and “continuous practice” were organized under adaptation strategies.

Notably, to ensure the accuracy and credibility of the findings, member checking was adopted by allowing participants to review and validate the interpreted data. This process helped confirm that the themes and conclusions drawn from

the analysis accurately represented their experiences and perspectives (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Results

Our analysis reveals how older micro-Wanghong navigate digital content creation through *dynamic access* processes that fundamentally challenge Van Dijk’s (2020) static conceptualization of digital inclusion. Building on Van Dijk’s four-level framework while extending it toward temporal and adaptive dimensions, we identify *dynamic access* as the ongoing negotiation between individual adaptive capacity and structural platform barriers. This concept captures three interconnected processes: motivational resilience, adaptive skill development, and algorithmic navigation, each representing continuous cycles of challenge and adaptation rather than episodic engagement with digital participation challenges. Table 2 illustrates how these *dynamic access* dimensions manifest through specific challenges and corresponding adaptive strategies.

Motivational Resilience: Beyond Initial Technology Interest

Van Dijk’s motivational access assumes technology interest as precondition for digital participation. However, our participants demonstrated motivational resilience – the continuous reconstruction of creator identity against discouragements and structural barriers. This process extends motivational access from initial interest to sustained identity work in the face of platform-mediated exclusions. As digital inclusion theory suggests, the structural demands of content creation significantly exceed those of routine consumption (Robinson et al., 2015), amplifying perceived barriers for older micro-Wanghong.

Participant 3’s experience illustrates this temporal complexity:

Shooting short videos is a totally different thing. If you just use Douyin, the only thing is to swipe up and down to watch the video, and the system can also recommend videos to you automatically. But for making videos, there are a lot of steps you have to remember, click where to start shooting, where to choose filters, where to add subtitles, all these steps are to be remembered. But honestly, at this age, my ability to accept new things is poor, maybe you learn today, someone teaches you hand-to-hand, you get it at that moment, but you might forget it in three days. (63 years old, male)

This narrative reveals three theoretical insights that extend Van Dijk’s framework. First, the phrase “totally different thing” signifies qualitative transformation in digital engagement rather than linear skill progression. Content creation activates age-related algorithmic exclusion, systematic barriers that position older adults as deficient rather than different (Stypińska, 2023). Second, the temporal markers (“learn today,” “forget it in three days”) demonstrate how

Table 2. Challenges and Adaptation Strategies.

Dynamic access dimension	Specific challenges	Adaptation strategies
<i>Motivational Resilience</i>	1. Recurring self-doubt about age-related capabilities 2. Competitive pressure from younger creators 3. Identity reconstruction as public figures	1. Continuous identity negotiation against ageist stereotypes 2. Niche content development leveraging life experience 3. Strategic persistence as algorithmic necessity
<i>Adaptive Skill Development</i>	1. Platform evolution requiring continuous learning 2. Cultural translation competence needs 3. Temporal maintenance costs of participation	1. Self-teaching through trial and error 2. Turning barriers into content 3. Intergenerational collaboration networks
<i>Algorithmic Navigation</i>	1. Algorithmic unpredictability 2. Content policy restrictions on older adults' knowledge 3. Platform-culture misalignment	1. Anthropomorphic algorithmic understanding 2. Strategic autonomy preservation 3. Maintaining regular posting schedules regardless of immediate results

motivational access requires ongoing engagement rather than one-time achievement. Third, the attribution to age activates internalized ageist stereotypes that create additional emotional labor absent from Van Dijk's individual-focused model.

The competitive platform environment intensifies these motivational challenges in ways that reveal the inadequacy of static access frameworks. Participant 5's structural analysis positions this as platform-level rather than individual limitation:

In the short video field, too many people have entered this market . . . it's very hard for most older people to compete with the younger ones. (64 years old, male)

This competitive framing reveals how older creators experience content creation as an ongoing struggle rather than a one-time achievement. The participant's awareness of being in a "market" with "younger creators" suggests that platform participation requires continuous effort to maintain relevance, a departure from traditional digital inclusion frameworks that assume stable competencies once acquired. Participant 2 extends this analysis by highlighting platform dynamics that compound age-based disadvantages:

Douyin is constantly bringing in new creators, if they [audience] find someone else in the same age group or with a similar style, they might just move on. (61 years old, male)

This observation reveals understanding of audience attention as scarce resource requiring continuous renewal – positioning persistence not as individual characteristic but as structural necessity for platform participation (Lin & de Kloet, 2019).

Adaptive Skill Development: Continuous Learning as Structural Necessity

Traditional digital divide frameworks conceptualize skills as achievable competencies. Our analysis reveals adaptive skill

development as ongoing process necessitated by platform evolution and algorithmic demands. This finding extends A. J. Van Deursen and van Dijk's (2019) material access beyond device ownership to encompass the temporal maintenance costs, the ongoing effort required to sustain platform participation as systems continuously evolve.

Participant 2's learning approach exemplifies this dynamic process:

When I have time, I open these courses and learn as I go along . . . I'm still learning. Whenever I see a good quality video, I try to figure out how they were made based on my understanding. . . I see very refined videos and I learn from them. (61 years old, male)

The temporal marker "still learning" challenges digital inclusion models that assume stable competency endpoints. This autodidactic approach represents what recent scholarship conceptualizes as ongoing skill adaptation necessitated by platform complexity rather than individual choice (Farias-Gaytan et al., 2023). The reverse-engineering strategy ("figure out how they were made") demonstrates sophisticated platform literacy absent from Van Dijk's operational skills taxonomy.

Participant 6's parallel experience reinforces this pattern while revealing the persistence required for *Dynamic Access*: "People told me how to do it, but even after learning, I still wasn't very good at it initially" (66 years old, male). The temporal marker "initially" suggests eventual improvement through sustained effort, yet the admission of struggle despite direct instruction challenges assumptions that barriers are merely informational. This finding demonstrates how adaptive skill development requires the learning resilience, sustained engagement despite repeated difficulties that extends beyond traditional skill acquisition models.

Dialect challenges illuminate how cultural identity intersects with adaptive skill requirements. Participant 1's solution reveals creative adaptation strategies: "With short videos, it's

easier because we can add subtitles. Over time, our audience grew accustomed to (my) way of speaking” (74 years old, male). This strategy transforms potential cultural barriers into distinctive content elements, demonstrating the conversion of structural limitations into competitive advantages through ongoing adaptation. This process requires continuous cultural translation competence that extends beyond Van Dijk’s framework into identity negotiation territories.

The *dynamic access* concept reveals how participants construct multidimensional support systems to sustain adaptive skill development. Participant 6’s intergenerational collaboration illustrates this hybridity: “I’m not good at this and often have to ask my grandson for help. . . I seldom do the editing myself” (66 years old, male). This frank acknowledgment of perceived limitations coupled with strategic resource mobilization challenges assumptions about individual digital mastery. Rather than viewing assistance as failure, participants frame collaboration as pragmatic adaptation that enables sustained content creation despite skill gaps.

Participants also developed emotional regulation strategies essential for sustained platform participation. Participant 1’s conflict avoidance approach demonstrates mature boundary management: “I don’t argue with them or quarrel.” This restraint, choosing non-engagement over confrontation, preserves emotional resources for creative work while maintaining platform presence. Participant 4’s observation about algorithmic demands emphasizes the temporal dimension of this adaptation: “You can’t just stop streaming; if you do, Douyin forgets you. . . everything gets mixed up” (60 years old, female). This anthropomorphic understanding (“Douyin forgets you”) guides consistent posting schedules that maintain algorithmic visibility, transforming persistence from individual trait to structural necessity for platform relevance.

Algorithmic Navigation: Responding to Systematic Platform Exclusions

Our analysis identifies algorithmic navigation as the third *dynamic access* dimension, encompassing ongoing responses to systematic age-related exclusion in digitalized societies (Stypińska & Franke, 2023). These finding positions algorithmic operation as active barriers requiring continuous adaptive responses rather than neutral technical features. Participant 4’s experience with algorithmic unpredictability demonstrates the systematic nature of these barriers:

I took a day off . . . and the next day when I resumed, Douyin couldn’t recognize me anymore . . . The algorithm started pushing people to my stream who didn’t match my usual audience. (60 years old, female)

The anthropomorphization (“couldn’t recognize me”) reveals how creators must develop mental models of opaque

algorithmic systems. This represents the algorithmic awareness within platform literacy concept (Ha & Kim, 2024), understanding that remains absent from traditional digital skills frameworks yet proves crucial for sustained content creation. The phrase “couldn’t recognize me” indicates understanding of algorithmic memory as temporal process requiring continuous maintenance rather than a one-time establishment.

Content policy restrictions reveal how platform governance creates systematic knowledge exclusions. Participant 5’s frustration illustrates age-specific targeting:

If I share some experiences, like about fasting, it will tell you this content can only be seen by yourself . . . it’s a violation (to the platform restrictions). (64 years old, male)

This restriction on health-related content, knowledge domains particularly relevant to older adults, highlights algorithmic exclusion within dynamic digital access. Platform policies systematically devalue knowledge forms associated with older generations, creating structural barriers that individual skill development cannot overcome. The passive construction emphasizes creators’ powerlessness against automated systems that lack transparency or appeal mechanisms.

Remarkably, participants demonstrated strategic agency through unanimous rejection of MCN partnerships. Participant 2’s reasoning reveals sophisticated cost-benefit analysis: “I’m not interested. While it’s true that collaboration might bring more support, I’m wary of too much polish, which often hides ulterior motives” (61 years old, male).

This wariness of “polish” suggests recognition that professionalization might compromise authenticity – a key asset for older content creators navigating algorithmic systems that prioritize engagement metrics over content quality. Participant 10’s parallel response adds another dimension of strategic evaluation:

Over the years on Douyin, many have contacted me, hoping I would join them to help manage my account, saying they could turn me into a big internet celebrity, haha. But I’m still wary, they keep asking and wanting to add me on WeChat, it doesn’t seem reliable to me. (61 years old, female)

This segment indicates skepticism toward promises of influencer transformation, while privacy concerns reveal sophisticated understanding of data vulnerability. This strategic autonomy preservation represents *dynamic access* adaptation that prioritizes sustainable participation over potential growth that might compromise agency.

Platform content preference creates additional structural barriers that require ongoing algorithmic navigation. Participant 5’s reflection on platform-content misalignment

reveals fundamental tensions between platform affordances and older creators' content goals:

As an older person, it's hard to find what you're looking for in Douyin, which just provides some laughs, . . . Older creators aren't very suited to Douyin's market. (64 years old, male)

This observation identifies structural exclusion through content preference, where technical access cannot overcome fundamental incompatibilities between platform logics optimized for entertainment consumption and older creators' preferences for knowledge transmission or cultural sharing. The dismissive characterization contrasts with older creators' desires for meaningful cultural transmission, requiring ongoing strategic adaptation.

Together, these findings illustrate how *dynamic access* extends Van Dijk's sequential model by reframing access as recursive and time-dependent, and challenges frameworks that conflate digital use with meaningful participation by showing how creators' inclusion depends on continuous negotiation with platform governance rather than one-off competence gains.

Discussion

The emergence of older adults as content creators fundamentally challenges existing digital inclusion theory, revealing gaps that require theoretical reconceptualization rather than incremental adjustment. Our *dynamic access* concept builds directly on the evolution of digital divide and inclusion research, particularly A. J. Van Deursen and Van Dijk's (2019) recognition that meaningful digital participation increasingly depends on sophisticated usage competencies rather than mere connectivity. However, their analysis focuses primarily on informational and communicative activities, stopping short of theorizing how usage requirements transform when digital participation shifts from consumption to content creation. This gap becomes critical when examining older micro-Wanghong, whose experiences reveal how traditional sequential access models prove inadequate for understanding creative digital engagement.

Digital inequality tends to reinforce existing social disadvantages, creating what researchers describe as an "inequality loop" where limited digital competencies trap people in cycles of recursive disadvantage (Ragnedda et al., 2022; Van Dijk, 2020). Yet our participants' experiences reveal a more complex dynamic that extends this cycle concept in unexpected directions. Successful content creation paradoxically intensifies rather than resolves motivational access challenges, as creator identity becomes vulnerable to platform-mediated discouragements that basic digital participation does not generate. This finding suggests that advanced digital activities can simultaneously provide increased social connection opportunities while creating new forms of exclusion risk – a complexity that existing frameworks struggle to accommodate.

The temporal dimension emerges as particularly crucial for understanding how platform-mediated participation differs from earlier forms of digital engagement. Where A. J. Van Deursen and Van Dijk's (2011, 2014) research emphasizes that digital divides require multifaceted approaches addressing access, skills, and usage dimensions, our analysis reveals how content creation requires ongoing negotiation across motivational, skill, and structural dimensions that operate recursively rather than sequentially. Platform environments create what we might understand as moving targets for digital inclusion, where competencies must be continuously updated not due to individual learning needs but because platforms themselves evolve to maintain competitive advantage and user engagement.

This temporal complexity becomes evident in how our participants navigate the sophisticated understanding of platform dynamics required for meaningful social media participation. Our analysis reveals how content creation requires continuous adaptation to platform evolution rather than stable competency application. The difference between consumption and creation activities proves more fundamental than existing frameworks recognize, suggesting that usage access itself requires theoretical disaggregation to capture these qualitatively different participation modes.

Platform governance emerges as a structural force that operates independently of individual adaptive capacity or community support systems, extending beyond the scope of Van Dijk's (2020) multidimensional policy framework. While Van Dijk acknowledges that digital inequality reinforces existing social inequality and recognizes the complexity of addressing structural barriers, his approach primarily focuses on policy interventions across technological, economic, educational, social, and persuasive dimensions. However, corporate platform power shapes inclusion possibilities through algorithmic design decisions that function outside democratic policy processes, creating systematic constraints that traditional intervention approaches cannot directly address. This reality requires extending Van Dijk's framework to account for how platform architectures embed particular cultural logics that favor-specific content forms regardless of creator competencies.

The temporal algorithmic marginalization we identify builds on Van Dijk's (2005) observation about how digital advantages concentrate among already privileged groups, but reveals how platform algorithms systematically privilege-specific temporal rhythms associated with younger, professionally-supported creators. This creates new forms of positional advantage that operate through technical systems rather than traditional social hierarchies, extending social stratification analysis into algorithmic governance territories where advantages and disadvantages become embedded in code rather than policy. Such algorithmic positioning operates through what appears to be neutral technical optimization but actually reproduces existing social hierarchies through seemingly objective engagement metrics.

The systematic restriction of knowledge domains particularly relevant to older adults, health experiences, traditional practices, intergenerational wisdom, through automated moderation systems illustrates how A. J. Van Deursen and Van Dijk's (2019) "usage patterns" analysis requires expansion to include content domain restrictions. These restrictions operate through automated systems that reflect platform priorities rather than user preferences, creating structural barriers that individual capability building cannot overcome, as Van Dijk (2020) would recognize. However, the platform-mediated nature of these barriers requires theoretical tools that existing digital divide frameworks do not provide.

Our analysis contributes to platform studies scholarship by demonstrating how age-related exclusions operate through systematic platform design rather than individual capability deficits, connecting with Lin and de Kloet's (2019) concept of "unlikely creative class" that shows how algorithms prioritize youth-oriented content while marginalizing older adults' knowledge forms. The unanimous rejection of MCN partnerships among our participants provides new empirical evidence about micro-influencer agency within China's creator economy, revealing how those who occupy positions between amateur creators and professional influencers develop strategic autonomy preservation that challenges assumptions about digital inclusion requiring institutional integration.

These findings also engage with broader debates about cultural context in digital inclusion research. Where Arora (2019) contextual critique emphasizes strategic non-participation as culturally appropriate response to digital pressures, our participants demonstrate strategic participation through adaptive mechanisms that preserve cultural authenticity while engaging platform economies. This suggests that meaningful digital inclusion may require maintaining independence from institutional capture rather than seeking professional integration, particularly for creators whose content draws on cultural knowledge forms that platform algorithms systematically devalue.

Dynamic access thus positions digital participation as continuous negotiation between individual adaptive strategies and structural platform barriers, revealing temporal dimensions absent from traditional digital divide models. This reconceptualization proves necessary not only for understanding older content creators but for grasping how platform-mediated participation fundamentally alters the nature of digital inclusion itself. As platform economies increasingly determine social visibility and cultural relevance, digital inclusion theory must account for the ongoing adaptive labor required to sustain meaningful creative participation within environments that continuously evolve to maximize engagement and commercial value.

Conclusion

In sum, older micro-Wanghong face recurring motivational, skill-based, and governance-related barriers that cannot be

reduced to individual competence. Their adaptive strategies show that participation is less a linear progression than a process of continuous adjustment to shifting platform logics. This underscores the value of *dynamic access* as a temporal and governance-aware concept that extends Van Dijk's framework and clarifies where policy should intervene.

This study makes two key theoretical contributions to digital inclusion scholarship. First, the concept of *dynamic access* reconceptualizes digital participation as ongoing negotiation rather than sequential achievement, revealing how platform-mediated content creation fundamentally disrupts linear access models. Through its three dimensions, motivational resilience, adaptive skill development, and algorithmic navigation, this concept extends Van Dijk's influential theory by incorporating temporal dynamics previously absent from digital divide models. Second, our identification of algorithmic exclusion as a systematic structural barrier operating through temporal marginalization, knowledge domain restrictions, and cultural misalignment challenges foundational assumptions about technological neutrality in digital inclusion research.

Empirically, this research demonstrates that older micro-Wanghong engage in continuous adaptive labor to sustain creative participation within commercial platform environments not designed for their needs or cultural expressions. Their unanimous rejection of MCN partnerships reveals how meaningful digital inclusion may require maintaining creative autonomy rather than seeking institutional integration, a finding that challenges integration-focused policy approaches. Crucially, this study centers older content creators' voices in defining what constitutes successful digital participation, moving beyond deficit-based framings to recognize their sophisticated navigation of algorithmic constraints.

These findings have significant implications as algorithmic systems increasingly determine social visibility and cultural relevance across societies. Understanding how marginalized creators sustain participation despite structural barriers provides essential insights for developing more equitable digital environments. As platform economies become central to economic and cultural participation, digital inclusion theory must account for the continuous adaptive work required to maintain presence within systems prioritizing commercial value over equitable access. This research thus contributes both theoretical concepts and empirical evidence necessary for addressing digital inequalities in an increasingly platform-mediated world.

While this study provides important insights, its scope is limited by its focus on a small subset of older micro-Wanghong on Douyin, which may not fully represent the diverse experiences of older Wanghong across different platforms and regions. Especially, the gender imbalance in our sample potentially skews findings toward male creators' experiences, which may not accurately reflect the actual gender distribution or varied gendered experiences within this

creator community. In addition, our analysis did not fully address how regional cultural differences might influence digital engagement experiences, particularly regarding dialect variations and regional internet penetration rates. Future research should expand sample sizes to ensure more balanced representation across gender, regional, and content-type dimensions, while implementing systematic approaches to ensure equitable inclusion of all participant voices in analysis and presentation. Longitudinal studies tracking creators' experiences across multiple platforms and cultural contexts would provide deeper insights into the temporal dynamics of digital inclusion among older adults.

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Ethical approval

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Consent to Participate

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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Data availability statement

The data sets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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Yanghui Cao is a PhD candidate at the UCL Energy Institute, within the Bartlett School of Environment, Energy, and Resources. Specializing in consumer psychology and marketing, Yanghui's research explores the use of heated clothing as an energy-efficient heating supplement, focusing on its adoption and integration into daily heating practices with both consumer psychology and sociology lens.

Appendix I

Interview Guide

Personal background and motivations for becoming a Douyin creator

1. Could you please share a little about yourself, such as what you enjoy doing in your free time?
2. How long have you been using Douyin when did you transition to creating content?
3. Can you recall what drew you to the platform initially?
4. Did you encounter any difficulties when you first started creating short videos? Could you share more about those difficulties?
5. I noticed you normally post [X] videos a week/month now, what amount of time do you dedicate to Douyin daily?

Technical experiences and challenges related to content creation, including platform navigation, video editing, and algorithm understanding

6. Could you walk me through how you prepare for making a video?
7. In terms of the technical side, do you use any of the editing tools or effects provided by Douyin to enhance your videos?
8. How do you maintain motivation to continue creating content? Have there been times you wanted to stop?
9. Have you experienced sudden changes in viewership or engagement? How do you explain these changes?

Social dynamics, including audience interaction, family relationships, and peer connections with other content creators

10. What role do family and friends play in your content creation?
11. I am curious has creating short videos opened opportunities for new friendships? Can you share that story?
12. Do you do some further interactions with your audience, such as comments, likes?

Content creation processes and adaptation strategies

13. Have you faced any challenges in your content creation journey? How have you approached solving them?
14. Do you feel you're still learning new skills, or have you reached a comfortable level of expertise?
15. What aspects of the platform do you find most challenging for older content creators?

Monetization and self-perception of Wanghong status

16. Have you been approached by MCNs (Multi-Channel Networks)? What was your response and why?
17. Have you monetized your content? How does income potential affect your creative decisions?
18. With [X] followers, do you consider yourself a "Wanghong"?
19. How do others in your social circle react to your online presence?
20. How has becoming a content creator affected your daily life and self-perception?