

Article

From “Technology Empowerment” to “Digital Citizens”: Reflecting on the Narrative of Technology Empowerment and the Awakening of Digital Subjectivity among Older Adults

Yuerong Yi

School of International Education, Wuhan University of Technology, Wuhan 430070, China; Email: yy710679@qq.com

Abstract: With the growth of digital platforms and the silver economy, “technology empowerment” is often used to explain the digital inclusion of older adults. This discourse should not be dismissed: it has promoted age-friendly design, easier public services, and digital skills training. Yet the central judgment of this paper is that the discourse becomes problematic when technology, platforms, and policy are treated as the only active forces. Under that grammar, older adults are too easily described as passive recipients who merely wait for support. This paper offers a conceptual critique supported by a small illustrative corpus analysis. The selected materials include policy texts, platform documents, media reports, and public policy materials from China, Japan, and South Korea. The corpus is deliberately modest, but it is analytically useful because it allows the discussion to trace how agency is assigned in concrete texts rather than in abstract slogans. Reading these materials together shows how the empowerment narrative defines older adults’ digital difficulties and how it may leave their participation, creation, negotiation, and refusal only partially visible. Theoretically, the study begins with subjectivity theory and draws on Foucault’s view of power and subject formation, Honneth’s recognition theory, and the capability approach of Sen and Nussbaum. These perspectives support a careful shift from “empowerment” to “digital citizenship”. The point is not to replace one fashionable term with another, but to ask whether older adults are recognized as subjects who can claim rights, make judgments, and set limits. In this sense, the digital citizenship of older adults is understood through four connected rights: access, participation, being heard, and refusal. At the practical level, the paper translates the rights framework into a rights-based, practice-oriented agenda for studying older adults’ digital practices. Researchers should observe not only online access, but also offline alternatives, platform participation, user feedback, and public discourse. Three directions follow from this approach: platforms should move from usability to richness; policy should protect offline services, cash payment, and face-to-face assistance as basic rights; and public discourse should avoid labels such as “digital refugees” while recognizing older adults’ diversity and agency. This conclusion is deliberately cautious. These proposals depend on institutions, platform governance, and public services, and they do not by themselves remove the imbalance between platforms and users.

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1. Introduction

With persistently declining birth rates and steadily increasing life expectancy, China has gradually entered an aging society. Data from China’s National Bureau of Statistics show that in 2019, the population aged 60 and above accounted for 18.1% of the total population (Xu, 2020). Meanwhile, by December 2023, internet users aged 50 and above numbered approximately 350 million, constituting over 30% of the total online population (Shen et al., 2025). These two sets of data indicate that hundreds of millions of older adults are either currently using or will soon become users of digital platforms. Older adults’ participation in digital platforms is expected to continue rising, particularly in the areas of healthcare, online shopping, and tourism (Lin, 2024).

When the older population intersects with digital platforms, the digital divide becomes a shared concern for policymakers, platforms, and the media. In many texts, “technology empowerment” appears as the preferred answer to the digital predicament of older adults. The term has produced tangible gains, including age-friendly interfaces, the preservation of offline services, and digital skills training. The issue, therefore, is not whether age-friendly reform is necessary. It is necessary. The issue is whether the language

of empowerment also narrows the agency that older adults are allowed to have. This paper therefore examines concrete policy documents, platform statements, and media reports to identify where agency is located and how older users are described.

The risk lies in a shift in the meaning of empowerment. In social work, empowerment refers to a process through which marginalized groups regain control over their lives and confront institutional barriers. In platform and policy discourse on older adults' digital inclusion, the term is often recoded as a top-down bestowal: technology gives capacity, platforms provide solutions, and older adults receive help. This shift is analytically important because it changes empowerment from a relational and structural process into a service delivery narrative. Technology becomes the active subject, while older adults become the objects of empowerment.

Discourse matters because language helps organize social reality. Labels such as “digital immigrants”, “digitally disadvantaged groups”, and “digital refugees” do more than name a difficulty; they create a rescue grammar in which older adults are read as backward, inconvenient, or waiting to be saved. Goffman's account of stigma explains why such labels matter: they shape how a group is seen, evaluated, and treated (Goffman, 1963). The judgment here is straightforward: once older adults' digital practices are consistently reduced to “access behaviors requiring assistance”, their qualification as digital subjects is weakened. Equally overlooked are the creativity, meaning-making, risk assessment, and refusal strategies they demonstrate in their use of technology.

Four questions organize the discussion. First, within the “technology empowerment” framework jointly constructed by policy, platform, and media texts, how is the agency of older users diminished? Second, what evidence in existing research shows older adults' subjective practices? Third, what concept can reposition older adults once they are no longer fixed as “objects of empowerment”? Fourth, what changes follow for research, platforms, policy, and public discourse? The first question is addressed through the illustrative discourse analysis; the second through existing studies on older adults' digital practices; the third through the framework of digital citizenship; and the fourth through the proposed practical pathways.

The article also treats older adults as a differentiated population rather than a uniform group. Age cohort, urban-rural location, education, income, work experience, gender, and regional environment shape their digital situations. A retired urban cadre and an older person living alone in a rural area may differ greatly in access to devices, internet connection, public services, and family support. This qualification is not decorative. Without it, the critique of empowerment would risk replacing one simplification with another. Because the available evidence lacks first-hand data on all these differences, they are kept as analytical variables and left for future empirical research.

2. Research Methodology and Materials

This study is a conceptual critique supported by a small illustrative corpus analysis, rather than an interview, survey, or platform-data project. This design is modest by choice: it examines the assumptions behind the discourse of “technology empowerment” through existing scholarship and publicly available texts, and it avoids claiming more empirical certainty than the material can support. It then uses digital citizenship as an alternative perspective on the digital lives of older adults and connects this perspective to practical questions: how researchers can study older digital users, how platforms can improve age-friendly design, how policy can protect non-digital rights, and how public discourse can avoid stigmatizing older adults.

2.1. Research Positioning

The analysis is carried out at four levels.

First, the study reviews scholarship on empowerment theory, critical gerontechnology, digital inclusion, digital citizenship, and critical discourse analysis. These works provide the theoretical basis for identifying the limits of the “technology empowerment” narrative.

Second, the study conducts an illustrative discourse analysis of selected public texts. The aim is not to build a large corpus, but to make the conceptual critique traceable to policy documents, platform statements, and media reports.

Third, the paper connects the four proposed rights with practical changes in research, platform design, policy-making, and public discourse. This step prevents the critique from remaining at the level of abstract terminology.

Fourth, the paper includes a limited comparison of policy materials from China, Japan, and South Korea. The analysis focuses on how the three countries set different priorities when promoting the digital inclusion of older adults. Because the corpus is small, these texts are treated as typical examples rather than representative samples of all related discourse. This limitation matters: the comparison is used to sharpen conceptual judgment, not to rank national models or generalize about all implementation outcomes.

2.2. Corpus Sources

The illustrative corpus consists of three kinds of publicly available texts. The first kind is policy texts. These mainly include the General Office of the State Council's Implementation Plan on Effectively Addressing Difficulties Faced by Older Adults in Using Smart Technologies, documents issued by the National Healthcare Security Administration on keeping traditional and smart

services available at the same time, and documents from the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology on age-friendly and accessibility reforms for internet applications.

The second kind is platform texts. These are mainly taken from Tencent's public statements on WeChat's "Care Mode" and the "Silver Age Program". The third kind is media texts. The main example is a review report from Southern Metropolis Daily on the first group of age-adapted apps.

These texts were selected because they represent different institutional positions: policy-makers, platform companies, and public communication actors. Together, they show how the narrative of "technology empowerment" travels across administrative, commercial, and media contexts.

To add an international comparative perspective, the discussion also refers to publicly available policy materials from Japan and South Korea. The Japanese materials mainly include information from the Digital Agency on digital supporters and community seminars. The South Korean materials mainly include the digital divide survey released by the Ministry of Science and ICT, as well as the recommendations of the National Human Rights Commission of Korea on protecting digital accessibility for older persons.

The comparison does not rank national models. It examines how different countries balance "digital inclusion" and "non-digital options" in their policy arrangements, thereby clarifying the practical meaning of digital citizenship for older adults. This choice keeps the analysis focused on rights and agency rather than on policy competition.

2.3. Analytical Framework

Drawing on the basic method of critical discourse analysis, the corpus is examined through five main questions. First, who is presented as the agent in the text? This question concerns the roles given to policy, platforms, technology, and older adults. Second, how does the text explain the digital difficulties faced by older adults? The problem may be described as a lack of individual ability, poor technological design, or a form of structural exclusion. Third, what is left out of the text? This includes whether older adults' creative practices, negotiations, refusals, and rights claims are fully shown. Fourth, are older adults treated as a single uniform group? Here the analysis pays attention to whether differences in urban-rural location, class, education, gender, region, and physical condition are made visible. Fifth, does the text provide practical and workable mechanisms, such as offline service windows, platform feedback channels, creator support, and user advisory bodies? The point is not to count keywords mechanically, but to judge how agency is distributed and how older adults are made visible or invisible in the text. The corpus is therefore analyzed through close reading rather than word-frequency statistics or inter-coder reliability tests.

To make the procedure more concrete, the close reading did not treat every mention of "help", "adaptation", or "training" as paternalistic. A text was read as empowerment-oriented only when agency remained concentrated in government departments, platforms, or technologies, while older adults appeared mainly as targets of service. By contrast, provisions that require offline channels, cash payment, in-person windows, or alternative verification methods were treated as partial counterexamples, because they protect room for older adults to choose non-digital or hybrid routes. This distinction is important because a fair critique must recognize both the practical value and the conceptual limits of existing policies.

2.4. Research Boundaries

Because all corpus materials are publicly available, the study does not collect private information or involve research participants. This design creates clear limits. It does not capture the lived experiences of older adults, and the arguments require further testing through interviews, surveys, or platform usage data. For the same reason, the illustrative corpus cannot speak to intra-group heterogeneity among older adults, such as differences shaped by age cohort, gender, education, income, health condition, family support, urban-rural location, or regional context. Public policy texts also do not prove implementation. A document may require offline channels or digital support, while local practice remains uneven. These limits are not hidden weaknesses but boundaries of the claim: the conclusions are limited to theoretical explanation, practical suggestions, and future research directions; the illustrative corpus analysis is not presented as a complete empirical finding.

3. Literature Review

3.1. The Theoretical Tradition of Empowerment: From Management Studies to Social Work and the Discourse of Technology Empowerment

The term "empowerment" first came from the idea of "empower" in management studies. In that field, it is often related to the delegation of authority. Through delegation, an organization gives more decision-making power to its members. Authority is shared so that individuals can gain more autonomy in their work. In this process, both organizational members and the organization itself may develop a stronger sense of ability, confidence, and competence.

However, empowerment cannot be explained only from the perspective of management and delegation. For the present discussion, the tradition of empowerment in social work and community psychology is more important. In social work, empowerment does not mean that professionals simply give ability or power to service users from above. Instead, it stresses that oppressed groups should recognize the power relations in their own situation. With the help of professional support, community resources, and collective action, they can gradually regain control over their lives. Solomon (1976) was one of the earliest scholars to use empowerment in social work practice with oppressed communities. She understood empowerment as a process that helps stigmatized groups deal with institutional barriers. Rappaport (1981) also pointed out that empowerment is not only prevention or correction. It is also the ability of individuals and communities to explain their own problems, take part in public decision-making, and improve their living conditions.

In this tradition, the key meaning of empowerment is not “I help you become stronger”. A more accurate understanding is that “you already have the ability to act, and the social worker works with you to remove oppressive barriers”. Gutiérrez (1990), in her study of women of color in social work, argued that empowerment includes self-efficacy, group consciousness, less self-blame, and responsibility for change. Lee (2001) further linked empowerment with social justice, anti-oppressive practice, and multicultural contexts. Therefore, empowerment in social work contains a clear awareness of power and relationships. It pays attention not only to individual ability, but also to structural conditions. It values the growth of service users, and it also requires changes in institutions and social environments.

For this reason, the value of “empowerment” itself is not denied. The problem lies in the narrow use of “technology empowerment” in discussions of digital platforms and the silver economy. In many policy, platform, and commercial narratives, empowerment is reduced to one-way technological assistance for older adults. As a result, empowerment is no longer an anti-oppressive practice. It becomes a paternalistic form of governance discourse. In this discourse, technology is placed in the active position, while older adults are placed in the passive position. Platforms often ask, “What functions can we provide for older adults?” However, they seldom ask, “How do older adults understand and define their own digital lives?” The distinction is decisive: returning to the social work tradition helps recover empowerment as a process of removing barriers with subjects, not a process of giving capacity to objects.

3.2. Critical Gerontechnology: Challenging Technological Solutionism and the Deficit View of Aging

Critical gerontechnology offers an important theoretical basis for reflecting on the narrative of “technology empowerment”. In traditional gerontechnology studies, technology is often viewed as a practical tool. It is expected to improve the quality of later life, make health care more efficient, and compensate for physical decline. This research direction has clear practical value. However, it may also lead to technological solutionism. In such a view, aging is treated as a problem, while technology is presented as the main solution.

Neven’s study on eldercare robot testing provides a useful example. In the testing process, designers invited older adults to participate. Yet the doubts, resistance, and different interpretations expressed by older testers did not truly change the designers’ original imagination of the “older user” (Neven, 2010). This means that “user participation” does not always represent real recognition of subjectivity. In some cases, it may only become one stage in the process of technology development.

Peine and Neven further criticized the “interventionist logic” within gerontechnology research (Peine & Neven, 2019). Under this logic, older adults are first imagined as people who need technological intervention. Technology is then given the task of improving, repairing, and managing their lives. Critical gerontechnology does not reject the value of technology itself. Instead, it questions the tendency to reduce older adults to passive receivers of technology.

This line of argument stresses that aging experience and technological form shape each other. On the one hand, technology design includes social ideas about “what an older person is”. On the other hand, older adults also change the meaning of technology through use, refusal, adjustment, and re-creation. The critique of “technology empowerment” developed here is therefore not an anti-technology argument. It opposes a technological imagination that places older adults in a fixed position of deficiency. That is the core judgment drawn from critical gerontechnology: technology is helpful only when it does not decide in advance what older age must mean.

3.3. Digital Inclusion Research: From the “Access Divide” to “Meaning, Outcomes, and Choice”

Research on digital inclusion also offers an important reference for the present analysis. Early studies of the digital divide mainly focused on basic questions. These questions included whether a person owned a device and whether a person could access the internet. Later research shows that digital inequality cannot be understood only through the simple opposition between access and non-access.

Selwyn re-examined the concept of the digital divide from a critical perspective. He argued that the meaning of “access” should be understood in a more complex way. Different groups use information and communication technologies in different contexts.

They also use them for different purposes and receive different practical returns. Therefore, the digital divide is not only a gap in devices. It is also connected with social resources, cultural capital, and life opportunities (Selwyn, 2004).

Helsper further explained this issue through the idea of “the social relativity of digital exclusion” (Helsper, 2017). Digital exclusion is not an isolated technological condition. It is related to a person’s social environment, comparison group, and actual life needs. This view is especially useful for understanding older adults. We cannot judge whether an older person is excluded from digital society only by looking at their smartphone skills.

For example, an older adult may not know how to use some applications. However, this person may still live with dignity through support from family members, community services, and offline channels. In another case, an older adult may use short-video platforms very well. Yet this person may still face exclusion in more difficult areas, such as health care, finance, and government services. Therefore, digital inclusion should not simply mean making all older adults “go online”. It should ask whether older adults can obtain the opportunities and protections of digital society in ways that fit their life rhythm, value choices, and social relationships.

Viewed in this way, the ableist tendency in the “technology empowerment” narrative becomes clearer. If the digital situation of older adults is explained only as a problem of “insufficient ability”, then the proposed solutions will usually focus on training, instruction, and age-friendly interfaces. These measures are useful, but they are not enough. From the perspective of digital inclusion, the problem is not only whether older adults can use technology. It also concerns whether digital services keep non-digital channels, whether platforms respect older adults’ ways of expression, and whether society accepts the reasonableness of not using certain technologies. The decisive question is therefore not simply “can they use it”, but “under what conditions can they use, avoid, or reshape it with dignity”.

Studies on technology non-use also provide an important reminder. Wyatt argued that non-users should not be excluded from technology research (Wyatt, 2003). Satchell and Dourish also pointed out that non-use is not a single or simple state. It may include resistance, disappointment, lack of interest, exclusion, and other situations (Satchell & Dourish, 2009). In this sense, the “right to refusal” proposed here does not deny digital inclusion. Instead, it deepens the meaning of digital inclusion.

Real inclusion should not only help older adults enter digital spaces. It should also allow them to enter digital life in limited, selective, or conditional ways. In some cases, older adults may even refuse certain forms of digitization. Such refusal should not be treated as backwardness or failure. It can also be a dignified expression of choice and subjectivity. This point gives the right to refusal its analytical weight: refusal is not outside digital citizenship, but one of the ways digital citizenship can be practiced.

3.4. Digital Citizenship Research: From Capacity Supplementation to Rights-Bearing Subjects

The idea of a “digital citizen” is not newly proposed here. Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal defined digital citizens as “those who are able to participate in society online”. They also explained how internet use may influence civic participation from three aspects: economic opportunities, democratic engagement, and social communication (Mossberger et al., 2008). Later, Choi offered a more detailed discussion of digital citizenship. Choi pointed out that digital citizenship is not only about the ability to use technology. It also includes ethics, media and information literacy, participation, interaction, and critical resistance (Choi, 2016). Therefore, the focus of digital citizenship research is not simply whether people can use the internet. More importantly, it asks whether members of a digital society can take part in public life in a responsible, critical, and participatory way.

When this concept is introduced into the study of older adults’ digital lives, it can help overcome the limits of the “technology empowerment” discourse. In the empowerment framework, older adults are often described as people who lack ability. Research and policy then mainly focus on helping them learn how to use technology. The digital citizenship framework provides a different view. Older adults are subjects who hold rights. They do not enter digital society because technology or platforms give them a certain qualification. Rather, they should naturally have the right to participate in society in the digital age. This change of starting point matters. Their digital situation should not be judged only by their level of digital skills. It should also be examined through deeper questions: Do they have equal access to public services? Can they take part in cultural production and public expression in digital spaces? Are their real needs heard by platform developers and policymakers? Do they have the right to reject unreasonable forms of compulsory digitization?

In the present study, “digital citizenship” both inherits existing research and extends it to a specific context. Digital citizens are not understood only as people who are skilled at using the internet. They are also understood as subjects with rights, agency, and the ability to express values in a platform-mediated society. This point is especially important in China’s rapidly developing silver economy. On the one hand, older adults are regarded by platforms as a new consumer group. On the other hand, they are often seen as users who need to be taught, guided, and transformed. The contribution made here is to bring digital citizenship research into the discussion of older adults’ platform participation and the silver economy. It also highlights the “right to refusal”, which is often ignored in discussions of digital rights. In other words, the framework treats older adults not only as market participants or assisted users, but as rights-bearing actors.

3.5. Critical Discourse Analysis and Media Representations of Aging

Because the analysis focuses on the “technology empowerment” narrative, discourse itself must be treated as an object of inquiry. Critical discourse analysis provides the methodological foundation for this endeavor. Fairclough (1992, 1995) stressed that discourse is not merely linguistic expression; it is also part of social relations and power relations. A particular formulation can appear repeatedly not because it is simply a neutral description, but because it has become linked to specific institutions, interests, and knowledge structures. Van Dijk (1993) also argued that critical discourse analysis must attend to how relations of domination are produced, legitimized, and reproduced through text and speech. Wodak and Meyer (2009) further understood critical discourse analysis as a set of methodological orientations requiring researchers to attend simultaneously to text, context, and power relations.

This methodological orientation is well suited to the analysis of the “technology empowerment” narrative. “Technology empowerment” appears to be helping older adults, yet at the linguistic level it may also construct a relationship of inequality. This narrative positions technology, platforms, and policy as active agents and positions older adults as awaiting assistance. It frames the digital circumstances of older adults as “insufficient capacity” while devoting relatively little attention to the structural exclusion produced by platform design, public service digitization, and commercial algorithms. The critical judgment is therefore not that help is unnecessary, but that help becomes incomplete when it is not accompanied by recognition of agency. Accordingly, three questions guide the discourse analysis: Which subjects are designated as agents in the text? Which older adult experiences are presented as problems? Which practices, refusals, and creative activities of older adults are excluded from the narrative?

Research on media representations of aging also provides important reference points. Rozanova’s (2010) study of “successful aging” discourse in media showed that the media frequently frame successful aging as a matter of personal choice and individual responsibility. Such framings tend to attenuate structural inequality and to recast older adults who fail to meet the standard of “success” as personal failures. Loos and Ivan (2018) proposed the concept of “visual ageism”, arguing that the media may manufacture age-based prejudice through under-representation, misrepresentation, or stereotypical portrayal. Makita, Mas-Bleda, Stuart, and Thelwall (2021) found in their study of aging discourse on social media that older adults are frequently presented as vulnerable, homogeneous, and diminished. These studies alert the present article that the “technology empowerment” narrative does not exist in isolation. It is connected to broader patterns of media representation of aging and to social imaginaries that cast older adults as in need of help, management, and correction.

In sum, the method is not to simply judge whether the term “technology empowerment” is good or bad. Rather, it asks how this term organizes the relationship between older adults and technology - how the “empowerment” discourse distributes agency, shapes the public image of older adults, and obscures their digital practices. Through this analysis, older adults can be dislodged from the position of “objects of empowerment” and their rights, experiences, and creative capacities can be reconceptualized as those of digital citizens.

3.6. Theoretical Perspectives on Subjectivity

Wang Yuliang’s theory of subjectivity serves as an important theoretical basis for the analysis. In his view, subjectivity can be understood through three related aspects: originating from the subject, acting upon the object, and externalizing essential powers (Wang, 1995). This idea helps explain why older adults should not be regarded only as recipients of technological support. In digital life, they also have their own needs, choices, practical abilities, and value judgments. Wang’s theory therefore offers a starting point for reconsidering the relationship between older adults and digital platforms. It helps move beyond the simple statement that “technology empowers older adults” and instead asks whether older adults can act, speak, create, negotiate, and refuse as digital subjects.

Foucault’s discussion of power and the subject provides another useful perspective. It helps explain how subject positions are formed within discourse. For Foucault, power does not only repress individuals. It also shapes the possible space in which people act (Foucault, 1982). From this view, the narrative of “technology empowerment” is not merely a positive or neutral expression. It can also define the way older adults are expected to enter digital society. In this narrative, older adults are often described as people who are “unfamiliar with technology”, “unable to use technology”, or “in need of help”. Over time, these descriptions may become common ways of explaining their digital situation.

Honneth’s theory of recognition further shows that subjectivity is closely related to social recognition. In Honneth’s view, recognition is necessary for individuals to build a positive relationship with themselves (Honneth, 1995). If older adults’ experiences, expressions, and refusals are often seen as backwardness or inconvenience, their subjectivity will be weakened in social evaluation. For this reason, the “right to be heard” is not only a general slogan. It means that the digital experiences of older adults should be taken seriously and should enter platform design, public service reform, and policy-making processes.

The capability approach proposed by Sen and Nussbaum also supports the present critique’s understanding of digital participation. From this line of argument, digital participation should not be limited to technical skills. It should be understood as a kind of substantive freedom. Sen understood development as the expansion of people’s real freedoms (Sen, 1999). Nussbaum also argued that social arrangements should be evaluated by asking what each person is actually able to do and to become (Nussbaum, 2011).

This view supports the discussion of both the right to access and the right to refusal. Real digital inclusion should help older adults use digital services when they need them. At the same time, it should protect their living space from being fully controlled by compulsory digitization.

In general, Wang Yuliang's theory of subjectivity provides the basic framework for analyzing subject-object relations. Foucault helps examine how discourse and power construct the "object of empowerment". Honneth helps explain why the realization of subjectivity requires recognition from others and from society. Sen and Nussbaum help interpret the four proposed rights as social conditions for older adults to realize their digital subjectivity. Taken together, these theories support a clear judgment: older adults' digital inclusion should be evaluated by the freedoms and recognition they actually gain, not only by the number of functions made available to them.

3.7. Summary of the Literature

Existing studies provide support in five areas. The social work tradition links empowerment with participation, changes in power relations, and structural support rather than a one-way gift. Critical gerontechnology exposes the technological solutionism and deficit view of aging embedded in some designs. Digital divide and digital inclusion research moves beyond access and emphasizes use contexts, resources, outcomes, and meaning. Digital citizenship raises participation to the level of civic qualification and rights protection. Critical discourse analysis and aging-media research show that the digital image of older adults is produced through policy texts, platform narratives, and media expressions.

Therefore, the paper does not claim to create the concept of "digital citizen" for the first time or to be the first study to criticize the paternalistic discourse of technology empowerment. Its contribution lies in three moves. First, it brings critical gerontechnology and digital citizenship into the context of China's silver economy and platformization, showing how "technology empowerment" gains legitimacy through business logic, age-friendly policy, and the older consumer market. Second, it uses Wang Yuliang's theory of subjectivity to reinterpret older adults' digital practices as originating from the subject, acting upon the object, and externalizing essential powers. Third, it highlights the right to refusal: non-use, reduced use, or selective use of digital technology can express subjectivity rather than incapacity or failed integration.

On this basis, older adults are treated as digital citizens in a society where aging and platformization are closely connected. They participate, express, create, negotiate, and refuse. Critical gerontechnology identifies the deficit-based imagination of old age; digital inclusion research prevents the digital divide from being reduced to technical ability; non-use research interprets refusal as social practice; and digital citizenship supplies a language of rights.

4. A Small-Scale Illustrative Analysis of the "Technology Empowerment" Discourse

The small-scale illustrative analysis responds to the need for corpus support. The selected materials do not form a large sample and do not exhaust policy, platform, or media discourse. They do, however, show a recurring vocabulary: "helping older adults integrate into digital life", "solving the difficulties older adults face in using smart technologies", and "age-friendly adaptation". These phrases have practical value, but they also concentrate agency in institutions and technologies, making older adults appear mainly as the recipients of assistance. The pattern should therefore be read carefully: it is evidence of a repeated discursive tendency, not proof that every policy or platform text is simply paternalistic.

4.1. Policy Texts: Facilitated Services and Parallel Safeguards

The Implementation Plan issued by the General Office of the State Council frames the issue as difficulties encountered by older adults in using smart technologies and focuses on high-frequency life scenarios while preserving traditional service methods alongside smart-service innovation (General Office of the State Council, 2020). The document therefore has a double structure. It protects older adults from exclusion by keeping offline channels, yet its problem statement still centers on helping older adults use smart technologies. This is precisely where the judgment must be balanced: the text offers real protection, but older adults still appear primarily as recipients of facilitated services rather than as participants in defining digital-service rules.

The wording of the State Council plan makes this double structure visible. The title names the problem as "difficulties faced by older adults in using smart technologies", and the notice assigns planning, implementation, and service provision to administrative actors (General Office of the State Council, 2020). The text safeguards access, but its verbs of action remain mainly attached to government departments rather than to older users.

The MIIT documents on age-friendly and accessibility reforms translate the problem into website and app design standards, including simplified interfaces, larger fonts, voice reading, alternative verification codes, and closed-loop service flows (Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, 2020; Office of Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, 2021). These provisions support the right to access. Their limitation is that they emphasize how technology improves older adults' usage capability while

leaving older adults' role in defining adaptation standards relatively weak. In this sense, the documents are necessary but insufficient from the standpoint of digital citizenship.

Chinese policy also contains counterexamples to a simple “getting online” logic. The State Council's plan proposes differentiated approaches according to age group, educational background, living environment, and habits, and it requires offline channels to accompany online services (General Office of the State Council, 2020). The National Healthcare Security Administration states that in-person window processing may not be refused on the grounds that online processing is available, and it requires restoration or dedicated channels where traditional services have been eliminated or replaced (National Healthcare Security Administration, 2020). These provisions supply the policy basis for non-digital rights. The remaining issue is implementation: whether these principles become stable performance assessments, everyday service windows, and platform rules.

The healthcare-security document draws the boundary of digital transformation most clearly. By rejecting the idea that online processing can replace in-person window processing, it moves the discussion beyond app training and recognizes that online procedures cannot become the only gateway to basic medical insurance services (NHSA, 2020). This evidence prevents the critique from overstating Chinese policy as pure technological solutionism. It also shows why the right to refusal must be treated as a policy issue rather than only a personal preference.

4.2. Platform Texts: The Help-and-Integration Narrative in Care Mode

Tencent's public documentation on digital life for older adults introduces WeChat's “Care Mode”, offline training courses, and the “Silver Age Program”. It lists fraud warnings, enlarged fonts, and reduced pop-up notifications as user-desired improvements, and reports that more than four million users had activated Care Mode by October 6, 2021 (Tencent, 2021). These details show platform response to some older users' needs. The judgment here is not that such measures are empty. They are useful. The limitation is that the agency of the text remains concentrated in the platform, the program, the courses, and the volunteers. Older adults appear mainly as learners, aid recipients, and people to be integrated into digital life; their roles as experience providers, rule negotiators, and cultural producers remain marginal.

At the sentence level, the Tencent text repeatedly assigns action to the platform: WeChat “launched” Care Mode, Tencent “helps” older adults enter digital life, and courses or volunteers provide guidance. The user survey is an important exception because it records functions that users wanted, such as fraud warnings, larger fonts, and fewer pop-up notifications. Yet the narrative converts these preferences into platform-led solutions rather than an ongoing mechanism through which older users negotiate design rules. This is a subtle but important difference between listening once and institutionalizing the right to be heard.

4.3. Media Reports: The Gap between Feature Adaptation and Actual Use

Southern Metropolis Daily examined the 43 apps included in MIIT's first age-friendly adaptation list. Because Didi Chuxing had been removed from app stores and 114 Health was temporarily unavailable during a system upgrade, 41 apps were included in the final assessment. Of these, 38—approximately 92.7%—had launched an age-friendly version or mode by September 30, 2021, while three had not. This figure refers to the availability of an age-friendly version or mode rather than formal completion of, or full compliance with, MIIT's adaptation standards. The review also found that some apps still contained advertisements, purchase inducements and unfriendly verification methods (Tang et al., 2021). This evidence supports a firm judgment: age-friendly adaptation can remain superficial when it is measured by fonts, icons, and simplified pages without rights-based constraints on advertising, consumer inducement, and verification.

The report provides concrete evidence for this judgment. After WeChat enabled Care Mode, advertising still appeared in Moments; Amap's Care Mode offered a simpler page but still displayed opening-screen advertising; and Ctrip's senior version contained a promotional pop-up. On verification, WeChat offered an age-friendly verification button with an automatic countdown, while Youku, Changba, Baidu Maps Care Version, and Haodf.com still required sliding or puzzle verification without alternative methods (Ma et al., 2021). These examples show that larger fonts and simpler pages do not automatically create dignified or barrier-free use.

4.4. Subsection Summary

The corpus therefore supports a cautious but concrete judgment: “technology empowerment” is a real explanatory framework recurring across policy, platform, and media texts. It promotes age-friendly adaptation and facilitated services, but its rhetoric often defines older adults through difficulty, learning, and assistance. In these texts, older adults rarely appear as digital citizens who can participate in rule-making, express values, create culture, and refuse unreasonable digital arrangements. This does not make the empowerment narrative useless; it makes it incomplete.

5. Toward “Digital Citizens”: Reconstructing the Subjectivity of Older Adults in Digital Platforms

5.1. From “Empowerment” to “Citizenship”: The Necessity of a Paradigm Shift

In the social work tradition, empowerment begins from the subjectivity of service users and from structural conditions that produce powerlessness. In discussions of the silver economy and digital platforms, however, “technology empowerment” is often narrowed into technological support. Platforms offer large-font modes, voice assistants, and age-friendly interfaces; policies encourage older adults to learn QR-code scanning, online shopping, and appointment booking. These measures help in everyday life, but they can also reproduce the image of older adults as users with deficient digital ability, with technology positioned as the main solution. The point is not to deny assistance, but to insist that assistance should not define the whole identity of the assisted person.

The proposed shift from “empowerment” to “digital citizenship” changes this starting point. It is not a conceptual fashion. It repositions older adults from supported users to rights-bearing subjects and active meaning-makers in digital society. Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal (2008) linked digital citizenship with online social participation, economic opportunity, and democratic engagement. Choi (2016) connected it with ethics, media and information literacy, participatory interaction, and critical resistance. Isin and Ruppert (2015) further emphasized digital rights claims. Applied to older adults, this framework foregrounds rights and choices while recognizing that conceptual change alone leaves structural problems intact. This recognition keeps the argument from becoming merely rhetorical.

This reading widens the field of older adults’ digital practices. Learning to use smartphones is one form of capacity building, but so are requests to keep offline service counters, demands for platform feedback mechanisms, and refusals of unnecessary algorithmic tracking. These actions show subjectivity because older adults judge the place of technology in their own lives. Digital citizenship therefore corrects the empowerment discourse by moving older adults out of the role of people being helped and into the position of people entitled to enter, negotiate, reshape, or reject digital arrangements. The human judgment behind this shift is that adaptation without choice is still a weak form of inclusion.

More specifically, digital citizenship resets the relation between older adults and digital technology. An empowerment starting point easily describes them through lack. A citizenship starting point begins from rights. Digital participation is then a civic qualification to be recognized and protected, not a benefit granted by outside forces.

The main limitation of the empowerment paradigm is its binary structure: active helpers on one side and passive receivers on the other. Technology, platforms, and policies appear as providers, while older adults appear as recipients. The digital citizenship paradigm breaks this structure by treating older adults’ rights to participate, express, create, and refuse as pre-existing claims that institutions and social relations must recognize. This is why citizenship is a stronger concept than assistance: it begins from entitlement rather than benevolence.

Wang Yuliang’s theory clarifies what this subjectivity involves. “Originating from the subject” means that technology serves people’s life goals rather than arranging their lives through procedures. “Acting upon the object” means that subjects influence and change the object through purposive practice. “Externalization of essential powers” means that abilities, emotions, and values are expressed through action and leave marks in the outside world (Wang, 1995).

These three dimensions appear in older adults’ digital lives. Choosing technologies according to personal need reflects “originating from the subject”. Browsing, commenting, consumption, creation, and feedback reflect “acting upon the object”. Bringing life experience, emotional memory, and value judgment into short videos, livestreams, community mutual aid, and public expression reflects “externalization of essential powers”. The digital divide is therefore a structural barrier that restricts subjectivity rather than evidence that subject status is absent. This judgment is important because lack of access should not be mistaken for lack of agency.

Foucault, Honneth, Sen, and Nussbaum strengthen this interpretation. Foucault explains how discourse shapes the subject positions available to older adults. Honneth shows why experiences and refusals require recognition rather than dismissal as backwardness. Sen and Nussbaum shift evaluation from app skills to substantive freedoms: what older adults are actually able to do and to become in digital society.

The move from empowerment to citizenship has three implications. Research moves from capacity supplementation to rights protection; from skills training to practice understanding; and from technology access to life choices. When older adults use mobile phones, they maintain family relationships, participate in community life, express personal experience, and arrange later-life affairs. Their digital lives cannot be reduced to scanning a QR code, making a payment, or operating a single platform. A rights-based perspective therefore asks not only whether an operation is completed, but whether the person remains able to choose, interpret, and influence that operation.

5.2. Four Digital Rights of Older Adults

Existing research on digital citizenship shows that participation in digital society should not be reduced to technical competence. For older adults, the central question is not simply whether they can use smartphones, scan QR codes, complete online payments,

or operate mobile applications. A more important question is whether they can enter digital society as subjects with needs, judgments, choices, and the capacity to influence digital arrangements. On this basis, this paper understands the digital citizenship of older adults through four connected rights: access, participation, being heard, and refusal. These rights are proposed as an evaluative framework, not as evidence that such rights have already been fully realized.

These four rights form a progressive but non-linear structure. Access concerns the basic conditions that allow older adults to enter digital life. Participation concerns whether they can use digital platforms to communicate, consume, create, organize, and take part in public life. Being heard concerns whether their experiences, complaints, and preferences can influence platform design, public services, and policy-making. Refusal marks the boundary of digital inclusion: older adults should be able to choose non-digital, limited, or selective forms of use without losing access to basic services or social dignity. The rights therefore work together: none of them is sufficient alone.

This rights framework also corresponds to Wang Yuliang's three dimensions of subjectivity. Access and refusal are closely related to "originating from the subject", because they concern whether older adults can decide how technology enters their lives. Participation corresponds to "acting upon the object", because older adults use digital tools to maintain relationships, join communities, express preferences, and shape meanings. Being heard relates to the "externalization of essential powers", because older adults' experiences and judgments must be recognized and translated into institutional response. The four rights therefore move older adults out of the position of passive recipients and reposition them as digital subjects who can use, negotiate, reshape, and sometimes reject digital arrangements.

The first right is the right to access. Access is the most basic condition of digital citizenship, but it should not be reduced to whether an older person owns a smartphone or has an internet connection. It also includes affordable devices, stable networks, age-friendly interfaces, clear instructions, large-font modes, voice guidance, simplified procedures, and alternative verification methods. More importantly, access also means that digital public services should not exclude older adults who cannot smoothly use mobile applications. For example, when hospitals rely on online appointment systems, when transportation services depend on QR codes, or when medical insurance procedures move onto mobile platforms, older adults should still be able to obtain services through in-person windows, telephone support, staff assistance, or other accessible channels. In this sense, the right to access is not a demand that every older adult must become a fully digital user. It is a demand that digital transformation should not create new forms of exclusion.

Many older adults use digital platforms to contact family members, exchange information with neighbors, join interest groups, express opinions, follow health information, engage in online shopping, or produce and share short videos. These practices show that older adults are not only adapting to digital platforms; they are also using platforms to organize relationships, express identity, and create meaning. Therefore, the right to participation shifts the focus from "whether older adults can use technology" to "what older adults do with technology in their own social and cultural contexts".

The right to be heard addresses a common weakness in age-friendly reform. Older adults are often treated as the target group of service improvement, but not always as participants in decision-making. A platform may launch a senior mode, enlarge fonts, or simplify pages, but these measures do not necessarily respond to the actual difficulties older users face. For example, older adults may still encounter pop-up advertisements, purchase inducements, complicated verification procedures, unclear privacy settings, or inaccessible customer service. If their experiences cannot reach designers, platform managers, and policymakers, then age-friendly adaptation remains a top-down project. The right to be heard therefore requires stable and effective feedback mechanisms. Older adults should be able to report problems, evaluate reforms, participate in user testing, join advisory groups, and influence the rules that shape their digital lives.

The right to refusal is especially important because digital inclusion is often understood as encouraging older adults to use more digital technologies. However, non-use, limited use, or selective use should not automatically be interpreted as backwardness, incapacity, or resistance to progress. Some older adults may avoid online payment because they worry about fraud. Some may prefer cash because it gives them a clearer sense of spending. Some may refuse facial recognition because of privacy concerns. Some may avoid unnecessary app registration because they do not want to provide personal information. Others may simply prefer long-established offline habits in medical care, shopping, transportation, or communication. These choices should be recognized as part of digital subjectivity. The right to refusal means that older adults should not lose access to basic services or social dignity simply because they choose not to use certain digital technologies.

The four rights are therefore closely connected. Access gives older adults the possibility of entering digital society. Participation allows them to act within digital society. Being heard enables their practices and experiences to become visible to institutions. Refusal protects their ability to set limits on digitalization. Without access, participation lacks a basic entry point. Without participation, access may remain only formal. Without being heard, participation may not lead to any change in platforms or policies. Without refusal, digital inclusion may turn into digital compulsion. The four rights together form a rights-based understanding of older adults' digital citizenship.

This framework also changes how age-friendly reform should be evaluated. A platform cannot be considered genuinely age-friendly only because it offers larger fonts, fewer buttons, or a simplified interface. It should also be assessed by whether older adults can avoid manipulative advertising, find human customer service, use alternative verification methods, give meaningful feedback, protect their privacy, and participate in improving platform rules. Similarly, a public service cannot claim successful digital transformation if online procedures become the only effective channel. From the perspective of digital citizenship, the goal is not to make all older adults enter digital systems in the same way. The goal is to ensure that older adults can access, participate, be heard, and refuse within a digital society that increasingly shapes everyday life. This is a more demanding standard than usability, but it is also a more honest standard.

5.3. Older Adults as Cultural Producers

The right to participation becomes clearer when older adults are viewed not only as service users, but also as cultural producers in digital society. Guo (2025) argues that digital reverse socialization allows older adults to become “active internet participants and cultural producers”. Xu and Zeng (2025) show how older adults create meaning, build relationships, and generate value in livestreaming rooms. These studies provide useful evidence, but they still cannot fully explain the cultural producer identity of older adults. Participatory culture offers a broader theoretical basis: Jenkins and colleagues (2009) argued that digital media enables ordinary users to participate in content production and the circulation of meaning. This argument is not only suitable for young users; it also helps explain older adults’ expression through short videos, livestreaming, online communities, and digital storytelling. The judgment here is that older adults’ digital practices should be read as cultural participation, not merely as successful adaptation.

Empirical studies of older adults’ digital practices deepen this point. Ferreira, Sayago, and Blat (2017) studied digital video production among older adults; nearly 200 participants aged 60 to 85 produced 320 videos. Their findings show creative practices around memory preservation, experience sharing, and video editing. Hausknecht, Vanchu-Orosco, and Kaufman (2019) similarly found that digital storytelling strengthens social connection and turns life stories into shareable digital content. Older adults’ cultural production therefore lies in bringing life experience, emotional memory, and value judgment into the digital public sphere.

Once older adults are recognized as cultural producers, age-friendly adaptation has a broader meaning. It is not limited to simplified interfaces. It also concerns space for cultural expression and personal experience. Platforms can lower the threshold for content creation, reduce advertising and purchase inducements, limit manipulative design, and provide feedback channels suited to slower-paced expression. Public service institutions can also include older adults’ digital stories, community experiences, and mutual-aid practices in public culture. Age-friendly adaptation thus becomes a social process that supports expression, participation, and creation. The practical judgment is clear: a platform that only makes consumption easier has not yet fully recognized older adults as creators.

5.4. Case Comparison: Practical Differences between the Empowerment and Digital Citizenship Paradigms

The first case concerns app adaptation. In the empowerment paradigm, evaluation usually centers on functional support: large-font modes, care versions, voice assistants, and simpler interfaces. WeChat’s “Care Mode” exemplifies this logic. Tencent’s document states that the platform supports older adults in entering digital life through fraud warnings, larger fonts, and fewer pop-up windows, and that more than four million users had turned on Care Mode by October 6, 2021 (Tencent, 2021). These changes are useful, but the design logic still casts older adults as learners and aid recipients. This is why functional improvement should be treated as the beginning of age-friendly reform, not as its endpoint.

From the digital citizenship perspective, the evaluation standard changes. The issue is not only font size or number of operating steps. It is whether older adults helped define needed functions, whether feedback channels persist after launch, whether advertisements and purchase inducements are controlled, whether verification and payment provide alternatives, and whether unnecessary data collection can be refused. As detailed in Section 4.3, 38 of the 41 apps available for assessment—approximately 92.7%—had launched an age-friendly version or mode, although some continued to contain advertisements, purchase inducements, and unfriendly verification methods. The contrast shows the difference between usable entry and rights-protected use: the empowerment paradigm mainly asks whether older adults can use the app, while the citizenship paradigm asks whether this use is dignified, voluntary, and able to affect platform rules.

The contrast is concrete. If the criterion is simply whether a senior mode is available, the relatively high rollout rate appears successful. If the criterion is digital citizenship, remaining advertisements, purchase inducements, hard-to-find senior versions, and unfriendly verification processes become central evidence. They reveal whether older adults are being helped into the platform or protected as users with rights. In this comparison, the more persuasive evaluation is the second one because it asks what kind of digital life the adaptation actually produces.

The second case concerns online and offline public services. The empowerment paradigm reads policy as a way to help older adults learn smart technologies more effectively. The State Council’s Implementation Plan does address difficulties in using smart

technologies, but it also preserves traditional service methods alongside smart-service innovation (General Office of the State Council, 2020). This provision moves closer to digital citizenship because it prevents basic public services from depending solely on smartphone use.

A policy document, however, is not the same as realized citizenship. The principle of online-offline parallel services still requires implementation at local service windows, platforms, and public institutions. Digital citizenship treats in-person service windows, cash payment, on-site support, and non-digital procedures as rights protections rather than temporary conveniences. It also treats refusal as legitimate when an older person avoids an app because of physical condition, risk judgment, privacy concern, or long-formed habit. The key judgment is that a non-digital route should not be seen as a leftover from the past, but as part of a rights-protecting public service system.

5.5. *A Practice-Oriented Research Framework for Studying Older Digital Practices*

Building on the preceding analysis, the paper proposes a rights-based, practice-oriented framework for studying older digital practices. The framework observes five sites at the same time: digital access; offline alternative pathways; platform participation, expression, and creation; feedback from older adults into platform and policy processes; and public discourse about older adults as digital users. This design prevents older adults' digital lives from being compressed into a skills-deficit problem. It also makes the researcher responsible for asking whether a digital service expands freedom or merely transfers the burden of adaptation to older users.

At the research level, question design is decisive. Instead of asking only “why can't older adults use this technology”, researchers can ask “why do older adults choose this form of use”, “in what scenarios do they refuse it”, “who benefits from digitization”, and “who bears the costs of learning and trial-and-error”. Future research can incorporate urban-rural location, class, education, gender, region, family support, and physical condition as baseline variables, and combine interviews, participatory observation, interface walkthroughs, and platform rule analysis. This approach makes differences among older populations visible rather than constructing an abstract “older user”.

At the platform design level, the key shift is from greater usability to greater richness. Usability covers larger fonts, simplified processes, voice prompts, and accessible verification. Richness adds creation, negotiation, and monitoring. Platforms can support older content creators with low-threshold editing tools, clear copyright guidelines, anti-fraud protections, appeal channels, and interaction mechanisms suited to slower-paced expression. Older user advisory councils can also be established, with membership reflecting urban-rural location, education, income, gender, and physical condition. Advisory councils should not merely conduct a one-time user experience test before product launch. They should participate on an ongoing basis in the assessment of advertising governance, privacy settings, recommendation mechanisms, payment verification, and customer service processes. This recommendation follows directly from the right to be heard: older adults should not only test finished designs, but also help define what counts as a good design.

At the policy level, non-digital rights need to develop alongside digital inclusion. Offline service windows, in-person assistance, cash payment, telephone-based processing, and paper documentation are baseline rights in public services, not temporary accommodations. Chinese policy already proposes parallel provision of traditional services and smart innovation, and healthcare security policy states that in-person window processing may not be refused because online processing is available (General Office of the State Council, 2020; NHSA, 2020). The National Human Rights Commission of Korea also recommends choice between digital and non-digital options and treats information accessibility as part of fundamental rights (NHRCK, 2024). These materials show that non-digital rights are compatible with digitization and protect older adults' basic life channels.

At the level of public discourse, the key task is counter-stigmatization. Expressions such as “digital refugees” may sound vivid, but they place older adults in a rescue frame: people to be saved, resettled, and managed. Alternatives such as “older adults facing digital exclusion”, “older users in need of digital support”, or “older citizens who choose non-digital pathways” still name difficulties, but they do not attribute those difficulties to old age per se, and they leave room for older adults' choice, judgment, and agency. This wording matters because it determines whether older adults are imagined as failed digital subjects or as citizens negotiating unequal digital conditions.

5.6. *A Comparison of Policies in China, Japan, and South Korea and Its Implications*

China, Japan, and South Korea all address digital inclusion under the combined conditions of aging and digitization. Each recognizes obstacles that older adults encounter with smart devices, online services, and digital public infrastructure, and each uses training programs, age-friendly design, or public-service adjustment to reduce those obstacles. Their policy priorities differ, and these differences clarify the practical direction of digital citizenship.

Chinese policy locates older adults' digital difficulties in high-frequency daily-life scenarios, including transportation, medical care, consumption, and administrative services. The State Council's plan also combines traditional services with smart-service innovation and requires online services to be accompanied by offline channels (General Office of the State Council, 2020). This scenario-based approach turns policy problems into concrete service-window, transportation, healthcare, and payment measures. Its main challenge lies in implementation: policy goals must become auditable, accountable, and sustainable practices in everyday public service provision. The judgment is therefore balanced: the policy direction is important, but its citizenship value depends on whether older adults can actually rely on these channels in daily life.

Japanese policy emphasizes a digital society in which “no one is left behind” and builds localized support networks through digital supporters and community seminars. Japan's Digital Agency describes digital supporters as people who assist those unfamiliar with digital devices and services, including My Number Card, Mynaportal, local digital services, and device use (Digital Agency, 2026a). It also compiles community seminars and smartphone consultation activities, noting that some courses may have age or residency requirements (Digital Agency, 2026b). This model brings support into community settings, but it remains close to teaching people to use technology unless older adults' feedback and rule participation are institutionally incorporated. The strength of the model is accompaniment; its limitation is that accompaniment can still remain one-way.

The community-seminar materials add another concrete detail: some courses are limited by target age or residential area, and the Digital Agency states that information will be updated as local sessions become available (Digital Agency, 2026b). This arrangement shows the advantage of local support, but it also suggests that access to assistance may depend on locality, enrollment rules, and the capacity of community organizations.

South Korean policy combines continuous measurement with rights-oriented language. The Ministry of Science and ICT's digital divide survey classifies older adults as a vulnerable group and measures access, capacity, and usage (Ministry of Science and ICT, 2023). The National Human Rights Commission of Korea recommends tailored training, user-friendly devices, analogue-mode accessibility options, and help desks for older adults (NHRCK, 2024). This approach treats digital inclusion as more than training; it links statistical monitoring with rights language and redress mechanisms. The important point is that measurement and rights language can work together: data show the scale of exclusion, while rights language defines what should be protected.

The rights-oriented language is especially clear in the Korean human-rights recommendation. By naming analogue accessibility options and help desks alongside training and user-friendly devices, the document defines support as both digital assistance and the preservation of non-digital routes. The policy implication is direct: support for older adults should not stop at teaching digital skills, but should include the right to obtain assistance and the right to retain analogue channels (NHRCK, 2024).

The comparison does not identify a superior model, and the available materials are insufficient for evaluating policy effects. It nevertheless yields three insights: China's scenario-based policy needs stronger performance assessment and accountability; Japan's community support model suggests long-term accompaniment mechanisms for platforms and communities; and South Korea's rights-based language helps articulate non-digital rights more clearly. Together, the three cases show that older adults' digital inclusion cannot pursue only “knowing how to use technology”. It must also safeguard the abilities to choose, provide feedback, participate, and refuse. This is the practical lesson of the comparison.

6. Conclusions

This paper has examined the narrative of “technology empowerment” in discussions of older adults' digital inclusion. The argument is not that technology, policy support, or age-friendly design lack value. On the contrary, enlarged interfaces, simplified procedures, digital training, offline service windows, and accessible verification methods can all reduce real barriers in later-life digital participation. The problem arises when empowerment is understood mainly as something granted by technology, platforms, or institutions. In that case, older adults are easily positioned as people who wait to be helped, taught, adapted, or integrated, while their own judgments, practices, refusals, and claims-making capacities become less visible. The final judgment of the paper is therefore a conditional one: technology is valuable, but it should not monopolize the meaning of inclusion.

By reading policy documents, platform statements, media reports, and comparative policy materials together, the paper shows that the empowerment narrative has a double character. It promotes practical improvements, yet it often concentrates agency in governments, platforms, technologies, and service providers. Older adults appear most frequently as users facing difficulties, learners of digital skills, or targets of age-friendly reform. This does not mean that existing policies and platform measures should be dismissed. Rather, it means that their underlying assumptions need to be reconsidered. Digital inclusion should not be reduced to helping older adults use more technologies. It should also ask whether older adults can choose how technology enters their lives, participate in digital culture, influence platform and policy decisions, and refuse unreasonable forms of compulsory digitization.

The framework of digital citizenship offers one way to make this shift. It repositions older adults as rights-bearing digital subjects rather than passive objects of empowerment. In this paper, their digital citizenship is understood through four connected rights: the right to access, the right to participation, the right to be heard, and the right to refusal. These rights are not separate policy

slogans. Together, they describe the conditions under which older adults can act as subjects in a platform-mediated society. Access provides the basic possibility of entering digital life. Participation recognizes older adults' communication, consumption, creation, and public expression. Being heard requires that their experiences and complaints enter platform design, public-service reform, and policy-making. Refusal protects their ability to use digital technologies selectively, or to retain non-digital pathways, without losing dignity or access to basic services.

The most distinctive point of this framework is the right to refusal. In many discussions of digital inclusion, non-use or limited use is treated as a sign of backwardness, incapacity, or failed adaptation. This paper argues instead that refusal may also express subjectivity. An older person may avoid online payment because of fraud concerns, prefer in-person service because it provides trust and clarity, or reject unnecessary data collection because of privacy worries. These choices should not be interpreted simply as resistance to progress. They reveal how older adults evaluate risk, maintain habits, protect autonomy, and negotiate the boundaries of digitization. For this reason, a genuinely inclusive digital society should not force everyone into the same digital route. It should preserve multiple ways of participating in social life. This is not a rejection of digitalization; it is a rejection of compulsory digitalization.

The study has several limitations. It is based on theoretical analysis and a small illustrative corpus of publicly available texts, rather than interviews, surveys, ethnography, or platform usage data. The selected materials can reveal recurring discursive patterns, but they cannot represent all policy, platform, and media discourse. The comparison among China, Japan, and South Korea is also limited to selected public materials and does not evaluate implementation effects in a systematic way. Moreover, the four rights proposed here are a normative framework, not yet an established institutional reality. Their realization depends on policy enforcement, platform accountability, public-service capacity, community support, and intergenerational relations. These limits should be taken seriously because they mark where judgment ends and future empirical research must begin.

Future research can extend this framework through empirical studies of different groups of older adults. Urban-rural location, gender, education, income, health condition, family support, and previous work experience may all shape how older adults access, use, negotiate, or refuse digital technologies. Interviews and participatory observation can show how older adults themselves define convenience, risk, dignity, autonomy, and inclusion. Interface analysis and platform governance studies can further examine whether age-friendly reforms actually give older users more power to participate and be heard. Cross-national research can also explore how different welfare systems, platform economies, and public-service arrangements affect the balance between digital inclusion and non-digital rights.

In sum, the shift from “technology empowerment” to “digital citizenship” is not merely a change of terminology. It is a change in the way older adults are imagined within digital society. They are not only people who need assistance in crossing the digital divide. They are also users, citizens, cultural producers, rights claimants, and decision-makers in their own digital lives. A more age-inclusive digital society should therefore do more than teach older adults to adapt to technology. It should also allow them to participate, speak, create, negotiate, and refuse. That is the human-centered judgment at the heart of the paper.

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