

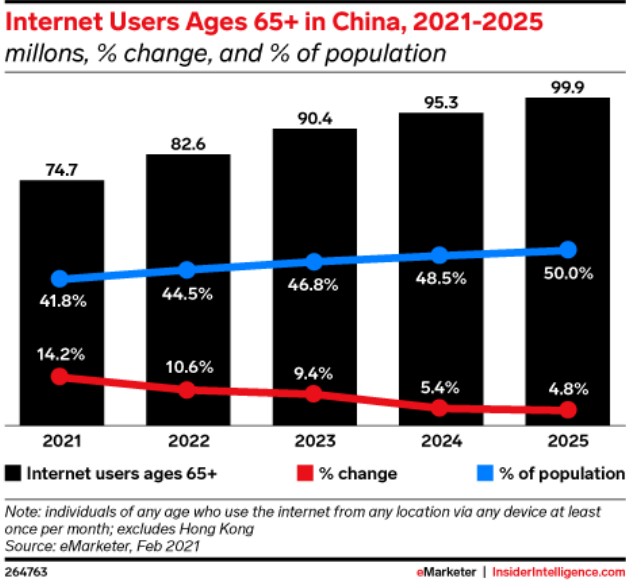
How China is closing the digital divide for seniors

Article

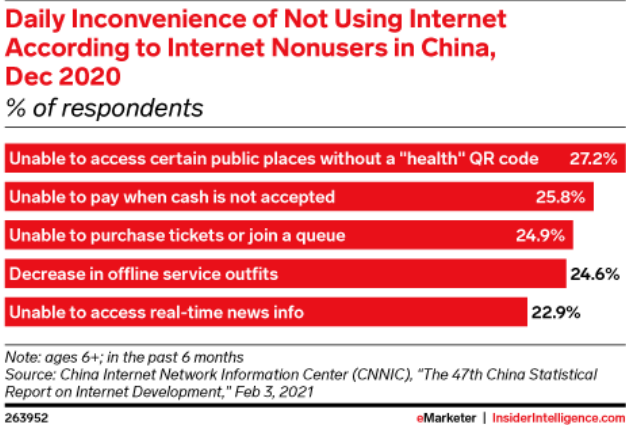
The digital divide has widened, particularly over the past year, and left seniors worldwide in the lurch. This issue takes on added urgency in China, where gender imbalance, delayed marriage, and a declining birthrate only exacerbate the rapid aging of its population. In November, the government urged tech companies to cater to the elderly, and China's digital giants are now tapping into the so-called silver market.

This market has huge potential. By 2040, there will be 402 million people ages 60 and older in China, making up 28% of the country's population, per a World Health Organization (WHO) forecast from 2019.

Internet adoption among seniors remains low, despite a boost from lockdowns and pandemic-related travel restrictions. We estimate that the penetration rate among people ages 65 and older in China will be just 41.8% this year and won't reach the halfway mark until the end of 2025. However, this cohort will see the fastest growth year over year, at 14.2% in 2021 and 10.6% in 2022.



December 2020 polling by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) shows how deeply embedded digital tools are in everyday life. When internet non-users in China were asked about daily inconveniences they encountered, the one they cited most was being barred from certain public places for not having a “health” QR code that identifies their contagion risk based on their digital and physical footprints.



The second-most cited inconvenience was dealing with cashless businesses. QR code-based mobile payments, enabled by Alibaba's Alipay and Tencent's WeChat, have revolutionized commerce in recent years. In December, China's central bank urged merchants and institutions to accept cash, not long after the State Council, the government's cabinet, released an implementation plan for senior inclusivity in the age of technology.

The plan called on companies to not only innovate their products, services, and ecosystems with the needs of the elderly in mind, but also use technology to optimize offline services that many seniors depend on, especially government services and those in healthcare, finance, ecommerce, entertainment, work productivity, travel, and mobility.

China's digital behemoths are answering that call. Here are a few approaches they're taking to help bridge the senior digital divide:

- **Improving user interface and functionality.** Alibaba, Baidu, Tencent, and other internet giants have released senior-friendly versions of their most popular apps, with features such as larger text and icons, simplified navigation, screen readers, and dialect recognition technology powered by AI. Mobility company Didi recently introduced a WeChat Mini Program that lets seniors hail rides with a single tap, without having to enter their destination. Alibaba's Taobao and WeChat Pay give seniors the option to charge orders to their adult children's accounts.
- **Optimizing hardware.** Ecommerce powerhouse JD.com and telecom company ZTE launched a 5G smartphone in December that makes it easier for seniors to place emergency calls, share their location, receive medical consultation, and more. That month, Baidu also released a "senior mode" on its Xiaodu Smart Display that includes enhanced voice recognition.
- **Enabling easier access to customer support.** In February 2021, Alibaba launched the Little Quilted Jacket Project (小棉袄计划) on its ecommerce platform Taobao. Seniors ages 60 and over can reach an agent more easily and get help with online shopping, payment, ride-hailing, health codes, online pharmacies, and doctor's appointments.

Technological innovation is only one prong of Beijing's efforts toward inclusivity of the elderly —training seniors to operate intelligent applications is another that featured prominently in the implementation plan. And seniors may have all the more opportunities to put those skills to use: The government announced earlier this month, at its annual parliamentary meetings, that it would be raising the retirement age—currently set at 60 for men and 55 for women not working in factories—albeit gradually.