

Resilient Growth Through Cultural Empowerment: Mediatized Reading Practices and Constrained Agency Among Older Accompanying Migrants in China — An Audio-Mediated Reading Case

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doi:10.63593/SSSH.2709-7862.2026.01.006

Abstract

With the integration of big data, algorithms, and platform infrastructures, mediatized reading is increasingly shaped by platform rules, social relations, and content ecosystems. Audio-mediated reading has become a low-threshold and highly companionable pathway for older adults to access cultural resources, and it is now deeply embedded in short-video and news-feed platforms. Focusing on older accompanying migrants in China, this study draws on in-depth interviews with nine older accompanying migrants in Chengdu and a 30-day micro ethnographic follow-up of one typical case. Using a dissemination-reception analytic framework, we show that older migrants enter audio-mediated reading through the intertwined mediation of adult children, peer word-of-mouth in weak-tie networks, and platform recommendation and incentive mechanisms. In reception, they develop stable preferences for family-ethics narratives, local cultural materials, and nation-centred political and historical content, while constructing a platform-based hierarchy of trust as an everyday risk-governance strategy. We further find that their agency is not limited to passive exposure: through tactical domestication of time-space arrangements and small scale recreation, some participants shift from receiver to producer. We conceptualize this process as “resilient growth through cultural empowerment”, while also highlighting its structural limits under algorithmic distribution and commercial incentive logics.

Keywords: cultural empowerment, older accompanying migrants, mediatized reading, audio-mediated reading

1. Introduction

With the integrated development of big data, algorithms, and platforms, cultural production, distribution, and consumption are becoming deeply platformized and datafied. Mobile Internet and smart devices embed reading into online, everyday life, while recommendation systems further reorganize the visibility, accessibility, and pathways of meaning-making for texts. Reading, therefore, shifts from a relatively private individual practice to a mediatized practice jointly shaped by platform rules, social relations, and content ecosystems. In this sense, mediatized reading refers not only to the digital migration of reading carriers but also to the reorganization of reading modes under media logics. Audio-mediated reading, such as “listening to books” and “listening to novels”, has attracted broad attention because of its immersion, low cost, and strong companionship, and it is increasingly replacing classic “deep reading” as an everyday pathway for audiences to access cultural resources (ZHANG, Y., 2025; XU, L., & ZHOU, Y., 2021). At the policy level, strategic initiatives such as “Digital China”, “smart society construction”, and “nationwide reading” have brought reading rights and cultural participation into the scope of public governance, further accelerating the expansion of mediatized reading (YAN, S., 2025).

Meanwhile, China is rapidly entering a stage of deep population ageing. Within the large older population, a group with distinctive mobility has increasingly become a focus of scholarship and governance. Researchers typically use the term “older accompanying migrants”, also colloquially “older drifters,” in the Chinese context to refer to older adults who move to unfamiliar cities for reasons such as caring for grandchildren, reuniting with adult children, or seeking out-of-town eldercare. Among more than 13 million older accompanying migrants, about 43% migrate primarily for intergenerational caregiving (National Bureau of Statistics, UNICEF, 2018). Because of cultural and environmental in daily life, this group faces notable barriers to social interaction and heightened interpersonal tensions (MU, G., 2017; HU, X., & HAN, X., 2022). Compared with local older residents, older accompanying migrants are spatially separated from their original acquaintances, are based in different communities and cultural settings, and, institutionally, often remain at the margins of public cultural services and community networks in destination cities. They shoulder intensive caregiving and domestic responsibilities, while also confronting fractured social circles, ambiguous identity positions, and a thin spiritual life (XU, J., & HUA, X., 2018). Existing research primarily focuses on family care, intergenerational relations, mental health, and social support; only a few studies examine social-media empowerment in their social interactions. As Yang Juhua and Lu Ruipeng (2023) note, studies remain scarce on how older accompanying migrants rebuild everyday life worlds and cultural belonging through media practices (YANG, J., & LU, R., 2023).

Among different media forms, audio-mediated reading has developed rapidly because it allows “reading with the ears”, requires relatively low skills, and offers strong companionship; furthermore, it is increasingly popularized on short video platforms. Although audio-mediated reading may constitute an important entry into digital culture for older adults, existing research primarily concentrates on platform industries, knowledge payment models, or young users. Even where the affordances of audio-mediated reading among older adults have been discussed (LI, L., & QIU, X., 2025), fine-grained depictions of the practices and experiences of older accompanying migrants who combine the attributes of both ageing and mobility remain limited. From an audience-centred perspective, this study asks through what digital media pathways older accompanying migrants connect with cultural content, and why and how they incorporate audio-mediated reading into everyday life. By treating older migrants’ audio-mediated reading as an analytic entry point into digital cultural space, the study offers a new lens on how digital media participate in “cultural eldercare” in an ageing society.

Therefore, within a dissemination-reception analytic framework, we address three research questions: (1) Under the combined influence of digital technologies and social relations, through what pathways do older accompanying migrants engage in audio-mediated reading practices? (2) In these practices, how do they obtain emotions and negotiate meanings? (3) How do their audio-mediated reading practices display tactical technology domestication and small scale cultural reproduction, and what are the possibilities and limits among these?

2. Key Concepts and Literature Review

2.1 Defining “Audio-Mediated Reading” and “Listening to Books”

The National Committee for the Approval of Scientific and Technical Terms defines audio-mediated reading as the acquisition of information by listening to audiobooks or to others reading published content aloud, corresponding to traditional reading on paper carriers. To ensure conceptual rigour, we define audio-mediated reading here as script-based audio narrative content, including audiobooks, audio novels, traditional storytelling (pingshu), and radio dramas.

By contrast, the everyday term “listening to books” foregrounds an action or process: receiving book content through the auditory channel, emphasising a practice of reading with the ears (YI, C., 2025). In the field, participants were more accustomed to the colloquial expression “listening to books,” which serves as an experiential, situated label for what they do. Therefore, to balance analytical precision and field experience, we use audio-mediated reading in theoretical discussion, while retaining “listening to books” when presenting participants’ words and everyday scenes.

To avoid conflating general auditory media use, such as scrolling short videos or listening to live streams, with “reading”, we adopt the following operational criteria. Included: older accompanying migrants continuously listen, via smartphones or similar devices, to script-based audio content dominated by narrative or knowledge telling; this also includes audio narratives on short video platforms that can be understood without images and have a clear narrative structure. Excluded: pure music, non-scripted ambient sounds for companionship, general video watching, and livestream companionship.

2.2 Cultural Communication and Reception in the Digital Era

Digital technologies, including big data, artificial intelligence, cloud computing, and the internet, have profoundly transformed the modes and ecologies of cultural communication (HAN, R., 2020; YUAN, G., 2024). As global networks become communication infrastructures, Van Dijck and colleagues proposed the notion of the

platform society, arguing that data and algorithm-driven platforms have penetrated key public domains such as education, journalism, and culture. Public values are reconfigured in platformization processes (McGowan, A., 2021), thereby reshaping users' cultural habits and identity formation (LV, Z., & DAI, H., 2024; Valtysson, B., 2022).

These technologies have also introduced new paradigms for cultural creation, distribution, and reception. Depending on attitudes toward technology, some studies emphasize empowerment and efficiency gains, suggesting that AI-assisted creation and virtual reality can enhance dissemination efficiency while strengthening interactivity and immersive experience (GAO, X., 2025). Digital technologies can also shift communication from one-way transmission to multi-directional interaction, opening innovative pathways for the inheritance of Chinese traditional culture and strengthening its global circulation and recognition (DU, C., 2025). Other studies, however, discuss challenges from the perspectives of ideology and public opinion security: algorithmic recommendations in traffic competition can amplify emotionally charged and fragmented content, squeezing space for in-depth interpretation of mainstream values (JIANG, W., 2025; JIANG, J., 2024). Scholars also note that algorithmic "hit-product logics" may marginalise cultural diversity and deep content (WANG, D., 2021). Peng Lan (2021) argues that, as algorithms and intelligent machines are unavoidable, algorithm literacy education must be advanced and citizens' algorithm literacy improved (PENG, L., 2021).

Overall, Chinese scholarship has offered relatively deep macro level discussions on how platformization and algorithmization reshape cultural communication structures, public opinion dynamics, and cultural industries. However, from an audience perspective, especially for structurally disadvantaged older groups and marginal populations such as older accompanying migrants, research remains scarce on how they encounter, interpret, and reproduce cultural content in platform environments.

2.3 Audio-Mediated Reading Among Older Accompanying Migrants

Research on older accompanying migrants has accumulated in sociology and demography. Drawing on the separation of person and household registration and structural change, Xu Jiaming and Hua Xuecheng (2018) define older accompanying migrants as those who move from their original communities to cities where their adult children reside, mainly for family reunion or grandchild care (PENG, L., 2021). They argue that the phenomenon is shaped by marketization, social security, state institutions, and cultural factors, and that older migrants face multiple role dilemmas such as being "surplus persons in the nuclear family" and "strangers in urban life" (XU, J., & HUA, X., 2018). Subsequent studies further focus on rural older migrants' out-of-town eldercare, spiritual care, and social integration difficulties, finding low cultural adaptation, thin social relations, and insufficient community attention (MU, G., 2021; CHI, S., 2021; XU, J., & HUA, X., 2018).

In communication and media studies, existing studies primarily focus on macro-level discussions of social support, mental health, and adaptation. Some studies report that social-media use is positively associated with subjective well-being but negatively associated with social integration among older migrants (LEI, S., 2023). Lei Sihan (2023) examines WeChat use and shows differentiated empowerment across relationship contexts (ZHUANG, X., 2024). Zhuang Xi (2024) finds that WeChat can partially re-aggregate and extend offline ties through "social substitution", thereby empowering social interactions (LI, H., 2021).

Although a small number of studies adopt a management perspective and treat audio-mediated reading as a pathway for the digital transformation of senior magazines (HU, D., & HE, M., 2025), systematic cultural-practice analyses of how older accompanying migrants rebuild cultural belonging and spiritual worlds through specific media forms remain rare. Therefore, taking older migrants' audio-mediated reading as the object, this study aims to extend existing research in three ways: (1) from the perspective of dissemination logic, analyzing how audio-mediated reading becomes embedded in older migrants' everyday life; (2) from the perspective of reception logic, mapping their pathways of cultural reception; and (3) theorizing these practices as "resilient growth through cultural empowerment", enriching cultural-communication research in an ageing society.

3. Research Design and Methods

Because this study examines a group situated in specific life contexts and media practices, we adopted purposive sampling. From October to December 2024, we conducted in-depth interviews with nine older accompanying migrants in Chengdu. Each interview lasted about 45 minutes.

To address the limitations of retrospective interview data, we also selected one typical participant for a 30-day follow-up observation (1 ~ 30 November 2024). Using a micro-ethnographic approach, we documented participants' whole process of technology use in natural settings, focusing on how older adults domesticate technology and engage in cultural production within mediatized reading practices.

We employed a question-driven thematic analysis. Through repeated reading of interview transcripts and field notes, we extracted recurring images and meaning patterns from participants' vernacular expressions,

summarized core themes, and interpreted them through theoretical lenses such as technology domestication and cultural production.

Table 1 provides participant information. Participant P01, who can skillfully edit and post short videos using AI tools and editing apps, is also the one for the follow-up observation.

Table 1. Participant information

Participant ID	Gender	Age	Education	Reason for migration	Self-rated smartphone proficiency
P01	Female	68	Junior middle school	Family reunion with adult children	Proficient
P02	Female	61	Illiterate	Grandchild care	Beginner
P03	Male	61	Junior middle school	Grandchild care	Intermediate
P04	Male	65	University	Grandchild care	Intermediate
P05	Female	62	Primary school	Grandchild care	Beginner
P06	Female	75	Primary school	Family reunion with adult children	Beginner
P07	Male	73	Primary school	Family reunion with adult children	Beginner
P08	Female	63	Junior middle school	Grandchild care	Beginner
P09	Male	63	Junior middle school	Grandchild care	Intermediate

4. Findings

4.1 From Technological Access to Everyday Embedding Section

4.1.1 Adult Children as Technological Intermediaries in the Family

In older accompanying migrants' entry into listening-to-books practices, adult children function as the most critical technological intermediaries. Most participants did not explore or install apps on their own. In contrast, their children installed and configured devices and applications in advance, including buying a new phone or passing down an old one, and pre-installing apps such as Douyin, audiobook apps, and casual games, so that older users could "just tap and use".

Participant P06 said: *"My daughter was afraid I would be bored, so she downloaded for me a Chinese-idiom game, Douyin, and Tomato Novel. My eyesight is not good; I cannot figure out the idiom game even after thinking all night, and Douyin is too noisy. I like listening to novels; no matter what the platform recommends, I will listen. Before sleeping, I even listen with my eyes closed."*

Among the apps installed on children's devices, P06 gradually developed her own listening preferences and even turned listening into a fixed bedtime ritual. P08's situation was similar: *"This phone is my son's old phone. I need to open it. I scroll Douyin; sometimes when I am coaxing my grandkid, Douyin also has stories you can listen to."* With the device and app environment set up in advance by her son, she integrated platform resources into her caregiving practice.

These accounts indicate that children's mediation provides convenience and significantly lowers the threshold for older migrants to access digital enabled environments. It makes listening to books a plausible daily option and lays the groundwork for subsequent diffusion through peer networks and platform recommendation mechanisms.

4.1.2 Peer Word-of-Mouth and Recommendations in Weak Tie Networks

Beyond children's mediation, peer word-of-mouth is another important pathway through which older accompanying migrants learn about listening to books and related apps. This diffusion often occurs in loosely connected informer social networks, such as "taking kids out for sunbathing". The information carries both a safety endorsement verified by gatekeepers and a practical promise.

P05 illustrates this process particularly clearly. As she explained, *"My son told me that I can do tasks to earn some money on Douyin. Later, I realized that I can both listen to audiobooks and make money, so I recommended it to my neighbour, my grandson's grandma."* She further added, *"I can earn money while doing housework. It is such a good deal. Everyone can use it."*

In this case, P05's son first acted as a gatekeeper by providing a credibility endorsement, reducing perceived risk and legitimizing the application. Through subsequent use, P05 discovered a compelling value proposition and then shared this experience with a semi-familiar contact. In this sense, the practice became framed as a shareable good thing within a grandparenting network, circulated with an explicit promise of practical benefit.

P02, by contrast, foregrounded the role of neighbourhood mutual aid in learning and use: *"It was my neighbour who recommended it to me. After I told my daughter and son-in-law, they showed me, step by step, where to tap on the phone. When they are not at home, I ask my neighbours."* For her, neighbours functioned simultaneously as an information source and as an important source of situated technical support, filling the operational gap when adult children were absent.

Taken together, peer word of mouth enabled audiobook-related practices to diffuse through an adult children-to-neighbourhood peers pathway within weak-tie networks. In doing so, what might otherwise have remained a relatively private form of media use became embedded within the everyday social infrastructure of mutual help and shared grandchild care. The practice was collectively experienced and circulated.

4.1.3 Algorithmic and Commercial Incentives

Once adult children and peers have helped migrant older adults gain basic access to technology, what often keeps them using it is the platform itself, especially its recommendation algorithms and task-based reward system. On the one hand, features such as autoplay and continuous recommendations turn what might have been a one-off listening session into an endless stream of content. As P06 put it: *"There are apps I did not even install. Sometimes when I am listening, I accidentally tap somewhere, and it takes me in — I can still listen. When this one finishes, it automatically plays the next. It never ends."* It reflects the effect produced by feed-like delivery and auto-play mechanisms.

On the other hand, platforms bundle listening with "doing tasks" and "collecting coins," using low monetary rewards to nudge older users to stay online longer. P05 was frank about the appeal: *"There are lots of tasks you can do on the phone, and it's not hard. And you get something lively to listen to."* For her, audiobooks are both entertainment and an effortless way to earn money.

Compared with the interpersonal intermediaries discussed earlier, grounded in family ties and neighbourhood trust, platforms "taskify" and lightly monetize audiobook listening through autoplay, gamified incentives, and cash-out features. Without adding much operational burden, these mechanisms steadily extend listening time, turning a once-tricky task into a routine folded into everyday rhythms. At the same time, listening rhythms become more deeply embedded in algorithmic distribution and commercial incentive logics. Personalized recommendations and autoplay may intensify repetitive exposure and content homogenization, heightening the risk of filter bubbles; reward systems can also recast companionable listening into a sustained capture of time and attention. These dynamics, in turn, provide a structural backdrop for the negotiated forms of reception that older adults develop around content in the sections that follow.

4.2 Content Preferences and Negotiated Reception Under Platform Stratification

4.2.1 Content Preferences and Listening Motivations: From Family Ethics to Public Affairs

Participants' listening practices were not reducible to entertainment; their preferences clustered into three types: family ethics and emotional disputes, local cultural materials that sustain rural memories, and nation-centred political and historical narratives.

First, family ethics content provides resources for emotional resonance and experiential comparison. P05 explained: *"It is all about family matters. I want to learn how others handle conflicts."* For her, such stories are less pure pastime than a way to compare others' marital, in-law, and intergenerational conflicts with her own drifting life. Participants like P05 and P06 often remain within emotional narratives, treating listening as a means to learn principles for handling tasks in childcare and housework.

Second, local culture emerged as a salient line of content. P03 said: *"I like listening to opera. Back home, I even played strings; now I can only listen to people sing on the phone."* For him, opera listening is not a new interest, but a means of sustaining continuity with hometown culture and a prior identity while living in an unfamiliar city.

Third, participants favoured audio content on historical biographies, national narratives, and public affairs. P09 stated: *"I love listening to political news. I also care about our country's history and how it is developing."* P01 emphasised the learning function of biographies: *"I like listening to people's biographies, which broaden my knowledge."* These listening practices help older migrants not only pass the time but also reaffirm imaginaries of home and nation, continually locating themselves within narratives of national development.

Overall, older migrants' listening preferences combine needs for emotional comfort and ethical reference with memories of local culture and attachments to home and nation. Under algorithmic recommendation, these

elements together build an audio-mediated reading experience through which older migrants reconstruct everyday emotions, historical time, and a sense of spatial belonging in digital environments.

4.2.2 Platform-Based Trust Hierarchies: Risk Governance and Negotiated Cultural Reception

In complex online information environments, participants were not simply credulous. On the contrary, they displayed strong risk awareness and defensive judgment tendencies, frequently using expressions such as “not daring to click links randomly” to describe their baseline stance toward online information. They reflect everyday self-protection strategies under information overload. Research on online credibility notes that networked environments reshape traditional trust formation; recipients rely more on low-cost cognitive shortcuts to make credibility judgments and manage risk (Metzger, M. J., & Flanagin, A. J., 2013).

In listening-to-books practices, this risk governance appears as a platform-based hierarchy of trust. Instead of verifying truth claim by claim, participants tended to use platform type as a shortcut for rapid authorization and meaning filtering. In general, news-feed platforms such as Toutiao were regarded as more credible; WeChat Moments, with mixed sources, attracted more cautious expectations; and short video platforms were categorized as lively entertainment spaces suitable for pastime and companionship but were discounted for the credibility of public information.

However, the belief that Toutiao is more trustworthy does not mean participants possess rigorous fact-checking abilities. Instead, it is shaped by heuristic cues provided by platforms. Platform names, interface designs, columnized presentations, and experiences are perceived as indicators of credibility. Because heuristic processing is lower-cost (Chaiken, S., 1980), participants rarely differentiate account types within a platform and instead link credibility directly to platform attributes.

More specifically, elevating news-feed platforms in trust rankings results from several interrelated factors. First, situational categorization: participants interpret different apps as different scenarios. News feeds are for authoritative information and national affairs, WeChat for maintaining relationships, and short-video apps for entertainment.

Second, institutionalized was created by a news-like presentation. The name “Toutiao”, the news-feed structure, columnized interface, and stylistic conventions make content more easily recognized as “news reporting”, producing a simulated cue of authority and reducing uncertainty.

Third, relational pressure. Moments content often mixes advertisements, jokes, and chain forwarding, and is constrained by face and relationship norms. Even when encountering questionable information, participants feel it is inconvenient to challenge it publicly, producing a cautious strategy. As P04 said: *“For content posted in Moments, I open it and take a look. Some I disagree with, but I will not leave comments.”*

Fourth, algorithmic repeated exposure brings both a felt sense of credibility and the risk of homogenization. Personalization may strengthen subjective feelings through value consistency and repeated exposure, thereby solidifying interpretive frames. This indicates that participants gain a sense of order and identity, anchored in their migration lives, while also carrying the risks of homogeneity and filter bubbles.

Overall, the platform-based hierarchy of trust reflects a negotiated reception of mediatized reading contexts. Participants balance platform rules with lived experience, using selective exposure and trust stratification to control risk and build meaning. This resembles the negotiated reading emphasised in Hall’s encoding-decoding model (LIN, Y., 2023). While it sustains listening practices, it also implies that agency is primarily exercised as negotiation and a bounded breakthrough within platform-defined boundaries.

4.3 Technology Domestication: Daily Rhythms and Productive Practices in a Focal Case

We selected P01 (female, 68) as a focal case for a 30-day follow-up. From a micro ethnographic perspective, we examine how her listening to books and broader smartphone practices are embedded in the temporal organization and spatial arrangement of everyday life. P01’s practice suggests that digital media are consciously planned and used as tools for organizing everyday life.

Temporally, P01 divided media use across the day. After waking, she typically listened to the news while still in bed, and then used WeChat to send morning greetings to friends before starting breakfast and chores. During the day, especially while cooking, doing laundry, and tidying up, she switched to family-ethics stories and news commentaries. She filled tedious domestic time with sound. In the afternoon, she often visited local “check-in spots” recommended on Douyin, taking photos and videos. At night, her media practice moved from listening to creating: field notes show that almost every evening she edited, added music, and posted videos on her phone, and she wrote captions or titles to express emotion.

This case shows that listening and short-video use did not simply intrude on or disrupt P01’s routine. instead, they were embedded in different life fragments along a “morning-daytime-night” rhythm. Such rearrangement of time and space is a typical domestication process (YAN, Q., & LI, N., 2022): older migrants are not merely led

by technology, but domesticate digital media as tools for organizing life and expressing the self, integrating them into everyday routines and rituals. Meanwhile, her shift from listening and browsing to shooting, editing, and posting also indicates a transition from receiver to producer, highlighting the productive and creative dimensions of listening practices.

4.4 From Reception to Production

In sum, older accompanying migrants first enter the listening-to-books field through multiple forms of mediation by children, peers, and platform mechanisms. They develop relatively preferences around family ethics, local culture, and national politics, and they form negotiated schemes of reception through platform-based trust hierarchies. Importantly, they do not always remain in passive listening positions; along a pathway from reception to production, they gradually release agency and creativity.

At the level of everyday interaction, listening content becomes a tellable and shareable cultural resource. Some participants reported recounting stories, biographies, or historical fragments to family members, neighbours, or caregiving peers to mediate conflicts, educate younger generations, or enliven conversations, completing small scale re-circulation and meaning making.

In P01, this agency shift becomes more concentrated and visible. Her listening practice evolves from alleviating loneliness and passing time toward resilient growth through cultural empowerment: under constraints of mobility, role burden, and institutional marginality, she obtains emotional comfort and meaning support through listening to family-ethics, rural/local, and national narratives, and through re-telling, recommending, and even producing digital content she transforms external cultural resources into expressive capital that she can use and output (see Figure 1).

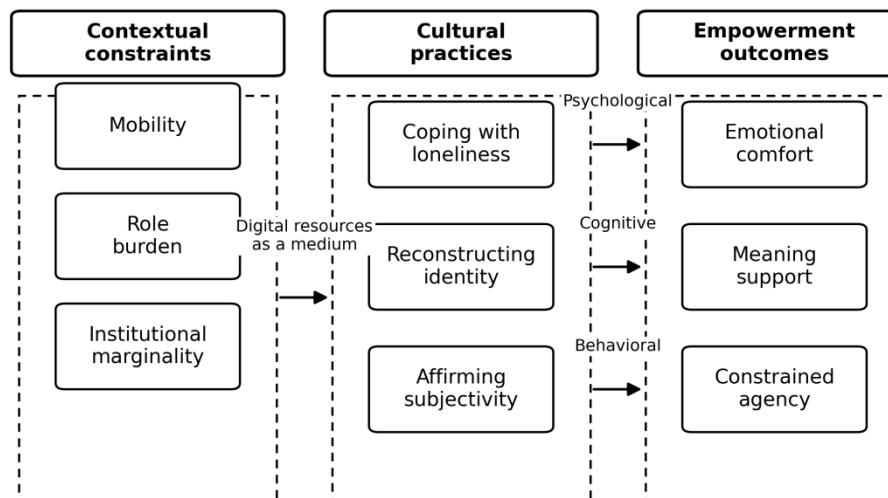


Figure 1. Cultural empowerment mechanism of mediatised reading among older accompanying migrants

These findings suggest that listening practices have become an engine of cultural eldercare, helping older migrants sustain a sense of self and organize social connections in later life. They provide a vivid micro level case for understanding digital empowerment and cultural eldercare in an ageing society.

5. Conclusions

Situated at the intersection of digitalisation and population ageing, this study draws on in-depth interviews with nine older migrants in Chengdu and a longitudinally followed case. Using dissemination and reception analysis maps, audiobook listening is a form of audio-based reading. Three findings stand out. First, dissemination is co-produced by family, peers, and platform logics. Second, reception combines clear content preferences with negotiated trust. Third, the tracked case shows that use is not purely passive or recreational. Some older migrants actively reorganise daily time-space and cultural resources, and, under certain conditions, even extend this to light content production — an insight best treated as a mechanism rather than a generalisable pattern.

These results complicate the dominant framing of older migrants primarily as vulnerable and isolated. Their participation is better understood as bounded agency, an ongoing negotiation between everyday needs and platform rules. We conceptualise this as “resilient growth through cultural empowerment”: expanded access to

cultural resources, emotional support, and room for action, continuously shaped by algorithmic distribution and commercial incentives.

The study has some limitations, including the small, single-city sample and the focus on audiobooks. Future research should adopt cross-platform and cross-city comparisons and test how platform mechanisms, family support, and peer networks jointly shape reading trajectories and credibility judgements.

Funding

This work was supported by Key Research Base Fund of Digital Culture and Media, Sichuan Provincial Philosophy and Social Science Program (Project: “Resilient Growth through Cultural Empowerment: Mediatized Reading Practices and Constrained Agency among Older Adults”; No. SC25DCM19).

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