

## Research Article

# Influence of Neighborhood-Based Identity and Social Participation on the Social Integration of the Drifting Elderly

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The drifting elderly are an interprovincial floating elderly population that is mainly composed of unemployed older parents in China. They have left their usual residence and relocated to urban areas, facing challenge about social integration. As a neighborhood has played important roles in the floating population's social integration, this study was designed to investigate the influence of neighborhood-based identity and social participation on the social integration of the drifting elderly. Five rounds of data collection and analysis were conducted in a continuous crossover sequence using grounded theory. Twenty-four participants were recruited from three districts in Shanghai, China. The neighborhood was shown to play a prominent role in the drifting elderly's perceptions of social integration. Good neighborhood relations help the drifting elderly establish effective social support networks, interact with inflowing society, get in touch with more human resources, and form social relationships and networks. Neighborhood-based participants and identity were more conducive to eliminating heterogeneity and creating homogeneity for the drifting elderly. Thus, the neighborhood affects the social integration of the drifting elderly, which directly impacts their social feelings, integrations, and networks. Management of social integration among the drifting elderly should be focused on creating general opportunities for them to participate in neighborhood-based social events with a reasonable identity.

## 1. Introduction

*1.1. The Drifting Elderly in China.* An interprovincial floating elderly population, mainly composed of unemployed older parents, has developed rapidly in China in recent decades. Based on our preliminary analysis, this floating population is a social group with a complex composition. Many of these individuals have left their usual residence and have relocated to areas where their adult children are living to help with family responsibilities and functions, including taking care of a pregnant daughter or grandchildren, helping with a family reunion, or getting old-age or medical support. This group is defined as “drifting elderly,” “trailing elderly,” “floating parents,” or “older migrants” and is collectively referred to as the drifting elderly in this study.

In general, this special floating population emerges to shorten the distance between generations and maintain tradition, primarily through providing/obtaining family-related support [1]. In China, it is common for multiple generations to live together in a big family, especially in rural areas [2]. The Chinese society has long benefited from this family structure which promotes intergenerational involvement in raising child-rearing [3] and care for elderly relatives [4, 5]. However, China's rapid urbanization has increased the number of young people who are living and working in cities, away from where they are formally registered [6]. This has resulted in the dissolution of many traditional family arrangements and has made it a challenge for floating youth to raise their children and support older

relatives in rural parts of China [7]. Growing floating families are experiencing difficulties with childcare, and elderly care is the result of inadequate system support as well [8], which also presents a challenge for policymakers [9]. These factors then have led to a rise in the number of the drifting elderly. This appears to solve both the problem of providing aid to left-behind elders and the issue of how floating families can effectively raise children in urban areas.

*1.2. Social Integration of the Drifting Elderly.* The drifting elderly face several specific challenges. Social resources that were present near their original homes, including interpersonal networks and social capital [10], are difficult to maintain because they are no longer nearby. At the same time, there may be significant differences in the language, living habits, or culture of the new location that make it a challenge for the drifting elderly to establish social relationships and access resources [11, 12]. In addition, because most drifting elderly lack a work unit, social group, or organization, they do not have a fixed identity [13]. As a result, they are easily marginalized and isolated, which affects their social participation, identity, and ability to integrate [14].

The social integration of a floating population relies on particular factors [15, 16], including obtaining opportunities for survival and development in inflowing areas, making fair use of public resources and social welfare, and participating in local social, political, economic, social, and cultural activities. Integration also requires the support of an effective social support network [17]. So far, a long-term puzzle for existing theories in explaining the social integration of the floating population is why it is hard for most of the initial floating behaviors to lead to the formation of a floating network and system [18].

Recent studies have indicated that the drifting elderly's social integration is most affected by their level of identity and social participation [19]. While the floating elderly are chronically less involved in social activities and unable to adapt to the inflowing environment, a lower sense of identity affects their happiness and self-worth and further reduces social participation. There are no current theories that explain the relationship between the social integration of the drifting elderly and their current social networks, including their neighborhoods.

*1.3. Social Integration and Neighborhood.* A floating population is always a vulnerable group in an inflowing area. The lack of human resources, including relatives, friends, and neighbors, makes life a challenge for this population in inflowing areas, which directly affects how they are treated and their ability to socially integrate [20]. This makes it difficult for them to feel a sense of belonging and social engagement, increases their perceived isolation, and reduces their number of social contacts [21, 22]. The social integration of the floating population is increasingly influenced by the communities in which they live [23]. A neighborhood is a key factor in the floating population's social integration because it can provide employment, build social trust, and offer social activities [24, 25].

A neighborhood is a dense, shared public space that is not independent but relatively autonomous and that is not fixed but relatively private. It is between the state and the family, belonging to a geopolitical community and occasionally to a family or spiritual community [26]. It is sustained by bonds of emotional and ethical solidarity, accepting universal moral standards of action and thought [27], and possesses specific demographic characteristics (cultural habits, identity, and leisure time) because its members live in close proximity. Related factors are closely linked and constantly cyclical, transforming what was originally a physical space into a meaningful public space [28]. Neighborhoods are often tied by common residence, language, and cultural practices and can satisfy higher individual needs such as belonging and love [29]. Prior studies have shown that social interaction and trust, neighborhood organization, and participation can influence the social integration of a floating population [30].

With rich formal and informal organizational lifestyles, neighborhoods can dilute the formal forces of governance that rely on neighborhoods to achieve their goals [31]. Such reliance elevates the neighborhood to an important status. Representing the interactions of space, population, and organization, the neighborhood is also a key factor that influences the generation and maintenance of community activities [32]. Community factors associated with neighborhood relations are essential for residents' attitudes toward the community. This correlates strongly with the attachment of floating populations [33], a determinant that facilitates social integration [34]. The neighborhood is also the main body of community governance in public affairs and is essential to successful community autonomy.

The drifting elderly are a special floating subpopulation that is not only drifting from rural to urban but is also dealing with the challenges of old age. The social integration of this group faces the specific vulnerability that results from being both old and physically frail [35] and factors that lead them to confine most of their activities to the neighborhood. As a result, neighborhood relations may be particularly important to the social integration of this population. The challenges faced by the floating elderly have attracted increasing interest from researchers but are still rarely studied. The current study was designed to investigate the social integration of the drifting elderly in China and explore how this population is influenced by neighborhoods in their new communities.

## 2. Methods

Between July 2016 and January 2020, our team conducted a series of studies on social adaptation, social support, and social integration of the drifting elderly in Shanghai using multiple rounds of snowball sampling as described previously [36, 37]. Based on the grounded theory approach (an additional with in-depth interview approach which is known to be more flexible and can support rigorous and transparent analysis better in some ways [38]), various drifting elderly were involved in our studies. Through this approach, their adaptation to urban areas was found to be challenging, and

their social support, especially emotional support, needed to be strengthened. These are important for their health. Meanwhile, these previous studies concluded that the social integration of the drifting elderly might be influenced by neighborhood-based relationships. Thus, the current study used the same approach to investigate the social integration of the drifting elderly in Shanghai and explore how they were influenced by neighborhoods in their new communities (Figure 1). Additionally, sentiment analysis will be conducted, as reported [39] in other studies, in the future.

**2.1. Study Design.** This study was based on grounded theory, one of the most widely used qualitative study methodologies in health research [40]. This brings researchers and their perspectives together by moving continuously between stories and analyses [41]. The drifting elderly in China are a newly emerging population that has never been supported by targeted policies. The education and comprehension of this population are so limited that many are unable to complete complex questionnaires, which hinders the use of traditional statistical analysis methods. However, grounded theory has relatively lower requirements for the study population. It is particularly valuable when the topic of interest has not been previously studied [42].

This study collected data through open discussion and observation of participants recruited by snowball sampling, as shown in Figure 1. All data were analyzed cumulatively by the study authors. Group discussions and expert-consulting methods were used to determine related themes and handle any disagreements. Coding, comparing memo writing, and immediate data analysis were involved (Figure 1). A final theoretical model was developed to explain the influence of neighborhood-based identity and social participation on the integration of the drifting elderly.

**2.2. Participants.** According to the definition of the drifting elderly used in this study and existing reports, the sampling criteria included having (1) more than one offspring in Shanghai, (2) no difficulty with communication, (3) never been affected by neurological or psychiatric disorders that should affect the results of the study, (4) willingness to discuss their lives, and (5) drifting in Shanghai  $\geq 2$  months before and living in Shanghai during the study. All the participants were informed of the purpose of the study and were involved in the project before providing their agreement.

The participants were recruited from three districts of Shanghai (Pudong, Xuhui, and Minhang) using snowball sampling. According to the data from the 7th National Census of China, resident population in Shanghai is 24.87 million, of which 10.47 million are permanent residents from other provinces and cities (nearly 2.42 million in Pudong, 0.34 million in Xuhui, and 1.24 million in Minhang). Among them, there are more than 0.63 million interprovincial floating elderly populations (over 60 years). Shanghai strives to promote the integration of the floating population into the community by expanding their orderly participation in the governance of the community where

they live [43]. However, specific unified law regulating the management of the floating population is scarce (it is only partially covered in the central and local legislation). Therefore, although Shanghai encourages the participation of the floating population in social construction, real management methods regarding the floating population (especially the elderly among them), such as social integration, still need to be studied more.

**2.3. Sampling.** The initial participants (5 were involved) in the first round of sampling were recommended by colleagues and friends of the researchers. Others were recruited from group locations such as gardens, elderly activity centers, and residential communities. Data in this study were the results of repeated observations on multiple occasions by trained researchers. After confirming that the potential participants met the inclusion criteria and obtaining their verbal informed consent, the purpose and process were explained to them. Related information was simultaneously transcribed by the researchers and voice recorded. The recorded data were then transcribed into printed material based on field notes written during related interviews. The transcripts were proofread and reviewed by the researchers to ensure the accuracy of the information collected. Coding, comparing, memo writing, and immediate data analysis were continuously carried out from this stage.

In the second round of theoretical sampling (7 participants were involved), the researchers focused on the influence of neighborhood relationships on the social integration of the drifting elderly. Representative data were extracted to guide participants through the follow-up sampling processes. By the end of the third round of sampling (6 participants involved), neighborhood-based identity and social participation had become two prominent categories that were the focus of subsequent assessments. The information was compiled when each interview was completed or at the end of the observation. All the data, including codes, categories, attributes, and dimensions, were continuously organized and categorized in a cumulative manner. The fourth round of sampling (4 participants were involved) focused on the impact of neighborhood-based identity and social participation on the social integration of the drifting elderly, ignoring any information considered irrelevant. As the sampling continued, the theoretical saturation of the model became apparent. The fifth round of sampling was then completed (2 participants involved).

#### 2.4. Analysis

**2.4.1. Open Coding.** To support subsequent steps, data analysis was initiated after the first two interviews were completed. An open-ended coding approach was adopted to maximize the information obtained. During this process, the researcher read and analyzed the survey transcripts, memos, and other documents word for word and sentence by sentence, implementing a combination of line-by-line and sentence-by-sentence coding. However, the integrated coding of sentences and even paragraphs with similar or

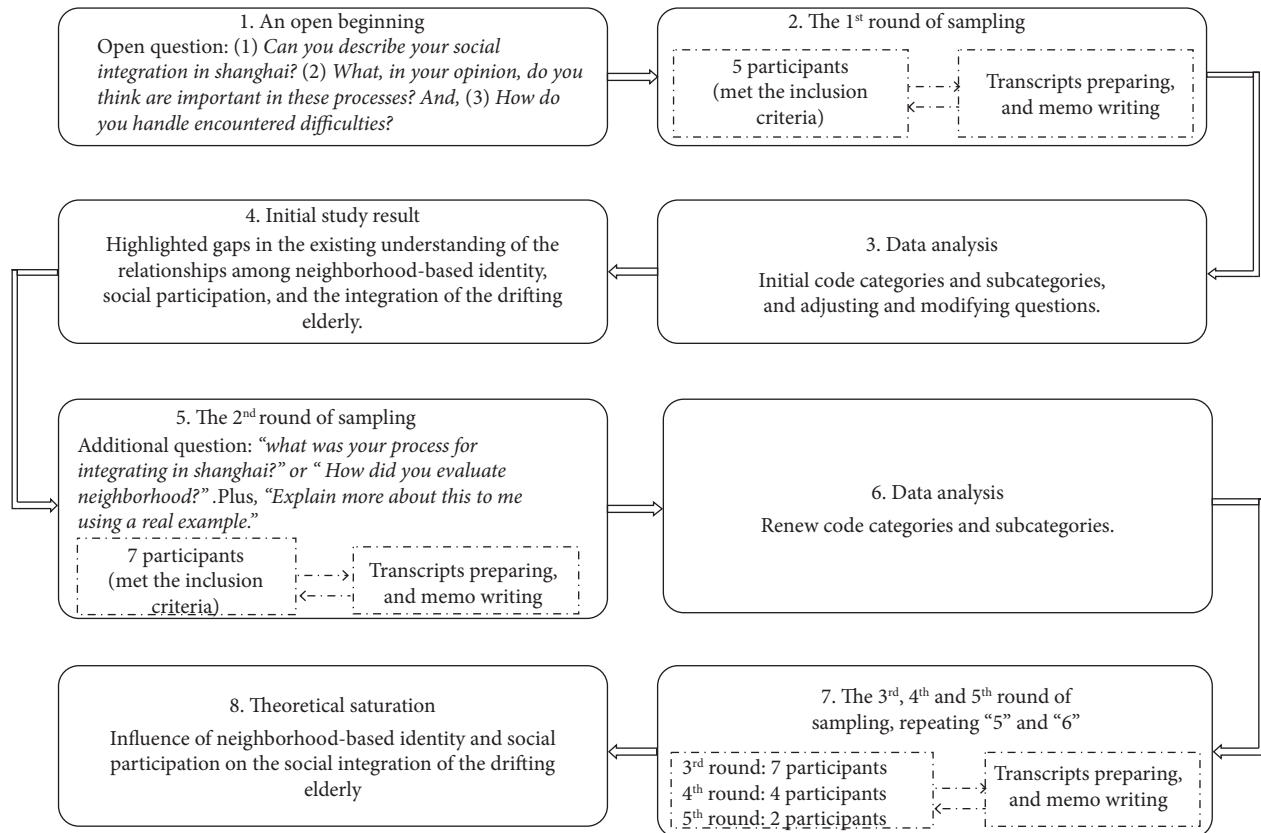


FIGURE 1: Study design.

related meanings was also allowed where appropriate. Sufficient attention was paid to some sensitive actions, events, and processes, especially to vivid and distinct words spoken during the interview, such as “can/can’t accept,” “(not) enjoy,” “(not) adapt,” and “(not) able to.” Some higher-level concepts were abstracted and labeled (as codes). The codes were revised, integrated, and even discarded as subsequent materials were added in, serving as a multilevel coding process. By analyzing the data step by step, the research content was gradually clarified, and the concepts and categories were presented. Throughout the coding process, the labels were repeatedly considered and compared.

**2.4.2. Focused Coding.** Open and focused coding were performed simultaneously. Codes in the first batch were initially grouped by meaning, and categories were generated. All open categorizations affected the subsequent sampling processes and guided related interviews and observations. After the initial sampling preferences were formed, the researchers focused more on the association between the social integration of the drifting elderly and neighborhood relations. A gradual focus on identity and social participation was also formed. In the fourth and fifth rounds of sampling, some of the outlines and guidelines were more clearly oriented by categories, attributes, and dimensions. A preliminary theoretical model for the influence of neighborhood-based identity and social participation on the integration of the drifting elderly was presented. Related properties and

characteristics were characterized by continuously reinforcing certain properties and dimensions, as well as names and categories, during the course of the study. After the fourth round of the survey, the theoretical model for neighborhood-based identity and social participation that affects the integration of the drifting elderly and its various categories, attributes, and dimensions was presented. To avoid premature conclusions that could compromise the objectivity of the study, discussion and finalization were reserved until the fifth round of interviews and observations.

### 3. Results

Five rounds of data collection and analyses were conducted in a continuous crossover sequence. Until theoretical saturation, a total of 24 participants were involved (Table 1). To ensure data confidentiality, all participants were given an anonymized reference code (including letters and numbers). The findings indicated that the social integration of the drifting elderly was influenced by neighborhood-based identity and social participation (Figure 2).

#### 3.1. Perceived Social Integration of the Drifting Elderly.

The drifting elderly had differing levels of understanding and perceptions of their social integration. This population came from different outflowing areas and was distributed differently in inflowing society. The differences in their perceptions of social integration were the result of disparities in

TABLE 1: Demographics of the study participants.

	Number	Percentage (%)
Age (years)		
50–59	7	29.2
60–69	9	37.5
70–79	6	25.0
≥80	2	8.3
Gender		
Female	14	58.3
Male	10	41.7
Marital status		
Single	0	0
Married	20	83.3
Widowed	3	12.5
Divorced	1	4.2
Education (years)		
≤6	8	33.3
7–9	12	50.0
≥10	4	16.7

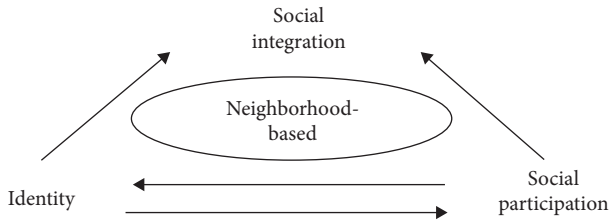


FIGURE 2: Theoretical framework.

their real-life encounters, feelings, cognitive abilities, and humanistic backgrounds. Many of the drifting elderly reported various degrees of “hostility,” “indifference,” “rejection,” or “alienation.” After further consideration, some of these perceptions were shown to result from specific public policies relating to pension, insurance, retirement, and community care. Some perceptions were sourced from local encounters with public officials, community workers, or neighbors.

I feel that they (residents of the inflowing areas) treat us in alienation. We are non-locals who understand their local language little. Sometimes we are treated differently by local policies or rules as well. When encountering these situations, I will feel uncomfortable. For example, lots of locals, including neighbors and others, speak their own language as usual. Without me, they would immediately communicate with their fellows in the local language, which make me feel that I am redundant. (M-TJH-2)

It is important to note that the drifting elderly had no desire to become locals and believed that this was an unrealistic desire. As a result, many of the drifting elderly never pursued institutional identity change (relating to the Hukou system, which refers to the legal system under which the government registers and manages the basic information, legal addresses, and marital status of the population within their jurisdiction), and few intended to give up their traditional characteristics, such as food habits and speech patterns, to become locals.

Many also specified that they did not want to be treated like a local but did think that being treated fairly and respectfully would help their social integration.

I’m not a Shanghainese, and I never expect to be one. It is unrealistic. So why should I learn to be them? I think my dress is okay, tidy and pretty. My ways of eating, talking, and working are okay, too. If others thought it’s okay as well. It will be a good feeling of better social integration. (F-ZXQ-17)

Thus, this group of the drifting elderly was older people who wanted to live as nonlocals in the inflowing society. Their perceptions of social integration were more dependent on their practical lives and feelings. They were willing to accept the new social environment and different life patterns in the inflowing areas but also hoped that their ways of living could be accommodated. The drifting elderly wanted to live normally in the new social environment, including having opportunities to participate in social events, building basic interpersonal networks, and accessing social support. A positive perception of social integration was often based on their beliefs about whether their social engagements were going well. Negative experiences were always associated with limited social integration.

I think, as long as I can live here in a practical way, it is okay. Such as, I can behave like as locals here. I can have some social resources, such as friends, like most locals. But if relatively normal things for the locals become difficult for me, I will feel uncomfortable. (F-LXJ-5)

Many participants specifically emphasized the importance of neighborhood relationships to their successful social integration. Their main activities tended to be located within the neighborhoods. The main social resources they accessed were also largely restricted to neighborhoods. “A relative afar is less important than a close neighbor” was repeatedly mentioned by the participants. The importance of neighborhood relationships for the drifting elderly was obvious. Their perceived social integration usually stemmed more from their interactions within the neighborhood, including whether they were “treated differently,” “discriminated against,” “welcomed,” or “accepted,” and this influenced their willingness to develop new social networks in the inflowing areas.

I don’t have a large range of activities. Thus, people who are too far away from me can affect me little. It is the neighborhood relations that are important to me. We live in the same space. We meet frequently. If we don’t welcome each other. How can I integrate into the local society? (M-WJY-11)

The drifting elderly’s perceptions of social integration were dependent on their feelings about their social life, in which neighborhood relationships played a prominent role.

3.2. *Neighborhood Relationships and Social Integration of the Drifting Elderly.* Neighborhood relationships were critical for the social integration of the drifting elderly in this study.

Most of these relationships developed in the inflowing areas and were concentrated among neighbors and/or friends, many of whom were also neighbors. The participants felt that neighbors were more likely to interact with one another as a result of “human feelings.” The Chinese society was considered a “human society” for these participants, in which there are always “human feelings” when people meet. Although the drifting elderly were nonlocals, they had greater feelings of familiarity with their neighbors than with others. Thus, neighborhood relationships became even more important for their perceptions of social integration.

Every day, when I send my granddaughter to go to school, they also go downstairs. At first, we smiled at each other. Living in the same building, interaction is unavoidable. After all, we are neighbors. The general human feelings are in need. Later on, there would be some words of greeting. Gradually, we know each other. When we are not in a hurry, we can also chat a little more. (F-ZXF-1)

Neighbors who were also friends were especially important for the drifting elderly. Many participants started their initial neighborhood-based interactions with “fellow villagers” who had similar accents. With the help of these neighbors, the drifting elderly in this study were able to get news and anecdotes about their neighborhoods. These interactions also taught them more about social resources, including neighbors, agencies, and necessary services. Most of the interactions between neighbors took place outdoors and were accompanied by activities, such as taking children out, grocery shopping, or walking.

She told me lots of things. She also introduced me to a lot of people. Gradually, I got to know many neighbors. We meet each other when we are in and out. We share where to buy cheap food, and how to wash clothes clean. We also share our food privately. (F-CXL-18)

Most of the drifting elderly in this study engaged in activities around their homes in inflowing areas, which helped them develop neighborhood relationships. The drifting elderly and their neighbors helped one another through experience and/or in-kind exchanges. This allowed them to form certain social support relationships, enhance their experiences, and facilitate their social integration. In related processes, good neighborhood relationships had a positive social impact on the drifting elderly.

The neighbor who lives next door is very kind. She is always smiling every time we meet. She even praised my spirit, strength, and good fortune. It was my neighbor who led me to the vegetable market when I first came here. I used to be reluctant to come here as a drifting elderly. I was afraid that people would dislike me as an old non-local woman. But now I don’t resist anymore. I feel I am well socially integrated here. (F-WXY-16)

Good neighborhood relationships between the drifting elderly and their neighbors also gave them a mutual

understanding of habits and preferences and the ease or difficulty each had in relating to others. This gave the drifting elderly opportunities to participate in various neighborhood-based activities, including lectures and performances, and enhanced the cohesion between the drifting elderly and residents of the same communities, defined using words like “solidarity” or “mutual aid.” Good neighborhood relationships encouraged the drifting elderly to establish their social networks. This allowed them to overcome some negative rejection and better integrate into the community, helping the drifting elderly change their feelings about identity and enhance their sense of belonging.

At first, I always felt uncomfortable as a non-local. Then, I got to know more neighbors with whom we can help each other with dispelling our emotions and finding ideas when we encountered difficulties. Gradually, I got used to it. Although I know I’m a non-local, I don’t feel so uncomfortable anymore. (M-SJD-13)

Neighborhood relationships were important for the social integration of the drifting elderly, helping them establish effective social support networks by strengthening their identity perceptions and social participation.

*3.3. Social Participation and Social Integration of the Drifting Elderly.* There were differences in the level and type of social participation among the drifting elderly in this study. Many participants were indifferent to participating in formal social activities (official activities organized by the community or higher levels of government) but were enthusiastic about participating in neighborhood-based activities such as chess games and pet games. The drifting elderly tended to act based on their perception of whether the related social activity could benefit them, including whether it was “fun,” “interesting,” or “useful.” Some social participation was unconsciously, however, occurring because they “just had time,” “just encountered,” or were trying to “kill some boring time.”

I never deliberately take part in some activities. Instead, if I caught up and my time permitting, I would like to participate. I can kill some boring time with a few familiar neighbors in related processes. Occasionally, I can also receive a small gift, such as toothpaste, towels, soap, etc. (M-LJY-4)

The importance of social participation for the social integration of the drifting elderly was often tied to feelings of the “privilege.” Some participants felt that activities should be primarily enjoyed by residents of the inflowing areas and that they were not sure whether they had the right to participate. This attitude about social participation had an important impact on the drifting elderly’s feelings about whether they were treated fairly and accepted equally, which formed the basis for their effective social integration.

I am always confused. I always hear people talk about some activities. But I rarely participate. I believe it is

prepared for the locals. I am a non-local. What does it have to do with me? (M-QZG-12)

The drifting elderly's feelings about their right to participate in social events were directly related to how they perceived locals. Neighbors were the most common reference group. The drifting elderly formed their feelings by participating in social activities, including whether they were welcomed, had equal access to certain opportunities and power, and were trusted and cared for by others. Positive feelings fostered more trust in the inflowing society. Related processes also helped the inflowing society understand, prepare for, and maintain a more open and tolerant attitude toward the drifting elderly.

I often saw this dance team dancing in the square. But I was too embarrassed to join in then. So, I just followed behind and looked. Occasionally, one of my neighbors upstairs recognized me and asked me to join them. She introduced me to the other dancers. The person in charge said, she never expected drifting elderly like me would also willing to join them. Since we had the same hobby. We were all welcomed. It makes me feel so good that the locals are not so discriminatory against us non-locals. Lots of the neighborhood-based activities are not the privilege of the locals. (F-LXY-15)

Active social participation allowed the drifting elderly to connect with more locals and enhance their understanding of the inflowing society. Since this largely occurred in neighborhoods, it was easy for them to establish long-term interactions with their neighbors and strengthen their experience in the inflowing society. Thus, extensive neighborhood-based social participation is the most direct way for the drifting elderly to integrate into the inflowing society. At the same time, it is also important for the inflowing society to interact with the drifting elderly. The process of participation blurred the boundaries between the drifting elderly and locals by helping them form new social connections.

Whether locals or non-locals, who cares! Although some locals still love to talk to locals. But that's because they are familiar with each other. When I met my familiar neighbors, we were able to play together with great enthusiasm as well. Many of the unfamiliar neighbors can talk to each other in the process of introducing each other. From then on, we can also nod and talk to each other and become acquaintances. (F-NCM-20)

Neighborhood-based social participation was able to help the drifting elderly interact with the inflowing society, access more human resources, form social relationships with the local society, and establish new social networks.

*3.4. Identity and Social Integration of the Drifting Elderly.* In this study, the drifting elderly's perceptions of identity were summarized into two categories, formal and informal.

Formal identity was primarily related to institutional identity, including having specific documents, such as ID cards and residence permits, required for the household registration system. There were also symbols related to property and goods, such as vehicles and other material possessions. Most drifting elderly believed that the formal identity was difficult to change and accepted heterogeneity. The informal identity was primarily related to the organizational culture and included birthplace, upbringing, customs, and traditions. This also involved details of daily life and personal perceptions, such as pet-keeping attitudes, daily dress choices, and political viewpoints. The informal identity was thus more varied and more directly related to the lives of the drifting elderly. Thus, participants were more interested in having informal identities that were similar to those of locals.

We are born non-locals. It is unchangeable. But we can seek a better quality of life and enjoy the same resources as the locals. I can't change my ID card, but I can change my clothes into something decent and clean. I can sit in the park and play cards with my neighbors. How do I look different from the locals? So, don't treat us as non-locals and don't look down on us. This is important. (F-HHP-8)

The identity perceived by many drifting elderly participants was related to their access to opportunities. Participants needed to consider their feelings of identity in terms of their ease of living. Their access to social participation and public resources played important roles in their identity in this study. The perceptions of identity homogeneity among the drifting elderly were not so much about eliminating differences in institutional identity as about dismantling the socioeconomic and cultural barriers to identity. Most participants felt that locals had natural advantages over the drifting elderly, including a more stable source of income, a closer connection to local culture, and easier interactions with locals. In contrast, the drifting elderly had little relevant support because they had left their traditional area of residence. This identity heterogeneity gave them a sense of insecurity.

I do not dare to say that we are the same as the locals. The locals were born and raised here. Their relations are here. They are familiar with the locals. Their identity advantage is there. Look at me again, I left my hometown. I have no relatives here. I even know a few places here. It is difficult for me to do anything. How can I be the same as the locals? (M-ZH-7)

As a result, many of the drifting elderly narrowed down their activities to the communities in which they lived, which increased the importance of neighborhood for their sense of identity. The participants found that their interactions with their neighbors could facilitate their interactions with more locals. This enhanced the mutual understanding between the drifting elderly and locals and alleviated or reduced certain prejudices.

Although I often stay at home, it is inevitable for me to go out shopping, walking or something. When I go out, I can meet many neighbors, both local and non-local. Although I know there are different, then again, they are also neighbors. We all live in a neighborhood that can bring me some kind of identity homogeneity. (F-TKX-9)

Neighborhood-based social identity created a sense of homogeneity for the drifting elderly, mainly through living in a common community. The cultural tradition of friendliness among neighbors also helped dissolve the heterogeneity of the drifting elderly. Participants felt that being a neighbor is a special identity that implies friendship, tolerance, and mutual help. This made it easier for the drifting elderly to establish a positive sense of identity in neighborhoods.

We are all neighbors. Nobody is more special than the others. We are all living here. We are similar. Many outside people who live in villas and mansions might be special to us. We may not be able to afford to compare. But here, we are the same. (M-YJJ-21)

Neighborhood-based identity helped eliminate some of the heterogeneity among the drifting elderly. Thus, neighborhood relationships were considered necessary for the social integration of the drifting elderly in this study.

#### 4. Discussion

In China, passive mobility, represented by the drifting elderly and children, is becoming a norm [44]. Unfavorable daily life experiences, including bad neighborhood relationships and barriers to social participation and identity (the focus of the current study), often hurt the drifting elderly's social integration. This, together with the relatively poor human resources possessed by this population, contributes to their negative feelings in the inflowing society. Neighborhood relationships and social participation directly affect the social network of the drifting elderly and impact their social feelings and attitudes about their identity. This further influences their integration patterns, processes, and results. Thus, neighborhood relationships are considered important links in the social integration of the drifting elderly in this study.

Most existing studies suggest that members of the floating population enter the inflowing areas for some utilitarian purpose and actively want to become locals [45]. However, the current study found that the drifting elderly may be a special floating population who does not want to become residents of inflowing areas. While their emergence is the result of social network reorganization, formed by society, families, and individuals [46], they do not want to make fundamental adjustments to their inherent social attributes. Therefore, this study argues that social integration management of the drifting elderly should not put as much emphasis on helping them become locals. Helping this population develop positive neighborhood relationships and promote neighborhood-based social participation and

identity is also important. This study provides some different insights into the general governance of the floating population's localization [47, 48]. The results indicate that governance of the drifting elderly should not be trapped by the difficulties of their localization. Making this population an integral part of the inflowing society and creating opportunities for them to participate with a reasonable identity are more practical. In particular, effective strategies should focus on reducing barriers to effective interactions and helping the drifting elderly establish paths and form necessary social networks.

It should be noted that the drifting elderly are not good at developing social connections in inflowing areas, which highlights the importance of neighborhood relationships. In general, the activities of the drifting elderly are limited in inflowing areas. Positive neighborhood relationships can bring a sense of belonging to the floating population and facilitate their social integration [49]. The current study found that neighborhood relationships are also important for the drifting elderly. Most participants interacted with the inflowing society through neighborhood relationships which helped boost the drifting elderly's enthusiasm for participating in social activities. These findings suggest that more attention should be paid to helping the drifting elderly establish neighborhood relationships in inflowing areas. This will help enhance their integration and increase the understanding between the drifting elderly and their social environments. Drifting elderly management should also consider neighborhood-based characteristics (including social participation and interactions) and attitudes toward inflowing areas, which aid their social integration. As other studies on floating populations have reported, neighborhood-based identity, status and power, and equal opportunity to participate in various community activities can satisfy the spiritual needs of the floating population [50, 51]. Through intergroup communication and mutual support [52], the drifting elderly are more likely to interact with their neighbors, establish initial social networks, and develop new social patterns. This is also important for their positive perception of social status.

Social integration of the drifting elderly is influenced by their identity and social participation [53]. The drifting elderly's social participation is helpful for them to interact effectively with the inflowing society and access local social, economic, cultural, and other human resources. This can also help them form social relationships with the inflowing society and establish new social networks and emotional support processes. Neighborhood-based social participation is an important path for the drifting elderly to rebuild their social support network, which can help them access various tangible or intangible local resources. It was reported that the floating population can obtain various kinds of support in informal relationships [54]. Neighborhood-based social interactions in this study were focused on obtaining tools, information, and emotional support, including local cultural resources. Related factors were considered critical for building trust and ensuring reciprocity in their neighborhoods [55]. As shown here, there was a lack of local cultural resources among the drifting elderly and a very limited



ability to participate in local activities. Thus, it is important to promote neighborhood-based relationship building for this population. Steps should be taken to reduce any barriers to participating in neighborhood social events and expand access to various community activities, creating an accepting atmosphere for this group of the floating elderly. The scope of community services offered by neighborhoods should also be widened to create more opportunities for the drifting elderly to participate and provide them with a greater sense of social integration. These are essential for helping the drifting elderly participate in various social events and enhance their social integration.

The identity of the drifting elderly is influenced by stereotypes, which are prevalent throughout the floating population's social integration processes [56]. As shown here, the identity of the drifting elderly was influenced by both formal institutional constraints and informal human factors. As with the other floating population [57], "political belonging" remains an insurmountable institutional obstacle for the drifting elderly to obtain identity homogeneity. Differences in documents such as ID cards and residence permits are closely linked to the identity heterogeneity of the drifting elderly and can create a natural sense of identity rejection. Meanwhile, the residents of inflowing areas exert inevitable identity pressure on the drifting elderly and other nonlocals because they have inherently more economic and cultural social resources. By leaving outflowing areas, the drifting elderly find it hard to maintain their livelihood, which reduces their confidence in their own identity. As a result, most drifting elderly can only retreat to the community, which emphasizes the importance of neighborhood relationships for their social integration. This study argues that the drifting elderly need to establish their initial identity through building neighborhood relationships. By creating a homogeneous sense of identity [58], such a neighborhood-based identity can provide feelings of belonging within the inflowing society. This not only further improves their social participation but also reduces their subjective interpersonal daily pressure, which is essential for increasing their social integration.

## 5. Conclusion

This qualitative study based on grounded theory found that neighborhood-based identity and social participation are critical for the effective social integration of the drifting elderly. This directly affects their social feelings, integrations, and networks. The findings suggest that governance of the drifting elderly's social integration should be focused on creating opportunities for them to participate in neighborhood-based social activities with a reasonable identity. This will help guide the drifting elderly to widely participate in the inflowing society and improve their social integration.

## Data Availability

The data used to support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

## Consent

All study participants provided informed consent.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## Authors' Contributions

All the authors equally contributed to this study and were thoroughly familiar with the primary data. All the authors have read the complete manuscript and approved the submission of the paper.

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