

Elder Fraud in China: Understanding Risks, Methods, and Prevention Strategies

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ABSTRACT

China has an aging population, and studies have shown that older Chinese adults are more susceptible to experiencing fraud victimization. Despite the increased vulnerability of older Chinese adults, there is sparse research that has applied a mixed-methods approach to documenting the factors that influence victimization and the impacts of experiencing victimization in this population. This article examines the risks and impacts of fraud victimization on older adults using a mixed-methods approach, including an online survey with 61 respondents and seven semi-structured interviews. Findings from this study identified fake product consumption/treatment scams, false online investment and financial management fraud, online shopping scams, and impersonation fraud as the most common types of fraud experienced by older adults in China. Results also showed that online and in-person contact methods are commonly used by scammers. Risk factors identified in this study included younger age among older adults, lower education level, lower income, beneficial temptation, trust in acquaintances, and lack of access to fraud information. Among these, beneficial temptation and lack of access to information were the most commonly reported risk factors. This study also found that fraud victimization can lead to various emotional consequences and health-related distress for elderly victims. Based on these results, strategies for prevention and intervention at the policy and interpersonal level are proposed. These include stronger government regulation of third party platforms, investments in prevention programming, and encouraging older adults to expand their sources of information about fraud prevention and response, maintain a healthy sense of inquisitiveness and skepticism, and seek help from third parties if necessary.

Keywords: Elder, Chinese, Fraud Victimization, Scam, Risk Factors.

INTRODUCTION

China is notably the country with the largest aging population in the world, and the population of older adults in China is expected to continue growing rapidly. The number of Chinese adults aged 60 and above is expected to reach 366 million by 2050 (Han et al., 2020). Older adults are a vulnerable population because of their increased susceptibility to social isolation, declining physical and mental health, reduced income, and limited access to support services. The combination of psychological, social, cognitive, and

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financial factors increases the vulnerability of this population to experiencing various forms of victimization, including financial fraud.

Financial fraud refers to illegal practices intentionally designed to deprive individuals of money. With limited financial literacy, older adults are particularly vulnerable to financial fraud. Survey reports have shown that individuals aged 60 and above constitute 52.33% of financial investment fraud victims in China (Cai et al., 2025). The large elderly demographic in China and the high prevalence of financial fraud against older adults can result in significant individual and societal economic losses. In addition to the direct financial burden resulting from experiencing fraud victimization, older adults may also experience loss of time spent dealing with the victimization, as well as emotional and health-related distress (Wang et al., 2023). The potential negative consequences of fraud victimization for the elderly in China underscore the importance of examining the nature, prevalence, and impact of fraud victimization, with a specific focus on identifying potential prevention strategies. To this end, the purpose of the current research study is to employ a mixed-methods approach to document the common forms of fraud victimization in China, understand why and how elders become victims of fraud, and explore ways to prevent and respond to elder fraud.

PURPOSE OF THE CURRENT STUDY

Considering the prevalence and perceived economic and person-level negative impacts of elder fraud, there is a need to better understand the risk factors that increase the likelihood of older adults experiencing fraud, and identify prevention and intervention approaches to reduce the prevalence of elder fraud victimization. To this end, the current study seeks to utilize a mixed-methods approach to document the risk factors associated with elder fraud victimization, the impact of fraud victimization on elders, and identify possible prevention strategies to protect against elder fraud victimization. The following research questions will be explored in the current study:

1. What are the risk factors associated with elder fraud victimization?
2. What are the impacts of fraud victimization on older adults?
3. What strategies or interventions can be implemented to prevent elder fraud victimization?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Common Types of Elder Fraud in China

Elder fraud has become a serious social issue in China in recent years, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. According to recent data from the National Bureau of Statistics of China, the total number of criminal cases filed by the public security authorities fluctuated between 1,599,914 and 1,954,276 from 2020 to 2023. In 2020, the number of fraud cases filed by Chinese public security authorities dramatically increased by 33.6% compared to 2019. Between 2020 and 2023, the highest number of fraud cases filed per 10,000 people reached 5.1 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, n.d.).

It is worth mentioning that the Chinese government has been paying increasing attention to the issue of fraud. Preventative and response measures have included the establishment of new laws and the development of anti-fraud online platforms. For example, on September 2nd, 2022, the 36th meeting of the Standing Committee of the 13th National People's Congress voted to pass the Anti-Telecommunication and Internet Fraud Law of the People's Republic of China (Ministry of Public Security of People's Republic of China, 2022). For various departments, enterprises, and local governments, the law stipulates the legal responsibilities; for individuals, the law prohibits the number of telephone cards and payment accounts that exceed the limit of relevant regulations. Furthermore, on February 1st, 2021, the National Anti-Fraud Center officially joined five new media platforms, including the People's Daily, WeChat Video Account, Sina Weibo, Douyin, and Kuaishou, to launch an official anti-fraud government account (Ministry of Public Security of the People's Republic of China, 2021). Figures reflecting the total number of fraud cases filed by the Chinese public securities office between 2019 and 2023 are included below (National Bureau of Statistics of China, n.d.).

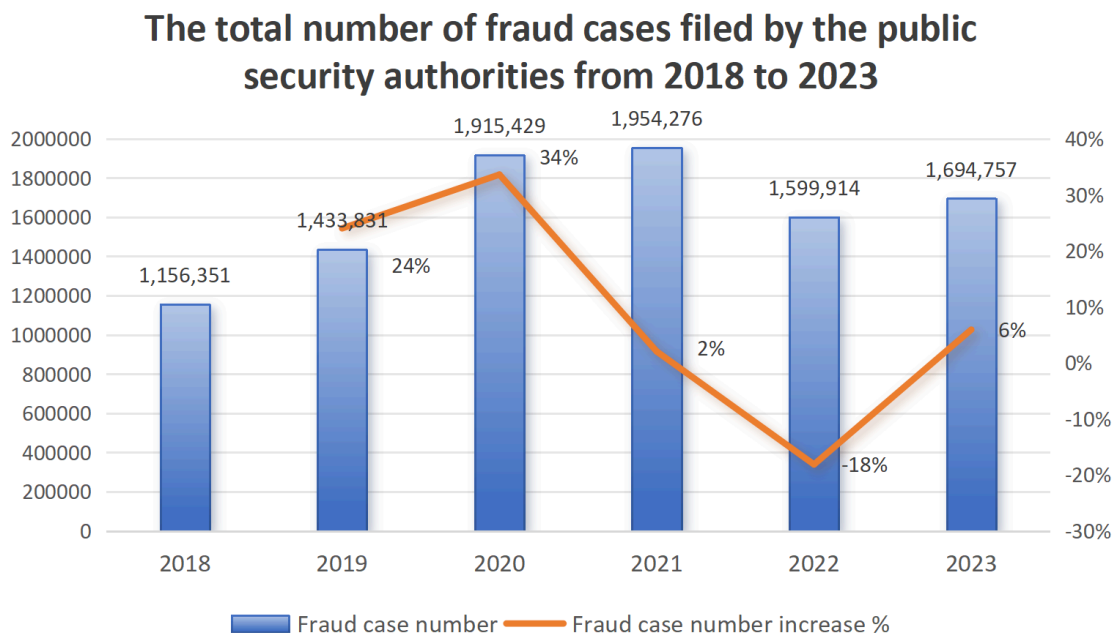


Figure 1. Total Reported Fraud Cases in China, 2018-2023

The Number of Fraud Case per 10,000 people Filed by Public Security Authorities

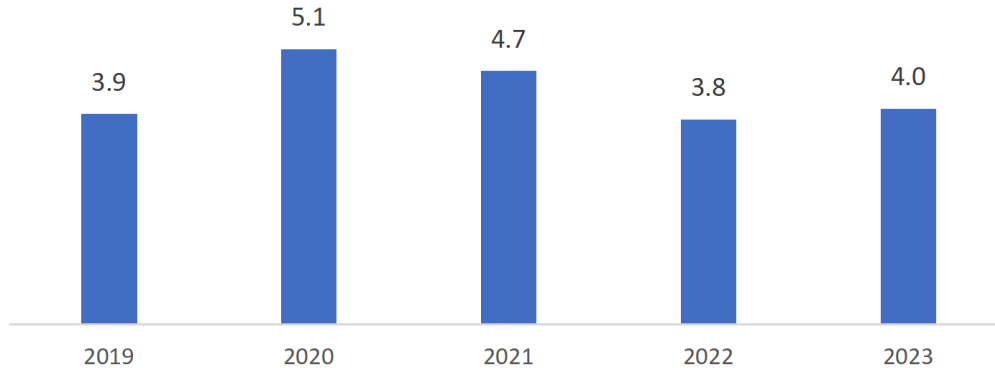


Figure 2. Reported Fraud Cases per 10,000 People in China, 2019-2023

With the accelerated development of technology and widespread internet adoption, fraud has increasingly shifted toward digital platforms, adopting more complex and digitalized scam methodologies (China Internet Network Information Centre, 2024). Over the past decade, fraud methods and channels have become more diversified, evolving from simple SMS scams to a wide variety of channels, such as website scams, social media scams, and AI-driven fraud. The statistical report on internet development in China revealed that by December 2024, China had 1,108 million internet users, an increase of 16.08 million compared to December 2023 (China Internet Network Information Centre, 2024). Internet penetration reached 78.6% in 2024 (China Internet Network Information Centre, 2024). Among all internet users, the proportion of users aged 50 and above increased from 32.5% to 34.1% (China Internet Network Information Centre, 2024). The internet has been further applied among middle- and old-age groups. In 2023, the proportion of internet users who had encountered online fraud was 20.0%, which is 3.6% more than that of 2022 (China Internet Network Information Centre, 2023). The types of online fraud encountered by internet users included 38% related to virtual lottery scams, 34.3% related to online shopping scams, 26.2% related to online part-time job scams, 24.4% related to phishing website scams, 22.0% related to fraudulent recruitment information exploitation, and 21.1% related to impersonation scams by acquaintances (China Internet Network Information Centre, 2023). This data indicates that internet and digital fraud have seen an increasing trend over the years. Meanwhile, traditional offline scams remain a significant threat, particularly for high-value fraud schemes that rely on face-to-face communication and trust-building tactics (Public Security Bureau of Yuncheng, 2022).

Empirical research reveals that common scams can be broadly categorized into three types: fake consumption or treatment scams, investment and financial fraud, and romance or impersonation scams.

Fake Product consumption or treatment scams. Fake consumption fraud refers to deceptive schemes where fraudsters fabricate false products or services to illegally obtain money (Dou et al., Xinhua News Agency, 2025). In recent years, fraudsters have increasingly targeted elderly individuals by exploiting their health anxieties and emotional loneliness, luring them into purchasing overpriced, fake health products (Dou et al., Xinhua News Agency, 2025). Along with the development of social media platforms, these scams have become more sophisticated, employing various methods such as e-commerce platforms, live streaming videos, and social media posts. In addition, scammers often forge authoritative certifications on fake health products and treatments. By exploiting the elderly's trust in medical 'experts' and 'doctors', fraudsters manipulate them into believing these products are safe, effective, and scientifically proven (Dou et al., Xinhua News Agency, 2025). Fake consumption and treatment scams not only cause financial losses and psychological distress for elderly victims but may also severely endanger their physical health since some products contain illegal or harmful substances (Dou et al., Xinhua News Agency, 2025).

This type of fraud can have significant adverse impacts on the elderly. For example, in June 2024, Beijing police cracked down on a health product fraud gang. The product promoted by the gang was called "Reprogramming Reverse SAg". The gang claimed that after use, it could reverse the cells in the body, thereby achieving a state of reverse growth, and have significant effects on diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, Alzheimer's disease, and cancer. The product packaging bore a national patent number and a US FDA certification mark. After testing and identification, this product has no medicinal effects at all, and the cost of each box is only \$1.60. During the promotion process, the gang would also use gimmicks such as national subsidies for the products, reducing the original price of nearly \$700 per box to \$700 for six boxes. According to the police, about 180 elders were deceived by this gang in Beijing (Lu et al., Xinhua News Agency, 2025).

If the previous case was just a minor one, the "health wine" scam in Yichang, Hubei Province had a much greater impact. The criminal gang lured elderly people to gatherings by giving away eggs and rice, to sell them "health wine". The gang then manipulated the elderly people in attendance, explicitly suggesting that the products they are promoting not only have health care effects but also therapeutic effects on certain diseases. The criminal gang also employed elderly people as accomplices to claim the efficacy of the treatment. According to the investigation by the public security authorities, more than 30,000 elderly people were defrauded in this case, with the involved amount exceeding \$140 million (Cheng et al., Xinhua News Agency, 2025). It not only caused huge economic losses to the elderly but also seriously endangered their physical and mental health, family harmony, and even social stability (Cheng et al., Xinhua News Agency, 2025).

Investment and financial fraud. Investment and financial fraud refers to deceptive practices designed to manipulate individuals into making financial decisions based on false or misleading information, resulting in unlawful monetary gain for the fraudster. A study by Reurink, A. (2018) introduced three types of financial fraud: false financial disclosures, financial scams, and financial mis-selling. False financial disclosures use asymmetric information to lie to consumers. While false financial disclosures are

“misleading”, financial scams are built on blatant lies and completely fabricated facts. Financial mis-selling means giving consumers a wrong description or advice on a financial product that is unsuitable for the user’s needs (Reurink, 2018).

Some common types of financial and investment fraud include brush orders and rebate fraud; false online investment and financial management fraud; false online loan fraud; and fraudulent credit-related fraud (Ministry of Public Security of People’s Republic of China, 2023). Older adults are commonly targeted by false online investment and financial management fraud due to their demand for money-saving. This scam involves luring victims into fake “investment” group chats where fraudsters pose as financial advisors or trading experts. They gain trust by sharing success stories, fake withdrawal screenshots, and hosting live “trading lessons.” Victims are then manipulated into managing a fake investment account under the scammer’s guidance. Initially, small investments are rewarded with returns to build credibility. However, once the victim invests a larger sum, the platform blocks withdrawals, and the victim is removed from the group and blocked (Ministry of Public Security of People’s Republic of China, 2023).

In recent years, investment fraud has developed various new methods. For instance, in December 2024, the Shanghai Public Security Bureau launched a criminal investigation into Jinke Company and its subsidiary Yanyang Holiday Company for illegal fundraising. The companies allegedly lured members through elderly care and tourism services, then directed sales agents to promote investment products from affiliated businesses, and illegally collected massive deposits and investments. The case involved over 10,000 victims and more than \$1.4 billion (Sina Finance, 2024). It was a typical case of a Ponzi scheme. Investment and financial fraud usually involve substantial amounts of money, inflicting not only severe financial losses on elderly victims but also causing psychological trauma. Unlike fake health products, where victims at least receive items, financial scams leave victims with absolutely nothing. Moreover, financial fraudsters typically disappear suddenly with the money, delivering an abrupt and devastating psychological impact on elderly victims who had placed their trust in them.

Romance or impersonation fraud. Romance fraud refers to a type of financial scam in which criminals fabricate fake identities to establish emotional connections with victims, ultimately manipulating them into sending money or revealing sensitive financial information. Nowadays, many older adults who have lost their spouses choose online or offline dating to find new partners. Fraudsters thus invest huge amounts of time building trust and relationships with the elderly victims. Subsequently, the scammers deceive the victims by claiming to encounter unexpected difficulties that require urgent financial assistance (Ministry of Public Security of People’s Republic of China, 2023). In addition to experiencing severe financial losses, romance fraud also inflicts psychological feelings of betrayal and the collapse of trust for the elderly (Wang et al., 2023). For instance, Lu, 69, had been living alone for a long time. A strange woman suddenly added him on WeChat. They got along very well and gradually developed a romantic relationship. One day, this “girlfriend” suddenly sent a message to Lu, claiming that she was short of money when buying clothes and hoped that Lu could pay to show his concern. Lu then transferred 500 yuan to her by scanning a QR code on WeChat. She was not satisfied and continued to

demand money from Lu. Lu deposited another 4,300 yuan into her bank account. After the transfer, his “girlfriend” blocked him on WeChat (Fujian Provincial Civil Affairs Department, 2023).

Impersonation fraud refers to a type of scam where criminals falsely assume the identity of a trusted individual, organization, or authority figure to deceive victims into sending money, sharing sensitive information, or performing actions that benefit the fraudster. Some common impersonation fraud includes counterfeit e-commerce logistics customer service fraud, impersonation of public security, procuratorate, and court fraud, and impersonation of leaders and acquaintances fraud. Take consumer service fraud as an example. Through illegal means, scammers obtain victims' shopping information and personal details. They falsely claim that the purchased goods have quality issues. Under the pretext of issuing refunds, they deceive victims into filling out their bank account and mobile verification code information on fraudulent claim pages. In a case reported by the National Anti-fraud Center, a victim received a scam call from a fraudster posing as an online store customer service, claiming his recently purchased hair dye was defective and offering a fake refund. The victim was tricked into downloading an app and opening screen-sharing access, which allowed the scammer to steal nearly \$2,800 from the unsuspecting victim's bank account (Ministry of Public Security of People's Republic of China, 2023). For another example, Mrs. Zhang, 70 years old, received a call from someone claiming to be a staff member of the National Medical Products Administration. The man claimed he and his colleagues had dealt with a gang selling counterfeit drugs recently, and now they were going to compensate Mrs. Zhang for her losses. Mrs. Zhang had indeed bought health supplements before. The other party told her that she needed to pay 20,000 yuan in taxes first as processing fees. She then transferred the money to the other party as required. However, when she asked when the other party could make a refund, they hung up the phone directly and could no longer be reached. It was only then that Mrs. Zhang realized she had been deceived (Fujian Provincial Civil Affairs Department, 2023).

Risk Factors Associated with Elder Fraud Victimization

Previous research has identified multiple factors that influence older adults' vulnerability to fraud victimization. At the individual level, sociodemographic characteristics such as age, gender, education level, income status, and social background have been associated with differences in fraud susceptibility (Han, 2023). Psychological characteristics also act as important risk factors. Shao et al. (2019) found that factors including impulsiveness, trust tendency, cognitive decline, emotional regulation difficulties, motivational changes, and psychological vulnerability may increase older adults' likelihood of experiencing fraud. In particular, previous studies have suggested that beneficial temptation and poor judgment are important reasons why older adults may become victims of scams (Wang et al., 2019).

Beyond individual characteristics, social and technological factors also influence fraud vulnerability. Social isolation may reduce older adults' access to opportunities to share information, thus increasing susceptibility to frauds (Han, 2023). Additionally, weak awareness of fraud prevention and limited access to reliable information have been identified as important risk factors among older adults (Wang et al., 2019). Although anti-fraud technologies and applications have been increasingly developed in China,

existing research has not fully examined whether these tools effectively reach older populations or reduce fraud vulnerability.

Consequences about elder fraud victimization

Fraud victimization can have serious consequences far beyond financial loss. Previous research has found that older adults who experience fraud may suffer emotional and health-related distress, including depressive symptoms (Wang et al., 2023). Feelings such as regret, anxiety, and loss of trust may further affect older adults' emotional well-being. These findings suggest that elder fraud should be understood as an experience that can affect older adults' psychological and social well-being. Therefore, further research must be done to better address the issue.

Although previous research has identified various factors that contribute to elder fraud victimization, less is known about how these factors are experienced by older adults in China specifically. Existing studies have also tended to examine risk factors and consequences separately. Accordingly, limited insight was provided into how older adults understand fraud victimization. Furthermore, much existing research has relied primarily on quantitative surveys, limiting understanding of how older adults personally experience vulnerability, trust, and decision-making during fraud victimization. Therefore, a mixed-methods approach combining survey data with interviews can provide both an overview of common risk factors and a deeper understanding of older adults' individual experiences in China.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

The current study applied a cross-sectional, mixed-methods design to address the outlined research questions. Utilizing a mixed methods approach allows for a more holistic exploration of the topic and addresses an existing gap in empirical literature on elder fraud victimization in China. This study involved conducting online survey data collection and semi-structured in-depth interviews with participants who met the eligibility criteria for the study. Eligible participants included older adults, ages 60 years and above, who have experienced one or more forms of fraud victimization. The survey material was posted online, including the original survey platform Wenjuanxing and social media platforms such as WeChat. Participants were able to access and fill out the survey questionnaire through the shared link.

For the interviews, both online and offline methods were used. Those who completed the survey online could voluntarily join the interview by contacting the researcher through the provided email and phone number. Offline, elderly people in local neighborhoods and communities who had experienced fraud were recruited to participate in the interviews. 61 participants completed the survey, and seven participants completed the interview.

An Institutional Review Board (IRB) committee consisting of medical practitioners was convened to review and provide ethical oversight for the current study. The Regeneron Talent Science Search (STS) guide to creating IRBs was used to convene the IRB, and the STS approval form was used to secure documented ethical approval of the research plan before data collection began.

Materials

The online survey material had 14 multiple-choice questions covering three main sections. These included participants' demographic data, experience of common types of fraud, and risk factors for elder fraud. The questions were based on survey scales and data collection tools utilized in similar empirical studies (Koning et al., 2024; Naruedomkul et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2019). Examples of the questions included "What kind of scam have you been targeted by?" "What do you believe are the main reasons why elderly people are affected by scams?"

The semi-structured in-depth interview questionnaire included 12 questions. The questions mainly cover four sections. These included the participants' personal experience with scams, the social and emotional impacts of experiencing scams, understanding individual risk and vulnerability, and insights on prevention and intervention strategies. The questions were derived and adapted from relevant empirical research (Koning et al., 2024; Naruedomkul et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2019). Examples of questions included "Can you tell me about a time when you experienced a scam or suspected you were being scammed?" and "What kind of support (from family, community, technology, or government) do you think is needed to protect older adults from scams?"

Data Analysis

Quantitative survey data were analyzed using WJX.CN, an online survey design and analysis platform. Specifically, the analytic function of the platform was used to generate summary statistics, customize results, and apply filters to compare responses across specific groups and segments.

Qualitative interview data were analyzed using a codebook thematic analysis approach. First, interview responses were organized by question using a note-taking guide. A set of pre-determined codes developed based on the research questions and insights from the survey data was then created. The codes were grouped according to research questions. For example, when analyzing risk factors associated with elder fraud victimization, main codes included "lack of access to information about fraud" and "financial difficulties." The interview notes were then reviewed and coded accordingly. If relevant data did not fit any of the pre-established codes, new codes were created. Finally, all codes were organized into broader themes and subthemes to address the research questions in a structured and meaningful way.

RESULTS

The purpose of the current study was to examine the nature, prevalence, and impact of fraud victimization against older adults in China and identify strategies to prevent and respond to fraud victimization in this population. Data were collected through surveys and interviews with older adults, and the findings from these data sources are summarized in this section.

Participants' Sociodemographic Characteristics

61 adults over the age of 60 responded to the survey. Table 1 shows the descriptives for those who completed the survey. Most of the participants self-identified as female ($n = 40$; 66%) and were between the ages of 60 and 65 ($n = 47$; 77%). Furthermore, many respondents reported their highest level of education as junior (lower) secondary school ($n = 40$; 66%), and earned at a pension level of under 6000 yuan ($n = 43$; 70%). Among all the respondents, 14 (23%) reported Henan Province to be their state of residence.

Table 1. Participant Sociodemographic Characteristics

Category	% (n)
Gender	
Male	34 (21)
Female	66 (40)
Age	
60-65 years	77 (47)
66-70 years	12 (7)
71-75 years	3 (2)
76-80 years	3 (2)
81-85 years	5 (3)
Education Level	
Junior (lower) secondary school	66 (40)
Senior (upper) secondary school	26 (16)

Vocational education	3 (2)
Bachelor's degree	5 (3)
Pension Level	
Under 6000 yuan	70 (43)
6000-9000 yuan	20 (12)
9000-12000 yuan	8 (5)
More than 12000 yuan	2 (1)
State of Residence	
Henan Province	23 (14)
Shanghai	18 (11)
Zhejiang Province	15 (9)
Sichuan Province	13 (8)
Guangdong Province	8 (5)
Beijing	7(4)
Jiangsu Province	7 (4)
Jiangxi Province	5 (3)
Anhui Province	3 (2)
Guangxi Province	1 (1)

Nature and Impact of Elder Fraud Victimization

60 out of the 61 survey respondents confirmed that they were victims of various scams. Table 2 shows the reported nature and impact of elder fraud victimization from the survey. Out of the 60 victims of scams, 41 (67%) lost money, while 19 (31%) did not lose any money as a result of the scam. Findings from the interview supported this trend, as 6 out of 7 participants indicated that they lost money due to fraud victimization.

The most commonly reported type of fraud victimization experienced by older adults who responded to this survey was fake health products or treatments (n = 32; 53%). In contrast, the least commonly reported types of fraud victimization were romance fraud and fraudulent credit-related fraud. Additionally, findings from the interviews revealed that false online investment and financial management fraud were the most commonly experienced forms of fraud victimization. Three of the seven interview participants reported experiencing this type of fraud due to trust in acquaintances, attractive financial returns, and apparent endorsements.

Most of the survey respondents reported that the contact methods of the scammer are phone calls (n = 19; 32%) and in-person contact (n = 13; 22%). Similarly, interview participants reported phone calls and in-person contact as the most commonly used contact methods by scammers. In contrast, the least commonly reported contact method reported by survey and interview respondents was online pop-up. The interviews further showed that scammers often used seemingly trustworthy contexts to establish credibility, such as community lectures or acquaintances.

Furthermore, 25 (42%) survey respondents reported that they made payments (or were asked to pay) by the scammers using cash or a card offline. In contrast, many of the interview respondents (n = 4) reported that they made payments to scammers using online payment or banking apps. These findings demonstrate the diversity of payment methods utilized by scammers to victimize elderly victims.

After experiencing fraud victimization, most of the survey respondents (n = 51; 85%) chose to report the scams to their family. Similarly, most of the interview participants (n = 5; 71%) chose to report the scam to their family, while also reporting the scam to legal authorities. However, the interviews also revealed reluctance to report fraud in some cases. One participant initially concealed the investment from her family because she had invested secretly previously.

When assessing the perceived self-impact of experiencing fraud victimization, the most commonly reported reactions by survey respondents included feeling angry or frustrated (n = 44, 73%) and feeling regretful (n = 36, 60%). Similarly, interview participants reported feeling angry (n = 3) and regretful of what happened (n = 3). The interviews further illustrated the psychological impact of victimization. One participant reported that her existing depression worsened after the fraud. Another respondent continued to feel anxious and worried several days after receiving a fraudulent call.

Table 2. Nature and Impact of Elder Fraud Victimization

Category	% (n)
Type of Scam	
Fake health products or treatments (e.g., fake medicine, fake tonics, etc.)	53 (32)

Online shopping (purchasing fake products online)	33 (20)
False online investment and financial management fraud	32 (19)
Impersonation of customer service fraud	17 (10)
Impersonation of public security, procuratorate, and court fraud	12 (7)
Impersonation of acquaintances fraud	10 (6)
False online loan fraud (frauds that involve loans)	7 (4)
Romance fraud (building fake romantic relationships to ask for money)	2 (1)
Fraudulent credit-related fraud (frauds that involve credit cards)	2 (1)
Scam Contact Method	
Phone call	32 (19)
In-person	22 (13)
Social media	20 (12)
Online ad or Pop-up	12 (7)
Acquaintances	7 (4)
Text message	3 (2)
TV or Radio	3 (2)
Print media	1 (1)
Scam Payment Method	
Cash or card off-line	42 (25)

Payment or banking app online	36 (21)
Gift cards	20 (12)
Transfer without consent	2 (1)
Reporting Decisions	
To family	85 (51)
To authorities	43 (26)
To financial authorities	8 (5)
To service providers	8 (5)
Didn't report	2 (1)
Impact of Fraud Victimization	
Angry or frustrated	73 (44)
Regretful	60 (36)
Stressed or overwhelmed	45 (27)
Anxious or worried	40 (24)
Distrustful of others	33 (20)
Embarrassed or ashamed	32 (19)
Isolated or alone	5 (3)

Risk Factors for Experiencing Elder Fraud

The most commonly reported reason or risk factor of fraud victimization in the survey was the inability to resist the temptation of gains (n = 48; 79%). In addition, 42 (69%) survey respondents reported the main reason to be a lack of access to information. Similarly, most interview participants (n = 5) claimed their reasons for fraud victimization as the lack of access to information about fraud and trust in acquaintances. For example, Ms. B trusted an investment opportunity recommended by an acquaintance and became more confident after receiving returns from her initial investments. Similarly, Mr. G believed a scammer was his grandson because he had poor hearing and had no prior knowledge of this type of fraud.

Moreover, four of the interview participants believed that the risk factor of fraud victimization was financial difficulties or dissatisfaction with their current financial condition. See Table 3 below for a more detailed description of risk factors for experiencing elder fraud.

Table 3. Risk Factors for Experiencing Elder Fraud

Category	% (n)
Could not resist temptation	79 (48)
Lack of access to information	69 (42)
Self-perceived ability	57 (35)
Lack of people to communicate with	20 (12)
Financial difficulties or dissatisfaction with one's current financial conditions	13 (8)
Family/peer pressure for success	10 (6)
Unwillingness to share about the issue	10 (6)
Close association with the vendor	8 (5)
Family problems	7 (4)

Perspectives on Fraud Victimization among Older Adults

The data collected in this study also examined the perspectives of elderly people on the severity of fraud victimization in China. All survey respondents indicated that they consider fraud victimization as a serious problem, with 11 (18%) classifying it as an extremely serious problem affecting older people in China.

Furthermore, to understand access to information among elderly people, survey respondents were asked to report on how they access information about fraud victimization. The most commonly reported information sources included family/friends (n = 49, 80%), and TV/news (n = 29, 48%), while the least commonly reported source was anti-fraud apps (n = 14, 23%) with less than half of the survey respondents (n = 25, 41%) indicating that they have downloaded anti-fraud apps on their phones. Limited use of anti-fraud apps was also reflected in the interviews. Several participants emphasized the importance of government regulation, family support, and greater access to fraud-prevention information

rather than relying on technology alone. See Table 4 below for a more detailed description of the perspectives on elder fraud victimization from the survey.

Table 4. Perspectives on Elder Fraud Victimization among Older Adults

Category	% (n)
Access to Information about Fraud Prevention	
Family/friends	80 (49)
TV/news	48 (29)
Police/community talks	31 (19)
Online resources	26 (16)
Anti-fraud apps	23 (14)
Don't get information	2 (1)
Anti-fraud Apps Download	
No	59 (36)
Yes	41 (25)
Severity Cognition	
Very serious	57 (35)
Somewhat serious	25 (15)
Extremely serious	18 (11)

DISCUSSION

Nature and Impact of Elder Fraud Victimization

Type of scam. According to the study results, the most common types of fraud experienced by older adults are fake product consumption or treatment scams, finance fraud, online shopping scams, and impersonation fraud, which aligns with evidence from previous research (China Internet Network

Information Centre, 2023). Among various types of financial fraud, this study found that elderly people were more likely to experience false online investment and financial management fraud. The interviewees' experiences suggest that these scams may be particularly effective because scammers combine attractive financial returns with trust-worthy claims, such as recommendations from acquaintances and apparently credible endorsements. This may explain why financial fraud remained prominent despite differences in the types of scams reported in the survey.

Scam contact method. Study findings indicate that although online contact methods, such as phone calls and social media, comprise a large proportion of scam contact methods, offline in-person contact is still a prevalent contact method. Many of the fraud victimizations reported in this study include both online and in-person contact methods. Previous research data also showed that traditional offline scams remain a significant threat, particularly for high-value fraud schemes that rely on face-to-face communication and trust-building tactics (Public Security Bureau of Yuncheng, 2022).

Impact of fraud victimization. The findings from this study align with previous research, indicating that fraud victimization can lead to various emotional consequences for elderly victims. However, this study's findings did not show loneliness as a major impact of fraud victimization, which has been highlighted as an emotional impact in previous work (Xing et al., 2020). This research provides further insight suggesting that not all victims experience the same degree of psychological distress.

Risk Factors for Elder Fraud Victimization

Individual Factors. Our research data suggested that younger age (among elders), lower education level, and lower income status were associated with higher risks of fraud victimization. In contrast to general trends, elders with higher education and income levels were more likely to encounter financial scams, online shopping frauds, and impersonation of acquaintances. The reason is that these people are more likely to be interested in financial matters and take risks to earn more (Mao et al., 2023). Socioeconomic advantage does not necessarily reduce exposure to fraud. Instead, older adults with greater financial resources may have more opportunities to participate in investments or online transactions, increasing their exposure to financial scams. Previous research findings indicated that older age (among all age ranges) was associated with a higher susceptibility to scams (Han, 2023). The discrepancy might be affected by the limited sample size of our study and the demographic dominance of adults aged 60-69 among China's elderly population (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2020).

When examining gendered experiences, previous research suggests that both males and females can become victims of fraud, but the types of fraud they experience may vary (Han, 2023). Findings from the current research study appear to be in line with this claim, except that the data show that the proportion of female fraud victims is slightly higher than that of male victims. Furthermore, the proportion of men who experience online fraud shopping is higher than that of women, while the proportion of women who experience false online investment and financial management fraud is higher than that of men in the current study. Notably, male victims were predominantly targeted via phone calls ($n = 11$; 52%), while

female victims were predominantly targeted in-person ($n = 10$; 26%) or through social media ($n = 9$; 23%). Several interview participants associated women's greater social engagement with greater exposure to in-person and social-media interactions. However, because this explanation came from a small interview sample, it shouldn't be treated as a general gender pattern. For psychological factors, the survey identified beneficial temptation, self-perceived ability, and trust in acquaintances as important risks. The interviews strongly support these quantitative findings. This suggests that vulnerability may arise from the interaction between trust, perceived gains, and judgment in a specific situation.

Social and Cultural Factors. The survey and interviews together suggest that social relationships can have a dual effect on fraud vulnerability. Social connections can increase exposure to scams because acquaintances or community contacts may introduce fraudulent opportunities. On the other hand, strong family connections may also provide protection by encouraging older adults to verify suspicious opportunities. The finding suggests that the quality and function of social support may be more important than social contact alone. Previous studies have also indicated that socially isolated individuals may lack support and opportunities for information sharing, making them more susceptible to the influence of fraud (Han, 2023).

Another major risk factor of fraud victimization identified in the current research study is the lack of access to information about fraud among elderly people. This may help explain why some participants failed to recognize warning signs even when suspicious contracts or unusual payment methods were present. This risk factor may be influenced by the lack of adequate legal and community help for elderly people in China. Many Chinese elders are losing their place in society and getting out of touch with in-person social networks due to technological development. As such, they are more likely to send money as a way to transactions has become their way to prove their ability to contribute to their own families (Jiang, 2024). Specifically, elders feel pressure for success from friends or family and are unwilling to share issues with others.

Technological Factors. Previous studies have indicated that weak awareness of fraud prevention is largely due to lack of information about frauds, thus increasing risk of fraud victimization (Wang et al., 2019). Anti-fraud apps provide online fraud information and block suspicious calls. However, the current study found no association between downloading anti-fraud apps and a reduction in the risk of experiencing online or in-person fraud victimization. This outcome indicates that access to technology alone may not be sufficient to reduce victimization. Although anti-fraud apps can provide information and technical protection, their effectiveness may depend on whether older adults actively use and understand these tools. The relatively low proportion of survey respondents using anti-fraud apps further suggests that family, community, and other information channels may remain important sources of fraud prevention.

CONCLUSION

Limitations of the Current Study

The current study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the study results cannot be generalized across all older adult populations in China because of the limited scale of the study. The survey sample consisted of only 61 respondents and the interviews involved only 7 respondents. The small sample size, especially for the quantitative research part, limits the ubiquity of the data collected. Secondly, the geographical spread does not ensure a nationally representative sample. The 61 participants of the survey were from only 10 different provinces. However, China has 23 provinces. As such, the concentration of respondents in specific areas may overlook significant regional variations in fraud types and vulnerability factors. Furthermore, the sample had demographic imbalances. Female participants accounted for 66% of the total respondents. This gender distribution in the number of respondents may potentially underrepresent the male perspective. Similarly, the age distribution is a critical limitation of the study. With only 23% of respondents aged 66 and above, the data may not be representative of people who are older and may have different experiences. Overall, the study may not be an accurate representation of the experiences by gender, age, geographical location, economics status and educational level because the size of the sample is limited. Despite the limitations of this study, the findings still provide new information to advance empirical literature and understanding of the fraud victimisation experiences and outcomes of older adults in China.

Policy Implications

Both communities and government authorities have important roles to play in preventing and responding to elder fraud victimization. At the community level, efforts such as distributing anti-fraud promotional materials in neighborhoods and holding regular anti-fraud seminars can help raise awareness and equip older adults with relevant knowledge. As this study highlights, access to clear and reliable information about fraud is essential for prevention.

The responsibility for preventing online fraud extends to third parties such as payment providers, social media platforms, and internet and service providers (Koning et al., 2024). Considering this, the Chinese government should strengthen regulatory oversight of third-party entities. Specific attention should be given to enhancing data protection, enforcing stricter compliance with anti-fraud policies, and holding platforms accountable for facilitating or failing to prevent fraudulent activities.

Findings from this study also suggest that existing anti-fraud applications may not be as effective as intended. No clear link was found between downloading these apps and lower rates of fraud victimization among older adults. Many interviewees who had installed such apps still noted a lack of accessible information as a major factor in their victimization. This indicates that anti-fraud apps require further development, particularly in terms of usability and content design tailored to older users. Improving the

clarity, accessibility, and relevance of the information provided could increase the effectiveness of these tools in preventing fraud.

Finally, interview data revealed widespread dissatisfaction with the perceived lack of responsiveness from police and judicial authorities. Most participants reported no meaningful outcome after filing complaints, with some expressing feelings of being dismissed or even reprimanded for seeking assistance. To address this gap, frontline responders, especially police officers and government staff, should receive training in trauma-informed and empathetic approaches to dealing with elder fraud cases. Clear communication about legal procedures, expected timelines, and visible efforts to advance investigations can help rebuild trust and improve outcomes for older victims of fraud.

Practical Implications

Recommendations for elders and older adults. Interview respondents shared some recommendations for how elders and older adults can reduce their risk of experiencing fraud victimization. Firstly, elders should expand their sources of information about fraud prevention and response. Accessing accurate evidence-based information through various sources, such as TV, law enforcement, online platforms, and the immediate community, is important. Secondly, elders should maintain a healthy sense of inquisitiveness and skepticism by asking more questions about any opportunities that seem suspicious, too easy, or present a get-rich-quick illusion. This inquisitiveness should be maintained even if the opportunity is offered by trusted individuals. Thirdly, elderly people should avoid making risky investments and purchases. Instead, they can explore qualified and verified financial institutions as the safest places for investments with the lowest risks. Fourthly, elderly people should avoid picking up unknown or suspicious calls and download national anti-fraud apps that can screen for scam calls. Most importantly, study participants recommended that elderly people should always reconfirm details before making any money transfers and inform trusted individuals, such as family members or friends, about any important decisions or money transfers they intend to make.

In addition to fraud prevention approaches, there are several actions that elders can take in response to fraud victimization. First, it is recommended that elders inform trusted individuals, such as family members, immediately. Instead of dealing with the problem in navigating the aftermath of fraud victimisation in isolation, sharing the issue with others can provide opportunities for elders to receive information, resources, and support. It is also important for elders to understand that experiencing fraud victimization should not induce shame and does not mean they are incapable. Seeking help from others demonstrates their capacity to actively and positively problem-solve. Secondly, elders should report fraud victimization to law enforcement, such as the police, as soon as possible, especially when the case involves financial loss. Prompt reporting may increase the likelihood of recouping any financial losses. Lastly and most importantly, it is important for elders who have experienced fraud victimization to seek mental health support if needed, to support their ability to recover from the emotional and psychological impacts of experiencing fraud. As negative emotions in response to experiencing traumatic situations are

normal, taking proactive steps to manage one's emotional state and avoid dwelling on negative thoughts is important.

Recommendations for family and friends. Family, friends, and social networks play a crucial role in safeguarding elderly people and contributing to efforts that prevent elder fraud victimization. Family is regarded as the primary source of both financial and caregiving support for older adults in China. Young family members are often more educated and may be more equipped to identify fraudulent schemes (Deng et al., 2025). To safeguard elders from online fraud, younger family members can use a diverse set of preventive measures with the permission of elders, such as restricting online payments, managing tasks for seniors, monitoring, selective blocking, and setting up anti-fraud defenses (Deng et al., 2025). Families should maintain good communication with the elderly and share resources on fraud prevention. Additionally, due to the special 'face' culture among Chinese elders, it is important that individuals who support elders do not blame them for their mistakes but instead create a safe space for them to make mistakes and receive guidance on corrective actions.

The support provided by family members, friends, and social networks also plays an important role after fraud victimization. Firstly, families should provide emotional care for older adults, such as providing more companionship and providing information and resources on mental health support to alleviate the emotional burden on the elderly. In addition to emotional support, financial assistance can be another way to support elders who have experienced fraud victimization. This can include helping seniors repay their debts and reclaim money lost by filing complaints and reporting fraudulent activities to relevant authorities (Deng et al., 2025).

Directions for Future Research

Building directly on the findings and limitations of this study, there are some avenues for future research. First, the current study did not address differences by gender, age, geographical location, economics status and educational level because of the limited sample size. A large-scale quantitative study could statistically model the relationship between gender, social activity patterns, and specific fraud channels to confirm and expand on the results of the current study. For instance, future studies could identify whether women face higher risks in-person because they are more socially active in their communities and men are more vulnerable online because they are less socially active offline. Secondly, while this study only focused on the several key risk factors reported by limited participants, future research should employ more mixed-method approaches to delve deeper into these risk factors and explore other risk factors of elder fraud such as personality traits. Thirdly, the psychological impact of fraud warrants further investigations. This study did not assess the mental health consequences of victimization. Further research should utilize established clinical tools to conduct an in-depth study of mental health outcomes such as the prevalence of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Depressive Disorder, and Anxiety Disorder. Studying mental health outcomes is crucial for developing effective psychological support. Furthermore, to truly understand risk factors and protective mechanisms, future studies should incorporate direct comparisons between elders who have experienced fraud and those who have not. These comparisons

would provide invaluable insights into protective methods, moving beyond correlational findings of the current samples that consisted only of victims. Finally, future studies could also include cross-cultural comparative research to determine how the risk factors and fraud mechanisms identified in China differ from or align with those in other aging societies.

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