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Using the Baidu Index to Understand the Public Online Interest Towards Life Education in China

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Abstract: This study aims to depict and analyse the online public attention toward "Life Education" in China. Building on an intuitive description of the data, it discusses and interprets the underlying socio-cultural dynamics, thereby filling the empirical gap in big data-based research in this field and providing data-driven support for curriculum development and education policymaking. This study adopted a qualitative research approach. Data were collected through the official Baidu Index interface, using "Life Education" as the core search term and a dataset spanning

14 years (2011–2025). Relevant data were retrieved for the three core modules: Trend Research, Demand Map, and Demographic Portrait. The search trends reveal a distinct evolutionary trajectory of public attention: a low baseline period from 2011 to 2019 with a search volume between 200 and 400, a historical peak in mid-2020 where search volume exceeded 1000, a 150% increase from the pre-pandemic average, and a stabilized plateau from 2021 to 2025 with a search volume between 400 and 600, significantly higher than pre-2020 levels. The demand structure presents a hierarchical system from safety education to philosophical reflection, with emerging demands for technology-enabled Life Education. Demographically, females account for 64.22% of searches, and the 30–39 age group dominates with 35% of the total. Geographically, attention is concentrated in economically developed regions such as East China and South China. Life Education in China has transitioned from being an event-driven reactive issue to a normalised societal educational demand. This evolution is marked by deepening layers of public need, interdisciplinary integration, and a growing contemporary expectation for technology-enabled approaches. Nevertheless, significant disparities persist across geographical regions, age groups, and genders. Consequently, the Chinese government and the education sector need to commit to constructing a life education system that is regularised, all-encompassing, targeted, and integrated with technology.

Keywords: Baidu Index, Data mining, Existential psychology, Life Education, Socio-cultural Dynamics.

Introduction

In the contemporary Chinese context, "Life Education" has evolved from a marginal concept into a prominent practical issue. Developed through critical reflection on purely utilitarian and exam-oriented education models, China's Life Education is an integrated concept encompassing mental health, meaning of life, death education, resilience, and value formation (Frankl, 1984; Walters, 2004; Feng, 2006). Its core mission is to guide individuals in recognizing the value of life (Noddings, 1984), coping with existential dilemmas, and constructing meaning, essentially addressing the growing existential psychological distress, such as meaninglessness, anxiety about freedom, unconscious fear of death (Heidegger, 1962), and the weight of responsibility (Yalom, 1980), experienced by individuals in the modern context. At a deeper level, Life Education is fundamentally an existential practice that guides individuals to confront the conditions of life and, through autonomous choice, responsibility, and action, to live a unique, authentic, and meaningful existence. Although scholarly discourse on the theoretical construction and school practice of Life Education is rich, there is a scarcity of long-term, continuous observations using big data on its cognitive form, demand structure, and evolutionary trajectory in the public sphere.

In the era of big data, digital traces have become a new pathway for revealing public attention to issues and policy preferences. According to the 56th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China released by the China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC), as of June 30, 2025, the number of internet users in China reached 1.123 billion, with an internet penetration rate of

79.7%. Among them, the number of search engine users reached 777 million, accounting for 69.2% of the total internet users (CNNIC, 2025). The internet and big data technologies, while reshaping public life, have enabled the collection and analysis of digital footprints. Consequently, the massive behavioural data in cyberspace provides a feasible path for effectively measuring attention to Life Education. Public information-seeking behaviour is not passive reception but a key window into understanding their intrinsic concerns, cognitive structures, and demand preferences (Savolainen, 1995; Wilson, 1999). Baidu Index, as the data analysis platform for China's dominant search engine, offers a unique lens. Its aggregation of billions of search queries allows for real-time tracking of public interest in core concepts, serving as an effective tool for glimpsing collective consciousness and social mentality (Liu et al., 2019).

Utilising big data analysis to uncover the cognitive forms, demand structures, and evolutionary trajectories of life education in the public sphere also serves as a practical anchor in the post-pandemic context. The pandemic has intensified public reflections on life values, death anxiety, and mental health, transforming life education from a marginal academic topic into a pressing social concern. While traditional survey methods hold value, they suffer from inherent limitations such as time lags and social desirability bias. In contrast, online search queries stand as more immediate, honest, and large-scale indicators of public sentiment. Therefore, analysing these digital traces is crucial for capturing the real-time dynamics of social attention to life education in contemporary China.

To address the gaps in the current literature, this study aims to answer three core questions through an in-depth analysis of Baidu Index data for "Life Education" from January 1, 2011, to October 1, 2025: (1) What long-term trends and phased characteristics does public online attention to Life Education exhibit? What core topics and foci of interest are revealed by the demand map constructed through the public's related search behaviours? (2) What structural characteristics does the population focusing on Life Education show in terms of geographical, age, and gender dimensions? (3) By answering these questions, this study aims to supplement the academic discussion on Life Education with empirical evidence and provide scientific reference for related curriculum design, policy formulation, and public communication (UNESCO, 2017).

Materials and Methods

Materials

The core data for this study comes from the Baidu Index platform (<https://index.baidu.com/>). As the world's largest Chinese-language search engine, Baidu is the most widely used search platform in China. Its user base, which broadly represents Chinese netizens across ages and regions, provides a comprehensive and objective reflection of public search behaviour and interests. Data from this platform have been widely validated in academic research as reliable indicators of Chinese public attention (Meng & Zhao, 2019; Wang et al., 2021). Baidu Index provides three core modules:

Trend Research, Demand Map, and Demographic Portrait. Users can retrieve keyword attention data for specific time periods and regions according to their research needs. The platform's data are updated daily. PC search indices have been tracked since June 2006, and mobile indices have been included since January 2011, which ensures the continuity and completeness of the data over a long time series.

The key search term "Life Education" was selected because it is the official policy term and encompasses a broad range of topics. Major national policies, such as the *Guidelines for Integrating Life Safety and Health Education into Primary and Secondary School Curriculum and Textbooks*, uniformly adopt "Life Education" as the core term, thereby ensuring alignment with the policy context. In addition, "Life Education" is a standardised term in Chinese educational policy and academic discourse, distinct from "death education" or "mental health", these representing specific sub-dimensions rather than synonyms. Thereby, focusing on the primary term "Life Education" ensures clarity and captures the mainstream public discourse.

Methods

With "Life Education" as the search term, the data acquisition period was set from January 1, 2011, to October 1, 2025. Selecting data from 2011 onward ensures the comprehensiveness of the dataset by including both PC-side and mobile-side search behaviours, thus accurately reflecting the evolutionary trajectory of public attention to "Life Education" over a long-term and continuous period. Specifically, the evolutionary trend of public attention was described by systematically analysing the changes in search volume over time; the demand structure of the public was summarised by categorising and interpreting the top and rising related terms in the Demand Map; and the characteristics of the core search audience were portrayed by describing the demographic attributes and geographical distribution of the searchers. Based on an intuitive description of the data, the research findings were further discussed and interpreted by integrating relevant theoretical frameworks from educational psychology, national educational policy documents, and authoritative academic literature.

Results

Temporal Differences in Attention to Life Education

As the search trend reveals (Figure 1), the "Life Education" search index traces a curve that began from stability, progressed through a wavelike rise, and ultimately subsided to a new plateau; this trajectory reflects its evolution from a phase of steady accumulation, through volatile fluctuations, to finally establishing a cyclical pattern of social concern.

From 2011 to 2019, the search volume remained within a low baseline range of 200-400, indicating that public attention to Life Education was in its preliminary stage during this period. Search behaviours primarily stemmed from initial policy signals. The 2010 National Medium and

Long-Term Education Reform and Development Plan Outline (2010-2020) first proposed emphasising Life Education. Although Shanghai, Jilin, and other localities led in issuing local guidance documents and textbooks, nationwide practice was still confined to a few pilot schools. Public understanding of the concept was vague, with searches mostly focused on answering basic questions, and it showed only brief fluctuations during occasional crisis events. Life Education at this time was in a formative stage, transitioning from theoretical introduction to localised exploration, had not yet broken through academic and educational circles, had not yet sparked broad social discussion, and overall attention remained low.

In mid-2020, the search volume surged to over 1000, setting a historical peak. This was directly related to the social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Ministry of Education(MOE) intensively issued documents in 2020, deeply linking Life Education with epidemic prevention knowledge and mental health, launched the National Primary and Secondary School Online Cloud Platform, established a Life and Safety Education column, and co-produced special First Lesson of the Semester programs, centrally disseminating epidemic prevention knowledge and the concept of life value, directly driving the policy-induced climb in "Life Education" search volume. Simultaneously, death anxiety and reflections on the meaning of life triggered by the pandemic also spurred a surge in public search demand for Life Education.

From 2021 to 2025, although the search volume declined from its peak, it remained within the high range of 400-600, significantly higher than pre-pandemic levels. This is related to ongoing efforts in national policy. *Guidelines for Integrating Life Safety and Health Education into Primary and Secondary School Curriculum and Textbooks* incorporated Life Education into the national curriculum system, requiring the formation of a progressive educational chain from understanding life to guarding life and developing life (MOE, 2021), which has sustained high search volumes. *The Special Action Plan for Comprehensively Strengthening and Improving Students' Mental Health Work in the New Era (2023-2025)* further underscores the fundamental role of life education in psychological crisis intervention (MOE et al., 2023), which has sustained interest in the topic. During this period, Life Education transitioned from emergency response to normalised teaching and integrated with new topics such as mental health and digital technology (Li & Luo, 2019).

Figure 1

Trends in the Search Index for Online Attention to Life Education (PC + Mobile)



Since Baidu Index began providing mobile data in 2011, the share of search traffic for "Life Education" has shifted from PC dominance to mobile overtaking (Figures 2, 3). This reflects a fundamental transformation in how people access information and signifies that the adaptation and dissemination of related content on mobile devices have become increasingly crucial.

Figure 2

Trends in the Search Index for Online Attention to Life Education (Mobile)



Figure 3

Trends in the Search Index for Online Attention to Life Education (PC)



Overall, public attention to "Life Education" has been internalised as a sustained, normalised social demand. Instead of being merely a passive response to sudden events, it has become a proactive educational investment by parents, teachers, and other groups in the healthy growth and psychological well-being of the next generation. This marks the maturation of Life Education from a marginal issue to a stable public educational concern.

Analysis of Demand Structure for Life Education

The Demand Map shows that public perception of "Life Education" is not fragmented but rather forms a hierarchical structure, ranging from safety and survival to meaning-seeking. The base layer is Safety Education, the middle layer is Psychological and Moral Education, and the top layer is Philosophical Reflection. "Life Education" is one dimension of China's Three-Life Education concept; therefore, understanding the former cannot be separated from understanding the latter (Han & Chang, 2009; Lin et al., 2020). Furthermore, newly added keywords such as "Smart Education" and "New Quality Productive Forces" reflect emerging demands for technology-enabled Life Education (Table 1).

Table 1

Top 10 Analysis of Demand Types Related to Search Popularity for "Life Education"

No.	Theme	Typical Keywords
1	Three-Life Education	Life, Survival, Living
2	Meaning Seeking	Meaning of life, Value of life, View of life, Humanitarianism, Origin of life, Self-efficacy, Freedom/Autonomy
3	Death Education	View on life and death, Being-towards-death, End-of-life care, Hospice care
4	Life Safety Education	Cherishing life, Reverence for life, Risk avoidance
5	Mental Health & Intervention	Psychological counseling, Depression, Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Art therapy

6	Family Education	Parent-child relationship, Home-school cooperation, Family Education Promotion Law, Emotional connection
7	Values Education	Concept of honor and disgrace, Craftsmanship spirit, Heroic figures, Educator spirit, Traditional culture
8	Psychological & Philosophical Theories	Humanism, Existentialism, Camus, Heidegger, Maslow's hierarchy of needs
9	Key Competencies	Moral education, Labor education, Aesthetic education, Sex education, Nature education
10	Policy & Contemporary Hotspots	Smart Education, Artificial Intelligence(AI) empowerment, New Quality Productive Forces, Double Reduction, Healthy China 2035

Spatial Differences and Demographic Structure for Life Education

Geographical Distribution

Search interest in "Life Education" is generally higher in the developed coastal regions of eastern China than in the central and western regions. Regionally, East China and South China are the core areas (Figure 4). These regions are China's economic and educational powerhouses, with well-established cross-regional educational collaboration mechanisms, economic vitality, and a strong willingness for educational innovation. At the provincial level, Guangdong, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Sichuan, and Beijing consistently rank among the top (Figure 5). Guangdong and Beijing are frontiers of educational reform in China, continuously issuing local policies to promote Life Education in classrooms, driving growth in search through policy. Jiangsu and Zhejiang have well-developed basic education, emphasise comprehensive student development and mental health, and Life Education closely aligns to cultivate key competencies, making it a focus of attention. Sichuan is a major educational province in Southwest China with a large population and diverse educational needs, which has driven public attention to Life Education. At the city level, Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Guangzhou lead the search rankings (Figure 6). These are China's first or new first-tier cities, possessing three advantages: resource aggregation, policy precedence, and urgent demand. These cities have dense concentrations of universities and research institutions, as well as strong theoretical research and curriculum-development capabilities in Life Education. Innovative, characteristic, and technology-enabled Life Education policies are prioritised, with policy dividends driving public attention. Parent groups in these cities typically have higher levels of education, broader international perspectives, and greater life and educational pressures. They are more sensitive to mental health and the cultivation of meaning in modern education and have more advanced expectations for quality-oriented education and mental health, thereby increasing search frequency.

Figure 4

Regional Distribution of the Search Index for "Life Education"



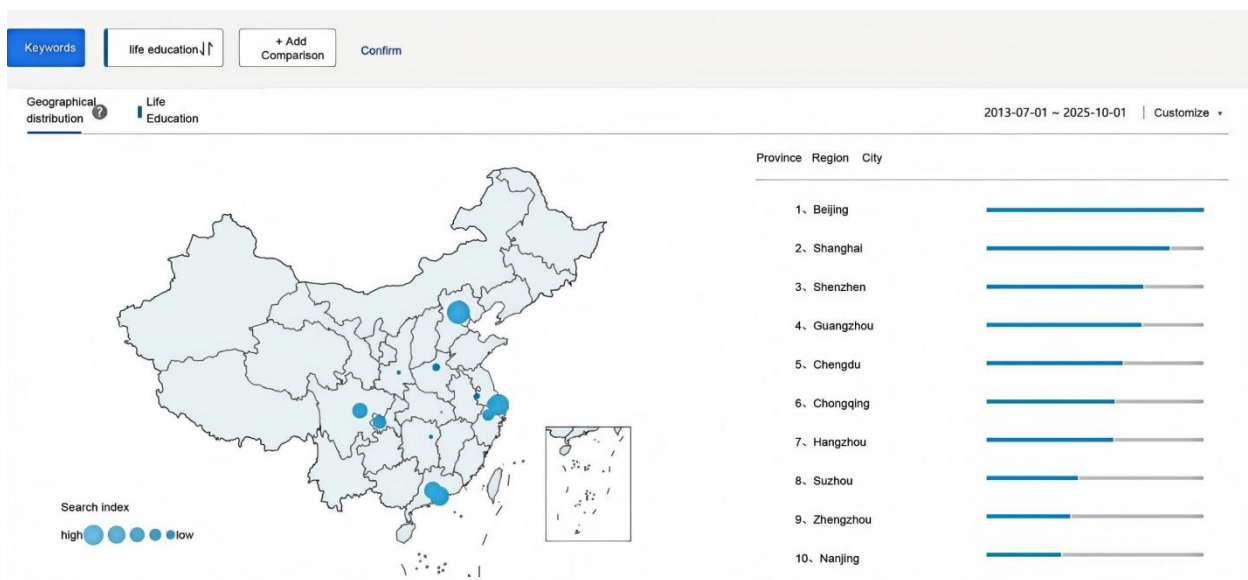
Figure 5

Provincial Distribution of the Search Index for "Life Education"



Figure 6

City Distribution of the Search Index for "Life Education"



Demographic Attributes

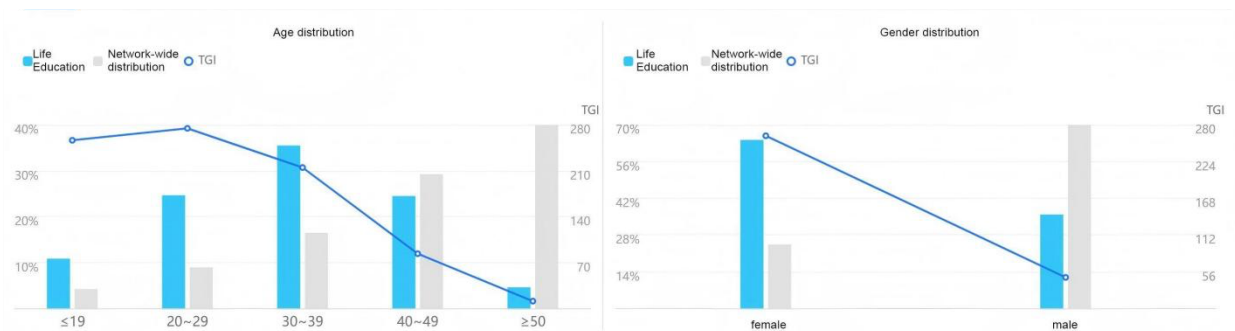
In terms of age, the 30–39 group is the dominant population, with the highest proportion, at nearly 35% (Figure 7). This age group is primarily composed of family units. After the Double Reduction policy, parental anxiety shifted from academic performance to comprehensive development anxiety, making Life Education, which involves mental health and life value guidance, an important direction for alleviating parenting anxiety. This phenomenon aligns with Erikson's theory of psychosocial development. Individuals aged 30–39 are in the critical stage of "Generativity vs Stagnation" (McAdams, 2001). Their core developmental task is to care for and guide the next generation and contribute to society. Simultaneously, they themselves face career challenges and midlife transition pressures. Therefore, their attention to Life Education is driven by the dual forces of internal developmental crisis and external social responsibility. The 20–29 age group has the highest Target Group Index (TGI), a metric that measures the relative attention to a given topic within a specific demographic. A TGI value above 100 indicates that the group's interest level exceeds the average. With a TGI of nearly 280, this cohort shows the strongest attitudinal inclination toward "Life Education" across all age segments. Although their absolute search volume is lower than that of the 30–39 group, the concentration of interest within this younger cohort is the most pronounced. The lowest search proportion is among those over 50, possibly related to lower internet usage frequency in this group and a fading focus on Life Education with age.

By gender, females account for 64.22%, far exceeding males at 35.78%, with a TGI of 263.21 (Figure 7). This aligns with research on gender roles in educational psychology and sociology. In most cultural contexts, women are implicitly assigned the primary responsibility for children's education, maintaining family relationships, and providing emotional support within the family (Bianchi et al., 2012). This gendered division of emotional labour naturally endows women with higher sensitivity and responsibility towards issues related to child development, mental health, and life value. Furthermore, when coping with stress and psychological distress, women are generally more inclined than men to adopt support-seeking strategies, including actively searching for

information, discussing feelings with others, and seeking professional help. Searching for "Life Education" is also an active, problem-solving-oriented help-seeking behaviour practised by women.

Figure 7

Demographic Distribution of "Life Education" Searches



In summary, public attention to "Life Education" has experienced a distinct evolution. Online search volume reached a historical peak in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, then receded somewhat but stabilised at a level significantly higher than the pre-pandemic baseline. The demand structure has formed a cross-disciplinary system integrating safety, psychology, and philosophy, while also giving rise to new, technology-enabled needs. The concerned demographic exhibits distinct characteristics, being predominantly concentrated in developed coastal regions of eastern China, with its core consisting of urban women aged 30-39, who often occupy family-centric caregiving and educational roles.

Discussion

Through the Baidu Index, this study depicts the macro-level landscape of "Life Education" in Chinese cyberspace. Behind the data surge lie complex intertwinements of social collective mentality, educational demands, and individual life courses.

Changes in search trends reveal the rule of socialisation of educational issues. They clearly document the entire process by which "Life Education" evolved from a professional topic to a public concern. The early stable accumulation period (2011-2019) aligns with the Innovators stage in Rogers' Diffusion of Innovations theory, during which attention was primarily from pioneers and professionals (Rogers, 2003). The significant peak in public attention during the volatile growth period (around 2020) strongly suggests an event-driven mode of public attention (Viner et al., 2020). These peaks can be interpreted as "collective existential shocks" triggered by society's experience of major adolescent psychological crises (Benner et al., 2017) or tragic events (Holtz & Miller, 2021). The public searches for "Life Education" to cope with the resulting death anxiety (Kastenbaum, 2000), insecurity, and meaning crisis, constituting an adaptive psychological behaviour seeking understanding, solace, and solutions. This event-driven surge in attention aligns with global patterns

observed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Cross-national studies using digital trace data have consistently documented increased public interest in mental health and life-related topics amid large-scale public health crises (CDC, 2021). These cross-cultural consistencies indicate that "collective existential shocks" triggered by major crises are not unique to China but reflect a global psychological mechanism that drives public attention to life and mental health issues. Entering the elevated plateau period (2021–2025) marks the internalization of the issue from a stress response into a sustained social consensus, reflecting that the public, especially parent groups, have shifted their perception of education's essence from purely academic achievement to long-term investment in the next generation's life quality and psychological resilience (Feng, 2020; Ren, 2022; MOE et al., 2023; State Council, 2025).

The analysis of the Demand Map and core related terms points to a significant reorientation in the public's understanding of "Life Education," one that marries deeper theoretical inquiry with a more practical, application-focused approach. On one hand, core related terms like "Death Education," "Existentialism," and "Meaning of Life" confirm the intrinsic fit between Life Education and existential psychology (e.g., Yalom's four ultimate concern), indicating the public intuitively recognizes that the fundamental task of Life Education is to respond to life's finitude, freedom, and meaninglessness (Schneider, 2007). On the other hand, the emergence of related terms such as "Positive Psychology," "Cognitive Behavioral Therapy," and "Self-efficacy" signifies a positive shift in public demand from a problem-oriented perspective to a strengths-based perspective (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Early public attention to Life Education focused more on problem-solving, such as coping with depression and suicide intervention (Lei & Xie, 2005), while the current tendency is towards proactive empowerment, searching for operational educational methods aimed at cultivating positive emotions, character strengths, and psychological resilience through terms like "Emotional connection," "Art Therapy" (Seligman, 2011). This transformation is paving the way for "Life Education" to evolve from a purely theoretical pursuit into an interdisciplinary practice, deeply intertwined with the hallmarks of our time. (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2004), such as the search association of "Life Education + AI" (Kye et al., 2021; Liu, 2021; Mohammed et al., 2024), reflecting innovative efforts to empower technology and provide new pathways for conducting Life Education in the AI era.

Demographic portrait data reveal the heterogeneity of the "Life Education" audience at both social-structural and psychological-mechanism levels, and these differences are highly consistent with classical developmental psychology theories and social gender role divisions. Geographically, the proportion of search volume exceeding 60% in economically developed provinces such as Guangdong, Zhejiang, and Jiangsu reflects the development-contingent nature of attention to Life Education (Inglehart & Baker, 2000; Peng et al., 2020), which is closely related to regional modernisation levels, educational competition pressure, and parental educational literacy. The high popularity in East China is directly related to its advantages of policy precedence and resource aggregation (Peng et al., 2020); whereas the low attention in central and western regions reflects the practical choice of prioritising basic subjects in basic education investment (Shek & Zhu, 2020). The

absolute dominance of the 30–39 age group in the age distribution precisely aligns with the core developmental task of "Generativity vs Stagnation" in middle adulthood, as proposed by Erikson (McAdams, 2001; Erikson, 1950). This group's attention to Life Education reflects the dual psychological needs of fulfilling parental duties and completing their own life integration. The significantly higher attention tendency among females compared to males profoundly reflects a persistent gendered division of labour, with the primary burden of familial emotional labour and children's education still falling on women. (Shek, 2020). Their active search for "Life Education" is both an embodiment of fulfilling parenting responsibilities and a proactive help-seeking strategy for coping with educational anxiety (Fisher & Julien, 2009). Our finding that females are the primary seekers of Life Education information aligns with global patterns observed during the COVID-19 pandemic, in which women consistently demonstrated higher levels of information-seeking regarding health and psychological well-being (Galasso et al., 2020; Ek & Stefan, 2015). These consistencies underscore that the gendered division of familial emotional labour and child-rearing responsibilities is a cross-cultural phenomenon. Notably, the 20–29 age group demonstrates the highest relative attentional inclination toward "Life Education", indicating that although the smaller total population size constrains their absolute search volume, their engagement with the topic reflects a high degree of personal relevance.

Conclusion and Future Research

Conclusion

Public attention to "Life Education" online is a concentrated manifestation of Chinese society's collective search for individual spiritual well-being, existential meaning, and psychological resilience amid rapid modernisation. In summary, Life Education in China has transitioned from being an event-driven reactive issue to a normalised societal educational demand. This evolution is marked by deepening layers of public need, interdisciplinary integration, and a growing contemporary expectation for technology-enabled approaches. Nevertheless, significant disparities persist across geographical regions, age groups, and genders. In response, the Chinese government and the education sector should establish a sustained institutional mechanism to advance Life Education systematically. This can be achieved by fostering cross-departmental and interdisciplinary collaboration, promoting technological innovation to enhance the supply of high-quality resources, and designing tailored content alongside equitable resource distribution to address existing imbalances. Such efforts would facilitate the shift of Life Education from a fragmented model to a systematic, inclusive, and universally accessible framework.

The value of this study lies in three key contributions. First, adopting a descriptive and qualitative research approach, it leverages longitudinal big data from Baidu Index to systematically depict the online attention dynamics of the Chinese public toward Life Education for the first time. Second, by intuitively presenting the evolution of attention, demand structure, and group characteristics, it clearly reveals the post-pandemic transition of Life Education demand from a

"problem-solving" orientation to a "proactive empowerment" orientation, providing digital trace evidence for understanding the collective pursuit of life values in contemporary Chinese society. Third, it conducts integrated interpretation based on educational psychology theories, national policy documents, and authoritative literature, validating the adaptability of classical theories in non-Western contexts while highlighting the unique impacts of China's regional development disparities and family structure characteristics on public attention to Life Education. This offers actionable insights for relevant policy formulation and practical implementation.

Future Research

Future research should adopt three specific paths to deepen and expand the current findings. First, incorporating replicable quantitative verification analyses can help address the data limitations. Since the Baidu Index captures only active search behaviours, does not reflect users' underlying motivations or cognitive depth, and may underrepresent groups with lower internet usage, future research could adopt targeted quantitative approaches to enhance the validity and generalizability of the findings. Second, the research context and content dimensions can be broadened. Semantic analysis of content on social media platforms such as Weibo and TikTok could be conducted to compare and examine the relationships and differences between users' search behaviours and discursive behaviours.

Additionally, by integrating case studies of school-based Life Education practices and regional mental health service data, future studies could examine the correlation between increased public attention and actual educational outcomes and group mental health levels, thereby providing more direct empirical support for the value of promoting Life Education. Third, research targeting specific demographic groups and regions can be deepened. For particular population segments, further investigation into their core concerns can inform the design of tailored Life Education content. Regarding the relatively low attention observed in central and western regions, an analysis of key constraints, such as regional policy support and the allocation of educational resources, could provide insights to promote more balanced resource distribution and to formulate differentiated promotion strategies.

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Conflict of Interest

None.

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