

The Dilemma of Age-Friendly Adaptation in Smart Communities: Why Are Public Services Built but Hardly Used?-A Case Study of Smart Community J

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Abstract: Digital technology is a key driving force in the process of building smart communities. However, the insufficient aging-friendly adaptation in smart community development is a widespread challenge. Using interviews and field observation, this paper conducts a case study of Community J and applies the multiple institutional logics framework to analyze the phenomenon from four dimensions: bureaucratic logic, market logic, semi-bureaucratic logic, and user logic. The study finds that bureaucratic assessment suspends age-friendly retrofitting; market supply neglects the needs of the elderly; community policy implementation replaces online aging-friendly services with offline solutions, and the elderly withdraw passively due to technophobia. The paper argues that institutional restructuring, incentive redesign, and value reconstruction should be advanced in a coordinated manner to move multiple logics from conflict toward coupling.

Keywords: Smart Community; Aging-Friendly Adaptation; Multiple Institutional Logics

1. Introduction

As digitalization accelerates, digital technology has become an important tool for grassroots governance, and smart community construction is regarded as a key pathway to modernizing grassroots governance. Since nine ministries jointly issued The Opinions on Deepening Smart Community Construction, governments at all levels have pursued pilots and invested heavily, deploying smart access control, IoT perception, and online service platforms at the community level. Smart community construction is a governance outcome in which digital technology and the lived space of grassroots society are mutually embedded and shaped.

Yet extensive practice shows that, due to the complexity of community demographics, diversity of usage habits, and contextual dependence of technology deployment, digital-intelligent technologies have not achieved their expected goals in community settings. Specifically, technological applications struggle to accommodate the actual needs of older residents; some intelligent facilities operate but see low utilization; and digital exclusion is even reinforced to some extent, shutting older adults out of digital-intelligent services. Hence there is an urgent need to investigate the age-friendly dilemma in smart community construction and clarify its causes and generative logic.

Existing research offers three explanatory paths. First, the technology-design perspective, which attributes usage difficulty to design flaws such as complex interfaces and poorly adapted voice functions. Second, the policy-institution perspective, which points to assessment indicators overweighting the supply side while neglecting the demand side, leading to structural imbalance in policy instruments. Third, the social-value perspective, which emphasizes the multidimensionality of digital exclusion and the failure of public value. Existing studies analyze technological application dilemmas from a single subject or dimension, but fail to reveal multi-actor interactions or answer the core question: why does age-friendly retrofitting appear compliant in form yet remain inefficient in substance. Therefore, based on a case study of Community J in Jinan, this paper adopts a multiple institutional logics framework to analyze the respective institutional logics and interaction patterns of four actors-government, enterprise, community, and older resident-users-so as to provide a systematic theoretical explanation of the age-friendly dilemma in smart communities and practical implications for optimizing multi-actor collaborative governance.

2. Literature Review

In recent years, academia has conducted systematic research on the problem of insufficient age-friendliness in the application of digital technology. Studies indicate that the application of digital technology in community fields often encounters problems such as algorithmic discrimination and digital exclusion, making it difficult to effectively integrate into specific life scenarios such as communities. The simple embedding of technology brings numerous negative impacts, even creating the paradox that the faster technology develops, the more marginalized elderly groups become. Regarding the age-friendliness dilemma in smart community construction, it can be divided into the following three explanatory perspectives:

2.1 Technology-Design Perspective

This perspective focuses on the age-friendliness level of intelligent products. Zuo points out that age-friendliness of smart technology includes two dimensions: functional age-friendliness and operational age-friendliness(Zuo Meiyun,2023). Dai argues that current age-friendly design faces the fundamental contradiction of rhythm misalignment, as the speed of digital development far exceeds the progress of age-friendly reform(Dai Yuan,2025). This perspective identifies specific solutions for age-friendly transformation in smart construction but neglects the influence of institutional and social factors on effectiveness during technology implementation.

2.2 Policy-Institution Perspective

This perspective concerns macro policy structure and implementation deviations. Ou yang & Xie find that policy tools exhibit a structural characteristic of emphasizing supply, weakening environment, and neglecting demand.(Ouyang Caihong & Xie Lili ,2025) Chen & Zhangpoint out that the digitalization of community elderly services faces dilemmas such as the decoupling of technological empowerment and environmental adaptation, as well as imbalanced governance coordination(Chen Guisheng and Zhang Ruiyu,2026). This perspective reveals institutional-level constraints but relatively ignores micro-interactions and multi-subject gaming in grassroots implementation.

2.3 Social-Value Perspective

This perspective elevates the problem to the

level of digital exclusion and public value. Pu & Yu point out that elderly people face four-dimensional exclusion risks in digital-intelligent services: willingness, opportunity, ability, and rights, leading to weak integration between technology and services(Pu Xinwei & Yu Liu jun,2026). Zhao & Liu define the essence of the digital divide as public value failure, namely blocked channels for value expression by elderly group(Zhao Miao & Liu Yinxi,2026) . Guo from the perspective of active aging, points out that the elderly digital divide results from the combined effects of multiple factors: the rapid development of digitalization and aging, lagging government supply, and insufficient market age-friendliness(Guo Rupeng,2024). Meng & Ma reveal the "market failure" of age-friendliness caused jointly by elderly groups' low willingness to pay and manufacturers' "maximum audience" development principle(Meng Ke & Ma Tingting,2022).

The above three perspectives respectively reveal one aspect of the age-friendliness dilemma, but their limitation lies in analyzing from a single subject or dimension without addressing the interactions and conflicts among four actors: government, enterprises, communities, and elderly residents. Therefore, this paper starts from the micro-interaction scenarios of these four actors, analyzes the multiple logics generating the age-friendliness dilemma, and explores the interaction mechanism of the four institutional logics in the community field.

3. Theoretical Foundation and Analytical Framework

3.1 Institutional Logic Theory

Friedland and Alford (1991) introduced the concept of "institutional logic"(Friedland & Alford,1991). Some scholars define it as material practices, values, and rules at the social level, pointing out that it can shape the cognition and behavioral choices of individual actors(Li Jinlong & Li Ming,2020). Modern society consists of multiple institutional fields (such as state, market, family, religion, etc.), and different fields follow different core institutional logics. Subsequently, Thornton and Ocasio further refined this theory. Scholars such as Zhou Xueguang introduced the multiple institutional logics framework into the Chinese context, and this analytical framework has been widely applied in fields such as grassroots

governance, policy implementation, and organizational change.

The problem of insufficient age-friendliness in smart community construction is an unintended consequence arising from the embedding of digital technology into grassroots social governance. This problem involves numerous subjects in the field, as well as behavioral choices made by different subjects following different institutional logics. Higher-level governments formulate assessment standards and policy orientations, enterprises provide technical products and service platforms, communities are responsible for facility implementation and daily services, and elderly

residents are the end users of products. The rational actions of different subjects lead to the dilemma of digital products being "built but hard to use". The multiple institutional logics framework provides an analytical tool for explaining this dilemma.

Using the multiple institutional logics framework to explain the behavioral performance of multiple subjects under different institutional logic backgrounds, this paper defines them as bureaucratic logic, market logic, semi-bureaucratic logic, and user logic—a composite field jointly shaped by four types of actors (Table 1).

Table 1. Four Institutional Logics

Actor	Institutional Logic	Core Rules
Higher-level governments and competent authorities	Bureaucratic Logic	Quantifiable Performance Assessment
Enterprises	Market Logic	Standardization Profit Maximization
Community organizations	Semi-bureaucratic Logic	Upward Accountability Downward Service Provision
Elderly residents	User Logic	Technophobia Psychological Exclusion

Bureaucratic logic originates from the pressure-type system and target responsibility system. Driven by promotion incentives, local government officials prioritize completing easily quantifiable and highly visible assessment indicators such as facility quantity and registration rates. However, they lack implementation motivation for soft indicators such as age-friendly utilization rates, while tending to avoid complaint risks that may arise from technological applications.

Market logic centers on efficiency and scale. In constructing smart products, enterprises need to achieve low-cost and high-profit goals to maximize benefits in project construction. Therefore, enterprises prefer providing standardized products rather than conducting differentiated transformation according to the needs of different groups. Age-friendly transformation has high costs and long benefit cycles, making it difficult to internalize as autonomous corporate behavior.

In semi-bureaucratic logic, community organizations have dual identities. On one hand, communities are grassroots implementers of administrative tasks; on the other hand, they are direct providers of community services. When administrative assessment conflicts with resident needs, communities often adopt strategies of catering upward while providing backup services downward. Consequently, online age-friendly transformation is suspended.

Community logic reflects the behavioral preferences of elderly groups. They are accustomed to face-to-face communication in acquaintance societies and, limited by physiological functions, cannot use technical products, while experiencing technophobia toward unfamiliar digital interfaces. This leads to passive withdrawal from digital services.

3.2 Theoretical Analytical Framework

Based on the multiple institutional logics theory, this paper constructs an analytical framework of "dilemma analysis-interaction mechanism-dilemma outcomes-solutions" (Figure 1). It analyzes insufficient age-friendliness from bureaucratic logic, market logic, semi-bureaucratic logic, and user logic respectively. Regarding the causes of the dilemma, bureaucratic logic, oriented by quantifiable assessment indicators, suspends age-friendly assessment; market logic follows the principle of benefit maximization, neglecting the differentiated needs of elderly groups; semi-bureaucratic logic results in insufficient policy implementation motivation; user logic manifests as elderly people actively withdrawing due to technophobia. The interaction of the four logics creates the age-friendliness dilemma in smart construction. In response to these dilemmas, this paper proposes solutions from three aspects: institutional reconstruction, incentive mechanism innovation, and value construction to

achieve systematic improvement of age-friendly transformation.

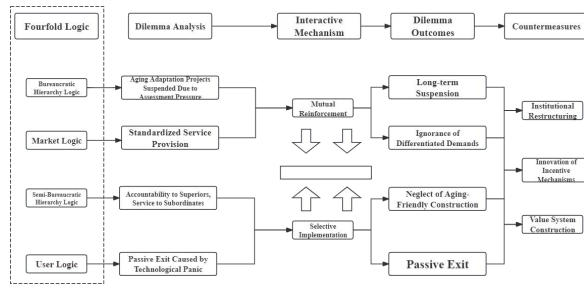


Figure 1. Analysis Framework Diagram

4. Research Design

4.1 Research Methods

This paper adopts the case analysis method. Case study is a research method that takes one or a few specific cases as the unit of analysis, collects data through multiple methods, and conducts systematic and in-depth investigation(Feng Xiaotian,2022). It is often used to explore "how" and "why" research questions, helping researchers deeply understand, describe, and analyze complex phenomena and internal mechanisms of specific cases.

Taking Community J as the analytical field, this study systematically investigates the implementation and application of digital technologies and facilities in this community through interviews, field research, and data collection. Existing studies mostly focus on the positive or negative effects of technology itself, neglecting that the functioning of digital technology is a process involving multiple subjects and intertwined multiple factors. Therefore, this paper attempts to analyze from the perspectives of four actors-government, enterprises, communities, and the elderly-to reveal the interactions and conflicts of different institutional logics in the process of technology application. This aims to explore the causes of the age-friendliness dilemma and provide a multi-level analytical framework for understanding the complex obstacles to digital technology implementation in grassroots communities.

4.2 Typical Case Selection

This paper selects Community J as the analytical case, mainly based on the following three reasons:

Firstly, case representativeness: The implementation of digital technology at the community level provides a micro-perspective

on the embedding of digital technology into overall social operation. The problem of insufficient age-friendliness in the application of digital technology in community public services is a dilemma faced by technology in practical application against the background of rapid digital development. Analyzing through the community perspective helps explore the general logic of digital technology excluding vulnerable groups in social fields from a micro perspective. Secondly, case typicality: Community J is a provincial key construction benchmark project for smart communities, and its construction has won provincial honors. As a livelihood project vigorously promoted by the government, the community has received substantial policy and financial support and has a relatively complete foundation for hardware equipment construction. Meanwhile, the proportion of population aged 60 and above in the community is approximately 20%, providing a natural field for observing insufficient age-friendliness.

Thirdly, data accessibility: Since the project construction started, Community J has relatively rich news materials and official document materials, with relevant literature available for consultation. In addition, the research team has established initial communication links with community staff, possessing conditions to enter the research field for investigation. This provides certain advantages in obtaining data and establishing trust relationships, enabling access to relatively rich research materials.

4.3 Data Collection

Based on Community J, the research began data collection in November 2025. Methods such as interviews, observation, and document analysis were comprehensively applied to ensure the reliability and validity of the research. Research data sources include: first, notes formed through explanations by community staff and field observations of the operation status of community digital facilities; simultaneously, primary data formed through interviews with community staff and residents regarding the usage of smart facilities. Second, relevant policy documents on smart community construction published on official government websites, reports from authoritative news media, and presentation materials such as PPT provided by the community, which were consulted and organized.

The problem of insufficient age-friendliness

often manifests as "silent exclusion" in daily community operation. Elderly residents rarely actively complain or report problems, making it difficult to directly capture from routine work records. Therefore, in data collection, this study consciously understood the actual usage status and feelings of elderly groups by setting interview questions and scenario observations, and adopted multi-source data cross-comparison for data sorting and analysis.

5. Analysis of Insufficient Age-Friendliness from the Perspective of Multiple Institutional Logics

5.1 Bureaucratic Logic: Quantifiable Assessment Suspending Age-Friendly Transformation

In the current administrative assessment system, higher-level evaluation of smart community construction effectiveness highly depends on quantifiable explicit indicators. The core of bureaucratic logic lies in organizational behavior being influenced by incentive mechanisms and environment. Under the upward-accountable pressure-type system, grassroots governments face increasingly demanding assessment tasks layer by layer. Their behavioral choices, influenced by assessment indicators, tend toward "visible" and quantifiable construction standards. Provincial acceptance documents for Community J show that construction indicator standards clearly specify coverage quantities and the presence of infrastructure equipment, but do not require or verify whether resident users can actually use digital-intelligent services. Therefore, such assessment requirements also give rise to selective implementation behaviors at the grassroots level, becoming the reference and goal orientation for policy implementation. Meanwhile, the risk aversion tendency in bureaucratic logic further weakens the motivation for age-friendly transformation. Community staff A stated: "If elderly people cannot use online services, we can help them solve it offline. There's no need to force them to use it." Under this logic, online age-friendly transformation lacks the impetus of institutional incentive mechanisms, systematically excluding age-friendliness from the priority agenda.

5.2 Market Logic: Standardized Supply Neglecting Elderly Needs

In smart community construction, technology

enterprises follow market logic oriented toward economies of scale, standardization, and profit maximization. Enterprises naturally tend to develop replicable and easily promotable standardized products rather than conducting customized transformation for specific community elderly groups. Respondent B reflected: "It doesn't understand what I say, and I don't understand what it says. We people only speak dialects. What it says is too complicated; we can't figure it out." The person in charge of Community J stated: "These elderly people usually don't know how to use these things. If they really need help, they have to wait for their children to come home and help them. Most of the time, when they have something to do, they gather together, and word spreads that way."

Insufficient age-friendly construction stems from two aspects. First, cost-benefit mismatch: enterprise R&D requires substantial resource investment, while elderly groups have limited willingness to pay, which cannot satisfy enterprises' profit maximization principle. Second, lack of specific requirements in government assessment standards: government acceptance criteria do not set clear indicator requirements for age-friendly functions, leaving enterprises with no construction motivation in project development. In smart construction, although technical products have extensive coverage, the needs of elderly groups have not been incorporated into the core of product design. Both enterprises' pursuit of benefits and government indicator requirements lack attention to age-friendliness.

5.3 Semi-Bureaucratic Logic: Upward Accountability and Downward Service

As the "last mile" of policy implementation, communities assume multiple roles. First, the role of policy implementers accountable upward; second, the role of public service providers accountable downward. In the process of grassroots digital transformation, assessment standards are also constantly changing. On one hand, superiors force communities to complete tasks through target responsibility systems and performance evaluations, requiring community workers to complete quantifiable evaluation indicators; on the other hand, grassroots workers maintain stable community operation by providing public services and responding to resident demands.

Grassroots policy implementation, influenced by

assessment standards, only focuses on quantifiable indicators-namely registration rates and coverage rates-while neglecting the usage situation of vulnerable groups, especially elderly groups. The author conducted statistics on government-citizen interaction letters available for inquiry in Community J over the past five years (Table 2). Statistics show that Community J has low utilization of online communication channels and weak responsiveness. Grassroots staff tend to exhibit formalism in completing assessment tasks, failing to mobilize residents' enthusiasm for usage.

Table 2. Statistics on Government-Citizen Interaction Letters in Community J, 2022-2026

Year	Number of Letters
2026 (June 15)	32
2025	31
2024	28
2023	33
2022	10

Facing the problem of insufficient resident utilization, communities provide offline solutions. Although this measure can alleviate technical dilemma problems to some extent, it is not conducive to the long-term development of community digital transformation. Respondent C stated: "I just go directly to them if I have something. I don't want to use these things, and I don't know how. Going directly to them works fine; I think it's quite convenient." Offline services replacing technical improvements in online age-friendly transformation normalizes and rationalizes the problem of elderly digital exclusion. Some scholars summarize this as "service idling"(Fang Guanxi,2023): communities use high-cost, low-efficiency manual backup to cover up the absence of low-cost, high-efficiency technological age-friendliness, causing the age-friendliness dilemma to persist.

5.4 User Logic: Technophobia and Technological Exclusion

Elderly groups are the end users of smart products and services, as well as important service objects of community public services. User exclusion is one of the causes of insufficient age-friendliness in smart communities. Subjective and objective limitations such as physiological functions, operational skills, and active exclusion make it difficult for elderly groups to use smart products

and accept public services. Although the introduction of digital technology has improved the efficiency of community affairs handling to some extent, it has also created new problems, leading elderly residents to face multiple dilemmas in receiving services. First, limited physiological functions. Research finds that elderly people generally suffer from presbyopia, preventing them from normally reading and operating interfaces. Respondent D stated: "I can't see these words clearly." Second, insufficient operational skills. Elderly people have relatively short exposure to electronic devices, with low learning ability and willingness. Respondent E said: "I'm already 69. I don't want to use these things anymore. I don't know how, and I can't see clearly. It's too much trouble for me." Third, active psychological and behavioral exclusion. Elderly groups generally have low willingness to learn emerging digital technologies, exhibiting both psychological exclusion and behavioral exclusion. Elderly people have low psychological acceptance of digital technology and are unwilling to spend time learning. Therefore, elderly people still rely on community offline services. Respondent E stated: "Just go to the community staff offline to solve any problems. No need for online; we don't know how anyway."

6. Solutions to Insufficient Age-Friendliness

Smart community construction is a systematic project of embedding digital technology into the community public service system, jointly influenced by multiple actors. Addressing the prominent problem of insufficient age-friendliness in the construction process urgently requires formulating corresponding solutions. Through institutional reconstruction, incentive mechanism innovation, and value construction, we can promote effective connection between digital technology supply and elderly group service needs, ensuring that elderly residents can equally and conveniently access and use smart community public services and share the achievements of digital-intelligent social development.

6.1 Institutional Reconstruction: Incorporating Age-Friendliness into Assessment and Acceptance Systems

Addressing the structural deviation of assessment indicators emphasizing construction over usage in bureaucratic logic requires

reconstructing the assessment system at the institutional level to promote age-friendly transformation. First, add effect-oriented indicators such as actual utilization rates by elderly residents and age-friendly service satisfaction to existing smart community construction assessments, and assign assessment weights to make age-friendliness effectiveness quantifiable and comparable. Second, set age-friendly functions as an independent acceptance module in the project acceptance, implementing a one-vote veto system where projects failing to meet standards will not pass acceptance. Third, link age-friendly transformation effectiveness with the performance assessments of competent departments and community workers, establishing a closed-loop management mechanism of assessment-feedback-improvement, transmitting pressure through accountability and promoting implementation through pressure.

6.2 Incentive Mechanism: Guiding Enterprise Supply and Community Implementation

Addressing the dilemma of insufficient transformation motivation in market logic and missing implementation incentives in semi-bureaucratic logic requires solutions through re-establishing incentive mechanisms. On one hand, review procurement evaluation indicators, incorporate age-friendly modules into the technical review indicator system for special scoring, and give priority procurement qualifications or certain economic rewards to compliant enterprises. Meanwhile, explore a collaborative model of "government + enterprise development," where governments encourage enterprises to actively explore and develop technological age-friendliness through financial subsidies. On the other hand, resource sinking to improve community implementation capacity. Governments provide certain resource to communities with remarkable achievements in age-friendly construction; establish digital assistance positions, encouraging communities to organize corresponding service projects to help elderly residents solve technology usage problems.

6.3 Value Construction: Strengthening Value Leadership and Digital Literacy Cultivation

Addressing the current situation of technophobia among elderly groups requires solutions from two aspects: psychological counseling and

practical education. First, create a community atmosphere of active aging through publicity, education, and role modeling to solve the problem of technophobia. Second, help elderly people understand digital technology and build digital confidence through establishing community digital classrooms and intergenerational digital feedback, enabling them to accept digital services.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

The application of digital technology is of great significance for improving community public service quality. Technology use expands service boundaries and enhances service efficiency. However, in the process of promoting smart community construction, phenomena such as insufficient age-friendliness have emerged, leading elderly groups to face dilemmas such as technological exclusion. To explore the causes of this dilemma, based on a case analysis of Community J, this paper uses the theory of multiple institutional logics to analyze the age-friendliness dilemma in smart community construction from bureaucratic logic, market logic, semi-bureaucratic logic, and user logic respectively. The study finds that there are multiple motivations for insufficient age-friendliness in smart community construction, with the four institutional logics jointly causing this dilemma through dynamic adjustment and interaction. Bureaucratic logic features insufficient institutional construction, with quantifiable assessment preferences failing to incorporate age-friendly transformation into assessments; market logic follows the principle of benefit priority, using standardization and scale effect construction while neglecting the differentiated and personalized needs of elderly groups; semi-bureaucratic logic means communities bear responsibilities of upward accountability and downward service, with insufficient motivation for age-friendly construction, and offline services replacing age-friendly transformation; user logic leads to two situations of technophobia and technological exclusion among elderly groups, causing passive withdrawal, whose low utilization rate in turn reinforces the "no demand" perception of governments and enterprises. The phenomenon of insufficient age-friendliness does not result from a single factor but is the outcome of mutual reinforcement by multiple logics. Elderly people's technophobia and technological

exclusion stem from the lack of truly age-friendly products and adapted service designs, leading to low acceptance willingness. Facing the low acceptance willingness of elderly groups, governments and markets lack motivation for further improvement. Facing increasingly demanding work tasks and assessment pressure, grassroots workers such as communities lack incentive mechanisms for transformation.

This paper takes Community J as a case study, analyzing its current situation through collected interview materials and available retrievable data. In the analysis process, extractable content was categorized, organized, and summarized as thoroughly as possible for detailed analysis to dissect the causes of insufficient age-friendliness in community smart construction. However, limited by resources and differences among communities, the generation mechanisms of age-friendliness dilemmas vary. Therefore, the research conclusions cannot be generalized to all specific scenarios of smart community construction. Future research can further verify the generation causes through multi-case comparison. Meanwhile, dynamic tracking methods can be used to observe behavioral changes of actors before and after age-friendly policy adjustments to deepen understanding.

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