

Bridging the Policy–Practice Gap: Framing Strategies and Policy Translation in Government Health Communication on Weight Management in China

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DOI: 10.65285/HSS.V2I3.002

Abstract: As obesity and overweight have become major public health concerns, governments increasingly use digital platforms to promote preventive health policies. However, less is known about how policy objectives are translated into everyday health practices through government social media. Drawing on framing theory and the concept of policy translation, this study examines the “Science-Based Weight Loss Together” column published on the official WeChat account Healthy China.

Using content analysis, 105 articles published between September 2021 and March 2026 were analyzed in terms of thematic structure, headline strategies, communication frames, and audience engagement. The findings identify a three-stage framing process consisting of risk alerts, knowledge explanation, and behavioral guidance. Together, these frames facilitate the transformation of institutional primary policy objectives into practical health recommendations. Audience engagement was highest for content with strong personal relevance and practical utility, and increased during periods of heightened policy attention.

The study extends framing research by conceptualising framing not only as a mechanism of meaning construction but also as a mechanism of policy translation. It further demonstrates how government social media contribute to preventive health governance by embedding policy objectives within everyday communication and behavioral practices.

Key words: Health Communication; Government Social Media; Framing Theory; Policy Translation; Weight Management; Communication Effectiveness

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Obesity has become one of the most pressing public health challenges globally and in China. While policy initiatives increasingly emphasize preventive health governance, translating primary policy objectives into sustained behavioral change remains difficult.

Government social media have emerged as key intermediaries between policy design and public implementation. Yet existing research has paid limited attention to how these platforms transform institutional objectives into actionable everyday practices.

1.2 Research Problem

Existing research has primarily examined communication outcomes, public engagement, and health information

dissemination. Less attention has been paid to the communicative processes through which policy objectives are transformed into practical behavioral guidance. This gap is particularly relevant in the context of routine health governance, where long-term behavioral change constitutes the primary policy objective.

Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What communication frames are employed in the “Science-Based Weight Loss Together” column?

RQ2: How do different framing strategies relate to audience engagement and communication outcomes?

RQ3: How does government social media facilitate the translation of public health policy into everyday behavioral guidance?

1.3 Research Significance

By focusing on policy translation in routine health communication, this study contributes to two strands of literature. First, it extends framing research beyond issue interpretation to the implementation of public policy. Second, it advances understanding of how government social media function as governance infrastructures that shape everyday health practices.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Framing Theory

Framing theory explains how communicators construct meaning by selecting and emphasizing particular aspects of reality. Originating from Goffman’s (1974) analysis of interpretive frameworks and further developed by Entman (1993), framing is understood as a process through which issues are defined, interpreted, and made salient to audiences. Rather than merely transmitting information, framing shapes how individuals understand social problems and evaluate appropriate responses.

Previous studies have shown that framing influences public attention, risk perception, and behavioral decision-making across a range of policy domains (Entman 1993). In the Chinese communication context, framing has also been widely used to explain how media construct social meanings and guide public understanding of policy issues (Sun 2010).

In health communication, framing theory has been applied extensively to health promotion and risk communication. However, its application to routine health governance remains relatively limited. As weight management requires sustained behavioral adjustment, framing theory provides a useful perspective for examining how policy objectives are translated into everyday health practices.

2.2 Health Communication and behavioral Change

Health communication research has evolved from a focus on information dissemination to a broader concern with behavioral change and public engagement. Early scholarship emphasised the role of communication in promoting health awareness and supporting informed decision-making (Kreps and Thornton 1992). More recent studies have highlighted the importance of translating health knowledge into practical guidance that individuals can incorporate into everyday routines (Hu 2012; Yu 2013).

This challenge is particularly evident in weight management. Although public awareness of obesity-related risks has increased, knowledge alone does not necessarily lead to healthier behaviours. Effective health communication therefore requires not only scientific accuracy but also relevance, accessibility, and practical applicability. Communication becomes most effective when individuals are able to connect health recommendations with their own daily experiences and behavioral choices.

2.3 Government Social Media and Public Health Governance

Digital platforms have become increasingly important infrastructures for public communication and governance. Government social media are now used not only to disseminate information but also to promote policy initiatives, facilitate public engagement, and support behavioral interventions (Mergel 2013). In the field of health communication,

social media platforms provide opportunities for continuous interaction, personalized communication, and broader audience reach (Moorhead et al. 2013).

In China, government-operated social media accounts have become significant channels for public health communication. Previous studies suggest that official digital platforms can enhance the accessibility and effectiveness of health information while strengthening public trust in health campaigns (Kuang and Wu 2019; Zhong et al. 2018). However, public health policies are often communicated through technical and institutional language that may limit public understanding.

2.4 Policy Translation in Digital Health Communication

Policy translation refers to the process through which institutional objectives are transformed into forms that can be understood, adapted, and implemented by target audiences (Freeman 2009). Rather than viewing policy implementation as a linear process, policy translation highlights how policy ideas are interpreted, reconstructed, and embedded within specific social contexts.

In public health governance, policy success depends on whether policy recommendations are incorporated into everyday behaviours. Government social media facilitate this process by translating policy objectives into practical guidance that aligns with citizens' everyday concerns.

Despite its relevance, policy translation remains underexplored in health communication research, which has largely focused on communication effects and audience engagement. To address this gap, this study integrates framing theory with the concept of policy translation. It proposes that government social media facilitate the transformation of primary policy objectives into everyday health practices through three interrelated frames: Risk Alert, Knowledge Explanation, and behavioral Guidance. These frames constitute the analytical framework for examining the communication strategies of the "Science-Based Weight Loss Together" column.

3. Methods

3.1 Data Collection and Sample Selection

This study examines the "Science-Based Weight Loss Together" column published on the official WeChat account Healthy China, operated by China's National Health Commission. Healthy China is a major government-operated health communication account in China.

All articles published under the column between September 6, 2021, and March 19, 2026, were systematically collected. After screening and data cleaning, a total of 105 articles were retained for analysis.

For each article, publication information, textual content, and publicly available engagement indicators were collected. Because WeChat reports engagement metrics using threshold values (e.g., '100,000+ views'), the analysis relies on publicly displayed figures.

3.2 Research Method

Content analysis was employed to examine thematic patterns, headline strategies, communication frames, and audience engagement. Integrating textual analysis with engagement indicators enables an assessment of both message construction and communication performance.

3.3 Coding Dimensions and Operational Definitions

To ensure systematic analysis, four coding dimensions were developed: thematic category, headline strategy, communication frame, and communication effectiveness.

Thematic categories included dietary management, physical activity, myth debunking, weight assessment, weight-loss strategies, special-population guidance, seasonal guidance, and other topics. Headline strategies were coded as interrogative/rhetorical, exclamatory, myth-debunking Q&A, or declarative. Communication frames were classified into three categories: Risk Alert, Knowledge Explanation, and Behavioral Guidance. Communication effectiveness was

measured using publicly available engagement indicators, including page views, likes, shares, recommendations, and comments.

4. Results

4.1 Thematic Structure: Diet, Physical Activity, and Myth Debunking

The thematic distribution indicates that dietary management, physical activity, and myth debunking constitute the dominant content categories of the “Science-Based Weight Loss Together” column. Of the 105 sampled articles, 27 focused on dietary management, 20 on physical activity, and 18 on myth debunking, accounting for 61.9% of the total sample. Communication is primarily organised around issues that audiences encounter in everyday health management.

4.2 Headline Strategies: Audience-Oriented Communication

Question-based headlines were the most common strategy, accounting for 41.0% of the sample, followed by declarative (23.8%), exclamatory/emphasis-oriented (18.1%), and myth-debunking Q&A headlines (17.1%). However, exclamatory headlines generated the highest average readership (72,684 views), suggesting that messages emphasizing urgency or practical value attracted greater audience attention.

4.3 Framing as a Mechanism of Policy Translation

Analysis reveals a recurrent three-stage framing structure composed of risk alerts, knowledge explanation, and behavioral guidance. Together, these frames constitute the primary mechanism through which policy messages are translated into practical health recommendations.

The risk-alert frame highlights the health consequences of obesity and warns against unhealthy weight-loss practices, establishing the necessity of scientific weight management. The knowledge-explanation frame translates technical concepts such as BMI, body fat percentage, and metabolic rate into accessible language, thereby improving health literacy. The behavioral-guidance frame provides actionable recommendations concerning diet, exercise, sleep, and habit formation.

Rather than functioning independently, these three frames form a sequential translation pathway through which policy objectives are transformed into individual behavioral recommendations.

4.4 Communication Outcomes During Periods of Policy Salience

A notable peak occurred in March 2025, when 14 articles generated an average readership of 69,642.9 views, accompanied by elevated levels of likes, shares, and comments. This period coincided with the launch of the National Weight Management Initiative, indicating a close association between policy attention and communication visibility.

4.5 Differences in Audience Engagement Across Content Categories

Substantial variation was observed across content categories. Weight-assessment articles recorded the highest average readership (81,800 views), while dietary-management content achieved the highest average number of shares (7,755.5). Physical-activity and myth-debunking articles generated comparatively lower but relatively stable engagement levels.

5. Discussion

5.1 Framing as Policy Translation

The findings extend framing theory by demonstrating that framing operates not only as a mechanism of meaning construction but also as a mechanism of policy translation. Through risk alerts, knowledge explanations, and behavioral guidance, framing creates a pathway through which institutional objectives are transformed into everyday health practices.

5.2 Government Social Media as Governance Infrastructure

The findings suggest that government social media function not only as information channels but also as infrastructures of routine health governance, embedding primary policy objectives within everyday communication practices.

5.3 Policy Salience and Communication Effectiveness

The relationship between policy salience and communication performance further demonstrates the importance of contextual factors in digital health communication. Audience engagement increased significantly during periods of heightened policy attention, particularly following the launch of the National Weight Management Initiative in 2025.

This finding suggests that communication effectiveness is shaped not only by message characteristics but also by broader policy environments.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Main Conclusion

This study examined how government social media facilitate the translation of public health policy into everyday behavioral guidance through the case of the Science-Based Weight Loss Together column on the official WeChat account Healthy China. This study demonstrates that government social media contribute to public health governance not only by disseminating information but also by translating policy objectives into everyday behavioral practices. By integrating framing theory with policy translation, the study highlights the communicative mechanisms through which public health policies become actionable in daily life.

6.2 Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged.

First, the analysis focuses on a single government WeChat column and therefore cannot capture the broader ecology of digital health communication across platforms.

Second, the study relies on content analysis and engagement indicators and therefore cannot directly assess audience interpretation or behavioral outcomes.

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