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"We're Experiencing Digital Death": Chinese People Who Used Heroin in Community-Based Rehabilitation

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Abstract

Digital inclusion is increasingly recognised as a critical dimension of social inclusion, particularly in contexts undergoing rapid technological transformation such as China. Despite the Chinese government's substantial investment in digital infrastructure, equitable access and meaningful participation remain elusive for many incarcerated lived experiencers. Drawing on narrative interviews with 18 people who used heroin and are navigating community-based rehabilitation after incarceration, this study investigates their everyday encounters with digital exclusion. Through a digital inclusion lens, we identify key barriers, including structural distrust, residual surveillance, and algorithmic classification, which collectively amount to a condition of "digital death." This form of exclusion is not merely rooted in personal incapacity or behavioural deviance, but rather emerges from institutional silences and systemic absences in both rehabilitation policy and digital governance. We argue that digital inclusion must be integrated into China's rehabilitation and *Huiguishehui* (returning to society) frameworks, repositioning it as an essential component of social reintegration and inclusive citizenship.

Keywords

community-based rehabilitation; digital inclusion; exclusion; narrative; people who used heroin

1. Introduction

In the context of accelerating digital transformation, digital inclusion has become a key dimension of social inclusion (Méndez-Domínguez et al., 2023; Mervyn et al., 2014). Commonly defined as the ability of all individuals and communities, especially the most vulnerable, to access and meaningfully use digital

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technologies (National Digital Inclusion Alliance, 2017), digital inclusion has attracted growing policy attention worldwide.

Social inclusion, as a foundational concept, is rooted in Western liberal traditions of civil society, where individuals are presumed to possess an inherent entitlement to inclusion by virtue of citizenship, human rights, and fundamental freedoms (Collins, 2003). Within this framework, inclusion is framed as a normative, rights-based principle anchored in legal status and oriented toward equal participation in social, economic, and political life. In China, by contrast, social inclusion operates less as a rights-based claim than as a concept subordinated to political rationality and governance objectives. Rather than articulated through the language of individual rights, inclusion is commonly condensed into the notion of *he* (和), signifying harmony, coordination, and the minimisation of conflict (Song, 2026). At its core, *he* prioritises accommodation and social stability, positioning inclusion as an instrumental means of governance rather than an end grounded in individual entitlement. Inclusion is therefore conditional, relational, and contingent upon conformity to broader governance goals.

Although China lacks a formal or unified definition of digital inclusion, its institutional development largely extends this governance-oriented logic of *he*. Digital inclusion is valued insofar as it contributes to stability maintenance, administrative efficiency, and orderly governance. As a result, digital inclusion in China exhibits three defining characteristics. First, it is state-led and top-down, embedded in national development strategies and policy-driven initiatives. Second, it operates through selective inclusion, privileging socially legitimised populations while systematically marginalising stigmatised groups, particularly those with histories of drug use, incarceration, or other forms of social deviance. Third, it produces internally fractured outcomes, whereby expanded digital access coexists with persistent exclusion from meaningful opportunities for skill acquisition, digital literacy, and social mobility among marginalised populations.

While international scholarship increasingly demonstrates how digital technologies reproduce existing power hierarchies (Kirkpatrick, 2017; Verstegen et al., 2019), relatively little research in China has examined digital inclusion among populations rendered marginal not only by poverty or rurality but by criminalisation and incarceration. This study addresses this gap by focusing on the digital inclusion of people who have used heroin. This group refers to men and women who initiated heroin use mainly between the late 1980s and mid-2000s, a period shaped by market reforms, internal migration, and the expansion of transnational drug routes (Song et al., 2025). Most were born in the 1960s–1970s and entered adulthood amid rapid social transformation and widening inequalities. Their life trajectories were marked by incomplete education, early entry into precarious labour markets, circular migration, unstable family relations, and repeated encounters with administrative detention (Li, 2024).

Therefore, people who have used heroin embody multiple, intersecting forms of marginalisation rather than constituting a single disadvantaged category; they represent a layered configuration of exclusion across age, health, class, incarceration, and governance encounters. Now ageing and multiply stigmatised, many continue to face residual surveillance and low digital literacy, rendering them particularly vulnerable to digital exclusion. Yet their lived experiences remain underexplored, especially amid recent policy shifts toward *Huiguishehui* (returning to society), which positions social reintegration as central to drug rehabilitation through community-based approaches.

Drawing on narrative interviews with 18 participants, this study examines how people who have used heroin experience digital exclusion in post-incarceration rehabilitation settings. Building on theories of digital inclusion, reentry, and rehabilitation, we explore how participants encounter, respond to, and narrate digital technologies, including experiences contributing to what we conceptualise as "digital death," which is not technological illiteracy, but a condition of algorithmically mediated social disappearance in which ageing, formerly incarcerated people who use drugs become structurally and symbolically erased from China's digital future, resembling a form of civil death. We argue that digital inclusion should be treated as a core component of inclusive recovery rather than a technological add-on. Digital governance initiatives must therefore be tailored to populations structurally unable to benefit from standardised models, highlighting the need to integrate digital inclusion into China's *Huiguishehui* framework and broader debates on digital justice.

2. Background and Literature Review

2.1. Governance and Rehabilitation of People Who Use Drugs

The governance of people who use drugs has long remained a central concern both in China and globally. Historically, drug use was primarily framed through criminal justice lenses and addressed through punitive interventions, including incarceration and compulsory rehabilitation (Tomaz et al., 2023). In China, such mechanisms continue to play a significant role within anti-drug governance (Wang et al., 2025). The enduring problematisation of people who use drugs is rooted in assumptions regarding the irreversible harms of drug use and its perceived social and economic burdens (Barrio et al., 2017). Consequently, punishment-oriented responses proliferated across many jurisdictions.

By the early twenty-first century, however, increasing recognition of the complexity of drug use prompted shifts in both scholarship and policy. Criminologists criticised punitive approaches for producing rights violations and failing to address structural vulnerabilities (Seddon, 2007). Drug policy scholars further questioned coercive rehabilitation models because of their limited effectiveness and incompatibility with sustainable recovery trajectories (Samouei et al., 2013). Consequently, many jurisdictions increasingly adopted penal-welfarist approaches that prioritised treatment, rehabilitation, and social reintegration over criminal sanctions (Khan et al., 2022).

Within this broader rehabilitation turn, drug governance in China gradually shifted from explicitly criminal processes toward administrative regulation (Lin et al., 2022). The 2008 Anti-Drug Law and the 2011 Regulation on Drug Rehabilitation institutionalised three rehabilitation pathways: compulsory isolation rehabilitation, community-based detoxification, and community-based rehabilitation (Yang & Giummarra, 2021). However, this transition has not represented a departure from carceral logic.

Unlike many other justice-involved populations, people who used heroin often encounter the state through compulsory isolation rehabilitation (*Qiangzhi geli jiedu*), a system formally framed as treatment but operationally resembling incarceration (Wang et al., 2025). These institutions are characterised by militarised routines, restricted communication, surveillance, and limited procedural safeguards. Although each placement lasts up to two years, repeated admissions across the life course frequently generate serial detention that disrupts employment, weakens family ties, accelerates ageing, and deepens material precarity.

Beyond behavioural modification, compulsory treatment also performs broader functions of governance stabilisation, risk management, and moral discipline.

Importantly, this system operates largely through administrative rather than judicial processes. Individuals experience forms of confinement without access to procedural protections commonly associated with criminal justice systems, including bail, trial, parole, or meaningful appeals (Pejic, 2005). Officially framed as patients but governed as detainees, people who use drugs occupy an ambiguous position where carceral control repeatedly occurs outside conventional criminal procedures. These dynamics position people who have used heroin as a multiply marginalised population shaped by late-stage prohibition, labour precarity, and cyclical confinement.

Following institutional rehabilitation, individuals typically enter community-based rehabilitation, which scholars have described as "surveillance without exit" (Lin et al., 2022). Although officially oriented toward reintegration, this stage continues to impose intensive monitoring requirements, including regular and random drug testing (Yang & Giummarra, 2021). In practice, surveillance often extends beyond formal regulations and remains heavily influenced by local enforcement discretion (Song & Jiang, 2025). Consequently, many participants actively avoid rehabilitation providers because they perceive engagement as prolonging surveillance and disrupting everyday life. Rather than fostering recovery, this model risks reproducing penal logics beneath administrative and therapeutic language.

Within this system, a distinctive cohort of post-incarceration people who use drugs has emerged, particularly those who began using heroin during the 1980s and 1990s (Li, 2024). Many entered heroin use during the early expansion of illicit drug markets and subsequently experienced decades of institutional marginalisation. Their life courses have been shaped by repeated cycles of detention, isolation, rehabilitation, relapse, and social exclusion. Today, many are aged over 55 and continue to experience the cumulative consequences of criminalisation and fragmented recovery trajectories.

Despite these intersecting vulnerabilities, limited scholarly attention has been given to how this ageing population survives within increasingly digital societies. Little is known about whether, and how, people who have used heroin navigate digital exclusion, engage with digital technologies during recovery, or respond to emerging digital inequalities. Questions, therefore, remain regarding how recovery needs are mediated through digital infrastructures and what forms of "digital rehabilitation" (Song & Tong, 2025) may mean for populations historically excluded from both technological advancement and mainstream welfare systems.

2.2. Rehabilitation and Digital Inclusion of Post-Incarcerated Populations

A growing body of research on the digital divide, exclusion, and inclusion from both theoretical frameworks and interventive strategies, offers a critical lens through which to examine the digital marginalisation of people who have used heroin, particularly at the intersection of drug use, ageing, and incarceration.

Early conceptualisations of the digital divide and digital inequality primarily focused on physical access to computers and the Internet (van Dijk, 2005). While connectivity concerns have diminished with the proliferation of broadband and wireless technologies, the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated individuals reveal a divergent reality. Post-release, many continue to experience unstable, insufficient, or tightly controlled access to digital technologies. In efforts to prevent re-engagement with criminal networks,

family members and rehabilitation programs often restrict individuals to basic mobile phones capable only of voice calls and SMS messaging (Reisdorf et al., 2022). Consequently, access to computers and laptops remains rare, and this population is largely absent from everyday forms of digital engagement.

Moreover, national rehabilitation approaches, such as mandatory drug testing, counselling appointments, and routine or unannounced home visits, undertaken ostensibly in the name of rehabilitation, often further restrict their mobility, time, and ability to access public ICT resources (Song et al., 2024). Reintegration into society, however, requires not only access to ICTs but also the long-term development of digital skills and literacies. The extended period of "digital deprivation" experienced during incarceration severely limits opportunities for digital education and skill-building, leaving many at a disadvantage in cultivating digital competency (Jimoyiannis & Gravani, 2010). Critically, most existing rehabilitation and reentry programs prioritise employment readiness and basic life skills, while offering limited support for digital literacy development. As a result, more than two-thirds of parolees are rearrested within three years of release (Durose et al., 2014). The lack of digital fluency not only weakens their competitiveness in an increasingly digitised labour market but also compounds existing structural biases. Many face bleak employment prospects, and the repeated experience of digital exclusion contributes to heightened psychological distress and a growing aversion to ICT use (van Deursen & Helsper, 2015).

A range of conceptual models has been proposed to better understand and address the digital exclusion experienced by formerly incarcerated individuals. Van Dijk's (2005) sequential model of the digital divide delineates four progressive dimensions of access—motivational, material, skills-based, and usage-oriented—underscoring that mere connectivity is insufficient for meaningful digital inclusion. Building on this foundation, Hargittai (2002) introduced the notion of the second-level digital divide, which highlights disparities in Internet skills among users. Van Deursen and Helsper (2015) subsequently advanced this framework by conceptualising a third-level divide, centred on unequal digital outcomes and benefits. Collectively, these models foreground the entanglement of digital inequality with broader axes of socio-economic marginalisation, particularly those structured along lines of race, class, and gender. In the context of carceral governance, Gurusami (2019) introduces the metaphor of the "carceral web" to illustrate how formerly incarcerated individuals remain ensnared within regimes of digital surveillance and algorithmic control. This framework is marked by two key features: "stickiness," referring to the enduring visibility of online criminal records, and "entanglement," denoting the interlocking state and corporate infrastructures that sustain digital vulnerability. Complementing this, Reisdorf and Rikard (2018) propose the concept of digital rehabilitation, which integrates classical reentry theory with Helsper's (2012) "corresponding fields" framework. Their approach advocates for a reconceptualisation of reentry that attends to both online and offline dimensions of reintegration.

These theoretical interventions redirect analytical attention from simplistic questions of access toward more complex considerations of agency, structural constraint, and digital justice. Our concern with people who have used heroin is situated within this evolving body of scholarship. By foregrounding the embodied experiences of digital exclusion among this ageing cohort, we seek to interrogate how the diachronic, spatial, and relational legacies of incarceration and drug use continue to shape, and at times undermine, equity-oriented models of digital inclusion.

Moreover, a range of emerging interventions has sought to support the digital inclusion of formerly incarcerated populations and offers potential foundations for a more comprehensive framework in this study. Reisdorf and Jewkes (2016) advocate for the expansion of IT education within carceral settings through the provision of restricted, education-led Internet access. This model, technologically feasible and pedagogically grounded, would enable incarcerated individuals to engage with digital tools in a structured and meaningful manner. Yet, such initiatives have faced widespread resistance from correctional staff and policymakers across jurisdictions, underpinned by longstanding concerns over institutional security, disciplinary authority, and the perceived legitimacy of digital empowerment behind bars.

The "digital rehabilitation" model recasts digital competencies as foundational not only for employability, but also for accessing public services, maintaining social relationships, and reconstituting a sense of civic identity. Reflecting this shift, innovative programs have begun to experiment with co-produced digital media, content collaboratively developed by incarcerated individuals, to foster desistance, build peer solidarity, and enhance digital fluency (Morris & Knight, 2018). In response to the enduring risks of the carceral web, other interventions foreground digital self-defence strategies, including privacy literacy, platform navigation training, and community-based education in digital resilience (Gurusami, 2019; Seo et al., 2022). These efforts aim to equip returning citizens with the critical tools needed to engage with digital infrastructures, mitigate exposure to algorithmic surveillance, and assert agency within an increasingly digitised public sphere.

Nevertheless, scholars caution that such interventions are unlikely to achieve substantive digital inclusion in the absence of broader structural reforms (Jamil, 2021). These include the equitable distribution of digital infrastructure, legal protections against algorithmic discrimination, and the dismantling of systems that perpetuate the online visibility of criminal records. In this context, theoretical insights into digital inequality extend beyond the domain of rehabilitative practice; they demand a fundamental reorientation of justice policy in the digital era. Positioned within this trajectory, our study continues the call for structural transformation but grounds its contribution in the lived experiences of those directly affected. By centring participants' voices and perspectives, we offer a bottom-up account of digital exclusion and inclusion, one that rethinks social reintegration not merely as economic participation, but as a process of digitally mediated belonging. In doing so, we underscore the importance of incorporating digital inclusion into broader frameworks of social return, with attention to both material access, moral recognition, and meanings establishment.

3. Method and Data Analysis

This study employed a qualitative research methodology to collect interview data between May and September 2024. It forms part of a broader project, approved by the UNSW Ethics Review Committee. While the overarching project focused on general recovery experiences, this study explicitly explores the narrative and embodied experiences of digital inclusion among people who use drugs with a history of incarceration.

The research was conducted in a coastal city that has long adopted dynamic strategies in response to drug-related issues and has actively participated in successive stages of China's drug policy reform. These efforts include the establishment of compulsory rehabilitation centres and the restructuring of these centres after the emphasis on social participation introduced by the 2008 Anti-Drug Law. Alongside these initiatives,

the city has consistently worked to improve its community correction system, establishing community-based detoxification and community-based rehabilitation services.

Having faced a major drug crisis since the early 1980s, the city's leadership has consistently sought to balance punitive measures with welfare-oriented approaches to promote citizen well-being and community development. Although compulsory isolation rehabilitation, akin to incarceration, remains under the control of public security and judicial authorities, the city has, in recent years, attempted to align with global trends in public health and harm reduction. In doing so, it has promoted a more compassionate model that encourages social organisations and social workers to engage with rehabilitation services, and requires traditionally enforcement-focused drug police also to assume supervisory and supportive roles (Song & Jiang, 2025). Within this context, the study observes and analyses the social inclusion of people who use drugs, focusing particularly on the generation that began using heroin in the 1980s. Their experiences of digital inclusion, a current neglected aspect, offer critical insights into how shifts in social inclusion and digital governance impact marginalised groups.

Recruitment was conducted through the corresponding author's pre-existing social and professional networks using a snowball sampling strategy. These networks were developed during long-term fieldwork and community engagement conducted between 2019 and 2022 across multiple rehabilitation settings in China. The corresponding author had previously established connections with community workers, rehabilitation practitioners, and people with histories of drug use through ethnographic fieldwork rather than formal treatment institutions or law enforcement agencies. Existing relationships facilitated initial access to participants who are often difficult to reach due to stigma, surveillance concerns, and the criminalised context surrounding drug use. The authors also recognise that these relationships shaped both access and the production of data. Familiarity and prior interactions may have facilitated rapport, enabling participants to discuss sensitive experiences relating to rehabilitation, surveillance, and digital exclusion more openly. At the same time, participants may also have selectively presented experiences or narratives due to existing relationships with the researcher. Throughout recruitment, interviewing, and analysis, the authors remained attentive to these dynamics through reflexive discussions and iterative comparison across interviews.

After two rounds of recruitment, 18 participants were interviewed. All participants had a history of heroin use and met the study's inclusion criteria: having experienced compulsory drug rehabilitation comparable to incarceration (at least once), currently being in the community rehabilitation stage, and self-reporting drug use within the past five years. Recruitment ceased after 18 interviews when thematic saturation was observed, indicating that no substantially new narrative patterns or challenges emerged in later interviews.

Interviews were conducted in public spaces, primarily teahouses, selected to minimise the risk of police investigation or disruption. Information sheets and consent forms were sent to participants via WeChat two days prior to interviews. To ensure participants fully understood the study purpose and their rights, the researchers verbally reiterated consent procedures immediately before interviews commenced. Interviews lasted between 35 and 70 minutes and explored participants' perspectives on rehabilitation and social integration, barriers to digital technology use, attitudes toward digital technology, experiences of digital exposure, abilities to interpret and utilise information, and perceptions of digital governance. All participants consented to audio recording. Interview data were transcribed and translated by the research team.

The sample of 18 participants had an average age of 61 years (range from 56 to 70), including 9 men and 9 women. Most primarily used heroin, though six also reported methamphetamine and cannabis use. Participants had experienced compulsory isolation rehabilitation an average of two times, with five detained more than three times. Educational attainment was low, with most completing only junior high school. At the time of interviews, three participants held formal employment, six relied on informal work such as street vending or casual labour, and the remainder were unemployed. To protect confidentiality, all personal and place names are English pseudonyms generated using AI.

Data analysis was conducted using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initially, two qualitative research scholars from the same institution were invited to conduct preliminary coding, generating 38 codes that captured a wide range of information. Subsequently, the two authors engaged in focused coding, each drawing upon their respective research backgrounds: The first author concentrated on conflict dynamics and digital relationships, the second author examined rehabilitation processes, social inclusion, and participant narratives. After several rounds of consultation and collaborative analysis, the study identified embodied narratives of digital exclusion as the overarching thematic framework. This was further elaborated through three supporting themes: barriers to digital skills, single-purpose entertainment use, and information discernment fallacies.

Finally, the study reflected on the perspectives of people who used heroin regarding digital exclusion, discussing the phenomenon of progressive "digital death" among vulnerable groups. This analysis echoes Reisdorf and Rhinesmith's (2020) critique of differential digital outcomes, revealing that what appears to be an individual lack of ability is, in fact, a structural outcome of entrenched social inequalities. Throughout the processes of data collection, analysis, and coding, the research team consistently advocated for a participant-centred perspective and engaged in multiple rounds of negotiation to minimise positionality bias. Nevertheless, the researchers' drug-free experiences and relatively privileged social positions inevitably influenced certain aspects of the analytical direction and thematic construction. While reflexivity measures were embedded throughout the study design, we acknowledge that the interpretation of participants' narratives may have been subtly shaped by these positional dynamics.

4. Findings

When discussing digital technology, participants commonly rationalised exclusion as "too troublesome and not suitable for me" (Bob, male, 58). Their narratives reveal embodied experiences of exclusion centred on technical barriers, disempowerment, information isolation, and the reproduction of stigma, which together progressively constitute a condition that participants described as "digital death" (James, male, 61).

4.1. "Using Some Apps Is More Troublesome": The Complicated Responses of Digital Technological Barriers

The avoidance of digital technologies by people who used heroin in China cannot be reduced to digital illiteracy alone but emerges from emotional dispositions, lived experiences, and structural constraints. Even when discussing basic digital functions such as food delivery or ride-hailing applications, many participants expressed deliberate resistance. This resistance reflected not only limited technical competence but also distrust toward digital systems, heightened sensitivity to economic costs, and internalised experiences of

social exclusion. A particularly salient concern involved surveillance: Participants feared that sharing personal information, including delivery addresses and phone numbers, could increase visibility under community rehabilitation conditions and heighten exposure to law enforcement scrutiny. For example, James (male, 61), when asked about his use of such apps, remarked:

> I'm supposed to live in Place A for rehab, but I stay in Place B most of the time. If I order food, I have to put in my phone number, address, maybe even link payment information. Once all that goes into the system, who knows who can see it? People say these platforms protect privacy, but I don't believe that. The platform's anonymity? That's fake. If they [cops] want to find you, they'll find you. Why take the risk just for ordering food? If I need something, I'd rather go out myself or ask someone I know.

James' narrative suggests that distrust toward digital technology extends beyond technological unfamiliarity and is deeply rooted in experiences of incarceration, surveillance, and policing mediated through technological systems. For participants who have lived under prolonged scrutiny, digital platforms requiring identity verification or data sharing are often perceived less as convenient tools than as extensions of surveillance.

Economic precarity further constrained engagement, as online payments, service fees, and minimum order requirements were often incompatible with participants' post-incarceration financial realities and limited employment opportunities. Helen (female, 59) reflected this sentiment:

> A dish already costs more than ten yuan, then there's the delivery fee and all those extra charges. Why would I spend that money? If I buy vegetables myself, five yuan is enough for one dish, and I can eat it for two meals. We have to calculate these things carefully. For people like us, every yuan matters. We are more difficult to find a job to earn money with compulsory experience.

Digital access alone did not translate into digital participation. For many participants, the platform-based digital lifestyle exceeded both their economic capacity and lived imagination. Most elderly participants survived on subsistence-level incomes, largely dependent on the national minimum living allowance (1000 yuan in this city). After paying subsidised housing costs, they were often left with only around 35 yuan per day for daily expenses. As Bob (male, 58) noted:

> We live by our fingers. Every day you calculate how much money you have left and what you can spend. Food delivery or ride-hailing apps aren't for people like us on minimum living benefits, and we worry our identity would be exposed to others. I want to live without more discrimination.

These perspectives suggest that, beyond issues of access and literacy, the limited relevance of certain digital services to participants' economic and social realities plays a decisive role in shaping their digital exclusion.

A more profound barrier lies in participants' diminished sense of self-efficacy that the belief in one's own capacity to learn and adapt to new technologies (Wyatt et al., 2005). For many people who used heroin, years of systemic stigma and exclusion have fostered a persistent internalised perception of inadequacy: The belief that "this technology is not for people like me." Dunn (male, 64) recalled:

> Some young people taught me how to order food. I thought I had learned it after watching, but when I tried, I couldn't remember anything. I always clicked the wrong place, especially when binding the bank card…not for me.

The failure here does not stem from the complexity of the technology itself, but from the cumulative psychological erosion shaped by repeated experiences of control, correction, and denial throughout incarceration-like rehabilitation (Song et al., 2024). Digital platforms come to represent not merely tools, but markers of an exclusive modernity—a world from which participants feel estranged (van Dijck, 2014). Despite having once been early adopters of emerging technologies in the 1980s and 1990s, they now distance themselves, as one participant noted:

> Radios, cassette players, TVs—we knew how they worked. They were simple and intuitive. But these digital things now…everything needs accounts, verification, updates, passwords. You are allowed to be visible online and across apps. I am uncomfortable…shifting from the traditional world to the new one after going back.

Importantly, this reluctance is often mischaracterised by external observers as "backwardness" or "laziness," thereby perpetuating deficit narratives. Yet, participants' stories reveal ambivalence rather than indifference. Lemire (female, 58) admitted:

> Sometimes when I see others ordering milk tea or cakes, I want to try too. But I worry about the trouble, about money. This feeling peaked when the lockdown ended, and it was hard to go out. But in the end, I gave up.

Her reflection encapsulates the contradictory emotional terrain of technological exclusion, specifically, a simultaneous longing for participation in digital society and an entrenched self-censorship shaped by caution, economic constraint, and feelings of unworthiness. This coexistence of *desire* and *disqualification* illustrates how technological non-use is not simply a matter of skills or motivation, but a reflection of deeper, structurally conditioned modes of self-perception.

Food delivery and ride-hailing applications, though typically classified as "mildly dependent" technologies, have become integral to everyday life in mainstream digital society. The digital literacy implicitly required by such daily convenience platforms, ranging from browsing, price comparison, and selection to payment and real-time delivery tracking, entails not only technical skills but also cognitive fluency and a sense of procedural familiarity. For older people who use drugs, many of whom have spent years under regimes of surveillance, institutional care, or disciplinary control, limited technological literacy and unfamiliarity with digital systems mean that they remain far from achieving a return into society (*Huiguishehui*) in any meaningful rehabilitative sense. Conditioned by systems of face-to-face management and analog interaction, Dunn (male, 64) said:

> I am often more comfortable with direct, in-person transactions than with abstract digital interfaces or virtual infrastructures. For example, standing at the intersection to hail a taxi.

As a result, even when they are aware of the existence and utility of such tools, the process of integrating them into everyday routines is marked by deferral and hesitancy. The adoption of digital technology, in this context, is not a linear process of access, but one of stalled domestication (e.g., Silverstone, 2003).

In summary, reluctance to engage with everyday applications reflects deeper structural forms of digital exclusion in elders who have used drugs (Reisdorf & Rhinesmith, 2020). Their disengagement extends beyond access or usage gaps, revealing multidimensional disconnection shaped by trust deficits, limited resources, and fragile self-conceptions. Addressing this exclusion requires moving beyond technological determinism and recognising how stigma, deprivation, and emotional experiences shape digital participation among marginalised populations.

4.2. "Mobile Phones Can Do This?": Single-Use Entertainment

People who have used heroin primarily engaged with digital technologies in entertainment-oriented and passive ways. Many participants mainly used phones to watch videos or livestreams on platforms such as Douyin (Chinese TikTok) and Kuaishou. While entertainment consumption constitutes their main avenue of digital interaction, it simultaneously reinforces their disconnection from more "functional" and potentially "empowering" uses of digital tools. Participant Peng (male, 62) stated:

> I use Kuaishou every day. When I wake up, I open it. When I have nothing to do, I watch it again. There are funny videos, people chatting, people selling things, people showing their lives—you can see a lot. Sometimes you watch for ten minutes and suddenly several hours are gone. It's mainly for killing time because otherwise there's not much else to do.

Yet, when asked whether he had used mobile navigation, online medical registration, job search platforms, or government service mini programs, he hesitated and responded with surprise:

> Mobile phones can do *this*? I thought they were just for making calls and watching short videos. Nobody told me you could use them for all that. Even if they can, I am not interested in finding those things.

His response exemplifies a broader digital cognitive gap among this population. While they are familiar with mobile technologies as tools for passive consumption ("watching"), their interaction rarely extends to functional engagement, productive participation, or civic involvement through digital means.

This entertainment-oriented usage pattern reflects broader structural concerns. Society often assumes users can equally explore digital technologies, yet participants with histories of rehabilitation, exclusion, and stigma frequently internalize technology as leisure rather than empowerment. Passive entertainment thus became not only convenient but also a low-risk digital practice that minimized exposure to shame, failure, and judgment. For example, Rain (female, 60) recounted an attempt to use an app:

> I kept pressing the wrong things and couldn't figure out where to enter the destination. Then the map changed, and I got even more confused. I tried several times and eventually gave up. I feel embarrassed because everyone else seems to know how to do these things. It's easier to just scroll through Douyin because there's nothing to get wrong there. Sometimes I feel like…maybe I'm still not recovered.

What may appear as avoidance is better understood as a protective response against shame and perceived failure associated with digital incompetence, shaped by repeated experiences of classification, surveillance, and correction within drug control systems.

Meanwhile, platforms such as Kuaishou and Douyin reinforce passive consumption rather than active participation. Participants mainly remained content consumers, as silence and invisibility online functioned as learned strategies of self-protection against exposure, judgment, and renewed social rejection. Many reported fluencies in scrolling and liking content; yet they "seldom engage in practices such as commenting or uploading videos" (Lemire, female, 58). This silent viewer mode may provide transient entertainment, but it does little to enhance users' informational agency, expand life opportunities, or facilitate social reintegration. As Jaxon (male, 60) put it:

> Watching videos can indeed relieve boredom, but afterwards, I still feel the same. At my age, my abilities have declined, and society has moved on without me. This is no longer the era I once belonged to. I can't fully utilise or sustain their use, so they don't really help my life.

Participants' recreational engagement with digital technologies masks a deeper form of digital exclusion. Although they appear digitally connected through routine platform use, their engagement remains largely passive and algorithmically driven, producing a cycle of consumption without agency. Participants generally lacked digital competencies such as information evaluation, platform negotiation, and rights advocacy, alongside limited awareness of algorithmic systems. Rather than promoting empowerment, digital technologies often reinforced disengagement from wider social structures and deepened feelings of stagnation. The experience of Zoe, a female participant in her late fifties, exemplifies:

> I just love to watch short videos and their live broadcasts. I don't have many friends in real life. In some smaller livestream rooms, the hosts chat with me. I've come to rely on this way of pleasing myself. No one knows me or cares whether I'm old or a drug-using person. At least I feel…happy.

In this context, short video consumption among people who have used heroin in China does not necessarily constitute meaningful digital participation but instead reflects passive cultural consumption and, potentially, a new form of technological discipline. The issue is not simply that participants watch short videos—a practice common among many older adults—but that these platforms become substitutes for social recognition, refuges from stigma, and compensatory responses to exclusion from employment, public services, and social relationships. This suggests that conventional indicators of digital engagement, such as usage frequency, require critical reconsideration (Reisdorf & Rhinesmith, 2020). Technology only becomes emancipatory when integrated into broader life strategies, functioning as a resource for improving everyday conditions rather than merely filling time. Realising this potential requires socially embedded digital translation mechanisms that provide accessible and contextually meaningful support systems capable of connecting digital infrastructure with marginalised groups' lived realities.

4.3. "Understanding the World From TikTok": Nationalist Affect, Class Antagonism, and Platform Misinformation

For many people who have used heroin in China, digital media have become a primary means of engaging with the broader social world, shaped less by preference than by disrupted employment, weakened social networks, institutional confinement, and continuing exclusion. Participants frequently described consuming videos and news emphasizing generational conflict, abuse of power, economic inequality, and rural hardship, reflecting the narrow informational environments through which many experienced contemporary social life.

For instance, Shong (male, 60) remarked:

> I watch short videos every day, and there are all kinds. After watching them, I realised how unfair this society is. The rich are bad, the poor suffer, and the police are unreasonable.

Similarly, Baillie (female, 57) commented:

> I get really angry when I see someone buying a watch worth a million RMB. I could never make that much in my lifetime.

These reactions reflect genuine emotions but also illustrate how algorithms reinforce particular narratives and ideological positions. Continuous exposure to similar content creates algorithmically driven information cocoons, intensified by participants' histories of drug use, incarceration, and marginalisation. Many lacked trusted information sources beyond digital platforms, making algorithmically curated content a key lens for interpreting social reality. Consequently, this information ecology often deepened alienation and reinforced worldviews shaped by grievance, exclusion, and despair. As Diego (male, 62) noted:

> I gradually feel uncomfortable. Sometimes I really feel that society is unfair. People like us are old, can't find work, and still have a history of drug use. Who would care about us? Douyin keeps showing me the same kind of videos. It's like I don't belong to that happy, glamorous world. It makes me angry.

The algorithmic logic of short-video platforms continuously recommends similar content based on engagement patterns, reinforcing existing cognitive and emotional orientations. For participants with limited information sources, this creates an illusion of agency while choices remain shaped by platform systems. As Reisdorf and Rhinesmith (2020) argue, digital technologies often reproduce existing inequalities rather than reduce them. This dynamic is particularly pronounced among elderly people who use drugs, many of whom, shaped by incarceration and long-term exclusion, increasingly rely on digital spaces as an "alternative public space," only to encounter new forms of discipline, manipulation, and misrecognition. A case in point is presented by Michele (male, 63), who said:

> I repeatedly forwarded a short video [about] retirees eligible for special subsidies…[I] later learned from family members that it was a scam. I really believed it. I thought the government still cared for people like us.

His reaction reveals not only a sincere hope for inclusion but also a vulnerability that is systematically exploited in digital environments. Such deceptive content manipulates users' desire for recognition and their residual trust in state support, highlighting the precariousness of digital engagement among structurally marginalised populations.

Some participants expressed difficulty in assessing the veracity of online information. This stems in part from limited digital literacy. Few use search engines or conduct cross-platform comparisons, and most lack access to offline networks that could assist with verifying information. Participant Kelly (female, 59) echoed:

> Indeed, many times, information is obtained in a relatively simple way, such as through TikTok and WeChat videos, and it is obtained in a two [to] three-minute quick read and fast-food style. Then, many times, we tend to believe it, mainly because it is our only source of information.

Unlike many older adults whose reliance on short-video platforms may reflect age-related skill gaps, participants faced additional informational disadvantages rooted in drug use and incarceration histories. Experiences of institutional control, stigma, and exclusion reduced both access to diverse information sources and confidence in navigating unfamiliar environments. Their dependence on platform-mediated information should therefore be understood as socially produced rather than simply an individual choice. Echoing Stuart Hall's discussion of encoding/decoding and oppositional readings (Hall, 1980), digital exclusion here limits not only informational access but also the capacity to critically interpret, negotiate, or resist dominant narratives embedded in digital culture and media consumption.

Several participants strongly identified with narratives of national unity, collective belonging, and social solidarity. For individuals shaped by prolonged stigma and exclusion, these narratives offered symbolic inclusion within a broader national community. Digital platforms reinforced themes of nationalism and collective identity while constructing emotionally resonant communities framed around "We Chinese." For older people who use drugs, this form of digital nationalism provided psychological reassurance and an imagined sense of reintegration into the national collective. As participant Lee (male, 59) noted:

> I think those videos are right. "We Chinese" should unite; otherwise, foreigners will bully us. I watch videos about the country becoming stronger, military things, people talking about national pride. Although I used to take drugs, I am patriotic. People may look down on me outside, but when I watch those videos, I still feel like I'm part of something.

The informational world of people who have used heroin is not merely shaped but heavily structured by algorithmic filtering. Although participants appeared to learn about society through digital engagement, their interpretations were formed within informational environments constrained by platform logics and social exclusion. The issue is therefore less about misinformation than unequal access to diverse information and critical engagement. This exposes how digital infrastructures neglect vulnerable populations and suggests that, without addressing structural biases, digital access itself may become another form of exclusion.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study contributes to a growing body of critical scholarship that interrogates how digital infrastructures intersect with state-led rehabilitation, disciplinary power, and everyday marginality. Building on the lived experiences of people who used heroin in China, we develop the notion of "digital death," as participants termed it, which referred to a condition of algorithmically mediated social disappearance.

While dominant policy frameworks in China continue to celebrate the nation's "digital leap" and near-universal connectivity, such techno-optimist narratives overlook the enduring power relations that determine who gets to participate, and on what terms. Participants in our study are not digitally absent in the binary sense; most possess smartphones and basic internet access. Yet their interactions with digital platforms are characterised by structural distrust, fear of surveillance, algorithmic misrecognition, and epistemic entrapment. These are

not isolated individual anxieties but culturally and politically embedded reactions to systems that encode their social deviance into algorithmic routines.

Indeed, digital death is not the negation of digital engagement, but its governed deformation. The state's community-based rehabilitation apparatus, far from enabling reintegration, continues to reproduce logics of surveillance, datafication, and control (Lin et al., 2022). Drug use history becomes an enduring digital mark, visible in the requirements of ID verification, registration procedures, and behavioural monitoring systems that persist long after incarceration. Rather than facilitating recovery or belonging, digital platforms, operated through state-public security integration or private-sector profiling, amplify the very forms of marginalisation that rehabilitation programs claim to be redressed.

This form of digital exclusion is entangled in what scholars term the "carceral web" (Gurusami, 2019) or "punitive mesh" (Corda, 2026), where platforms become extensions of carceral rationalities. Algorithmic classification systems funnel these users toward content saturated with anti-police sentiment, nationalist fervour, scams, and class ressentiment. Participants are repeatedly fed content that reproduces a sense of social decay, grievance, and loss. Far from being neutral tools, platforms like Douyin and Kuaishou act as affective infrastructures that produce and manage emotion within circumscribed discursive fields. People who have used heroin are thus not only excluded from digital participation but also interpolated into a discursive marginality that limits their capacity to imagine alternative futures.

Crucially, this study reveals that access to digital technology is insufficient when underlying governance structures reproduce stigma. In the case of people who used heroin in China, "digital death" is both a symptom and effect of broader state strategies: a convergence of punitive rehabilitation, ageism, and a digital governance model that privileges discipline over inclusion. While global policy discourse increasingly frames digital inclusion as a pathway to empowerment (Reisdorf et al., 2022), we caution against this instrumentalist logic. The assumption that digital access automatically yields agency or citizenship fails to account for how digital systems reflect, and often intensify, pre-existing social hierarchies.

Through a narrative-centred, bottom-up lens, our findings call attention to the politics of digital disappearance. The fact that eleven participants were once digitally literate, early adopters of *Xiaolingtong* phones or web users in the 1990s, yet now retreat from digital life due to fear, distrust, and algorithmic violence, signals a kind of reverse inclusion: They are connected, yet unrecognised; visible, yet unseen. In this light, digital death emerges not from technological obsolescence but from the slow violence of institutional silence, where neither the rehabilitation system after incarceration nor digital governance makes meaningful space for re-entry, recognition, or belonging.

Therefore, we argue that digital inclusion must be re-conceptualised as a right of return, not only to society but to mediated visibility, communicative agency, and affective participation. This requires moving beyond infrastructural provision and digital literacy training to fundamentally reimagining the ethical, political, and relational architectures of digital citizenship. For people who have used heroin and similarly multiply marginalised groups, digital transformation must not be a vehicle of further abandonment. Rather, it must begin by confronting the histories of exclusion it too often reproduces.

5.1. Implications for Policy and Practice

Addressing the structural exclusions embedded within China's digital inclusion agenda requires interventions at both governance and community levels. Digital governance should normalise people who have used heroin by reducing the stigma generated through long-standing institutional exceptionalism. Although special management regimes have been justified through risk prevention and social stability, the continued classification of people with drug-use histories as "special subjects" often intensifies surveillance, discipline, and symbolic incarceration. Rather than facilitating *Huiguishehui*, such governance reproduces marginality within digital systems. A shift is therefore needed from risk-based control toward citizenship-oriented inclusion, reframing people with drug-use histories as ordinary participants in digital life rather than perpetual objects of governance.

Policy responses should also address what participants described as "digital death," specifically, sustained exclusion from meaningful digital participation despite formal access. Overcoming digital death requires more than improving access; it requires cultivating digital agency—the capacity to interpret, evaluate, and strategically use digital resources in everyday life. Community rehabilitation programs should therefore recognise digital needs as part of social reintegration. Social workers and service providers should be supported to deliver tailored digital literacy initiatives and assist with everyday digital practices, helping rebuild confidence and autonomy. This reorients digital inclusion from surveillance toward substantive social integration and citizenship.

5.2. Limitations

While this study offers a rare bottom-up account of digital disengagement among post-incarceration populations, several limitations remain. The sample is confined to one coastal city and may not reflect experiences in other regions or among younger cohorts. Reliance on self-reported narratives may also be shaped by memory, stigma, or strategic silence. Incorporating perspectives from policymakers, platform designers, and rehabilitation officials is necessary but challenging to examine how exclusion is produced across institutional layers. Digital governance must address exclusion beyond access by rethinking visibility, participation, and care.

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Conflict of Interests

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Data Availability

Due to institutional and project data management requirements, the data supporting this study are not publicly available.

LLMs Disclosure

We declare that LLMs were used to support English Editing.

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