

The “Homogenization” Internet Image and Potential Dilemmas from the Perspective of Active Aging

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Abstract. In recent years, the proportion of the elderly group has been an essential part of Internet users in China. At present, it is obvious to see the growth of the elderly users on the Internet. Under such an emerging background, research on the image of elderly groups (especially silver-haired celebrities) is booming. Current mainstream analyses have constructed a specific portrayal of the elderly: breaking age-related limitations and conventions and bravely embracing new things. However, such a perception might come with the potential for homogenization of those online images, and it may also overlook the dilemmas faced by the elderly group. To explore the above issues, this study employed a mixed method of content analysis and small-sample questionnaire survey. It conducted statistical analysis on the popular content of silver-haired celebrities on platforms, such as Douyin and Xiaohongshu, and used valid questionnaires to examine whether homogenization exists and whether this phenomenon masks the real predicaments of the elderly. This study reveals that the challenges associated with an active aging approach do exist, but the causes leading to this situation are not singular. Commercial interests and media promotion also contributed to the emergence of this predicament.

Keywords: the elderly group, active aging, homogenization, potential dilemmas, stereotypes

1. Introduction

According to the 54th Statistical Report on China Internet Development, it shows that among the 7.42 million new internet users in the first half of the year in 2024, the proportion of people aged 60 and above was as high as 20.8% [1]. The elderly are actively participating as both viewers and bloggers. Furthermore, current mainstream research has also been able to construct the image of the elderly population. A 2024 study on the Douyin platform, examining 10 silver-haired celebrities, reveals that these individuals are challenging traditional perceptions of aging by demonstrating youthful mindsets and a willingness to embrace new experiences [2]. Based on this, there is also another study showing that the elderly people are willing to share their skills and creativity, demonstrating their rich life experience and establishing their image as wise men [3]. However, such a perception might come with the potential for homogenization: whether through the actions of commercial companies or the daily sharing of individuals, it may result in a uniform portrayal of elderly life online and overlook the real situation and dilemmas of the elderly.

This paper aims to explore whether there is a homogenization phenomenon through the materials mainly related to the elderly available online, and then investigate whether this phenomenon conceals the predicaments of the elderly group. To achieve this, the study employs a mixed-method approach, combining content analysis with a small-sample questionnaire survey. Guided by Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory and the active aging framework, this research provides a comprehensive exploration of the issue. Besides, pointing out the issue of homogenization could help audiences avoid falling into the monotonous and brainwashing-like memes, and provide a differentiated narrative reference for platform algorithm optimization and brand marketing targeting the elderly.

2. Literature review

2.1. Goffman's dramaturgical theory and its front stage

This theory originated from Goffman's 1959 book *The Presentation of Life in Everyday Life*, which views an individual's social activities as a kind of theatrical performance, consisting of a front stage and a back region. Generally, elderly users expressing themselves on social media could be regarded as a kind of front-stage performance, and it has three distinct features. The first is the role-playing nature, which means it is constructing an idealized image through selective display (e.g., meticulously choreographed dance videos on TikTok). The second is the audience-oriented approach, which means its content creation is influenced by algorithmic recommendation mechanisms. The third is Blurred Boundaries, which makes the private spaces (such as bedrooms) become performance venues, dissolving traditional front-stage/back-stage distinctions. Based on this, there is a study specifically on the Douyin platform that suggests that the emergence of short videos blurred the traditional boundaries between the front stage and back region. The shooting backgrounds of the elderly are often in real-life environments (such as their own houses). Such content, which was previously unseen and part of the back region, helps bring audiences closer to elderly creators [4].

Another study conducted on European society has raised comparable concerns. The study indicates that the aging problem is widespread in European society, and the media is paying increasing attention to the elderly population. However, the images of the elderly presented in the media are generally not representative. Some scholars have also pointed out that the media's focus on the elderly often excludes certain groups from the mass media (such as older women) [5].

Therefore, Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory endows this research with new significance. It reminds us that the performative nature of the stage may lead to the concealment of the real predicaments of the elderly lives, and provides a theoretical basis for the existence of this phenomenon.

2.2. Active aging

Referring to the policy framework of Active Aging published by World Health Organization (WHO), "Active Aging" is the process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age [6]. It involves continuous participation in various aspects including social, economic, cultural, spiritual and civic affairs, rather than merely engaging in manual labor, and aims at extending the healthy life expectancy and quality of all life for all people, including those who are frail, disabled and in need of care.

The Internet has well met the requirements of active aging and promoted its development. As mentioned above, social media has helped break the stereotypes. Furthermore, it also enables them to actively showcase their lives beyond their age. Additionally, new research data has also confirmed that the development of the Internet has a positive impact on promoting active aging [7]. This finding holds significant positive implications for the subsequent research. Because it provides a way of thinking for the subsequent analysis of the reasons: Active aging is more likely to become content that the media enjoy and appreciate, thereby leading to the concealment of the real living conditions of the elderly population.

2.3. Media representation

Representation refers to the process by which media texts handle and present gender, age, race, ethnicity, regional identity, social issues and events to the audience. Moreover, media texts have the ability to shape the audience's perception and understanding of these important topics. However, this does not mean that the content reflected by the media is true; in other words, the media are not neutral.

In the midst of a large amount of homogeneous content, some elderly creators may merely imitate popular elements to attract traffic and quickly accumulate fans, thereby neglecting to deeply explore their personal characteristics. This leads to the dissatisfaction and resistance of the audience. Although the impacts of commercialization are not always negative, for instance, commercialization can provide positive motivation: Grandma Wang. She wears high heels and finds fulfillment in life through short videos. However, the negative impacts have reached a point where they cannot be ignored. Besides the repetitive imitation mentioned above, some elderly people are facing the risk of alienation: The exposed case of the Sunset Red live-streaming team reveals that some agencies induce excessive consumption among the elderly through scripted performances. Some elderly people, for long periods of time, were conducting live broadcasts in dark and chaotic rooms, dressed in worn-out clothes, at night. They read the advertisement slogans in a systematic manner [8]. There is also evidence that creators employ professional editing techniques and exquisite packaging strategies to present the image of silver-haired internet celebrities [9].

3. Methodology

This article additionally adopted a supplementary questionnaire method, aiming to collect the general impression of the elderly group on the Internet from a third-party perspective, and to evaluate the “content displayed by the elderly group” as detailed later in the text, in order to explore whether there is a homogenization issue or if the true predicaments of the elderly group are hidden.

The questionnaire uses the classification standard of “people over 65 years old as the elderly group”, which is consistent with the “active aging” standard from the WHO. It aims to explore the group image of the elderly population in the media through the perspective of the audience (a third party), as the number of elderly users increases at present. Moreover, it divided the content presented in the media into two categories. One is the Internet content produced by the elderly group as the primary perspective, either directly or indirectly participated in by the elderly, such as silver-haired celebrities. The other is the description and portrayal of the elderly group from a third-party perspective, such as media reports, photography or written works centered on the elderly. Both categories followed the standard of centering on the elderly group as the content. This questionnaire consists of 14 questions, including 13 multiple-choice questions and 1 open-ended (fill-in-the-blank)

question. Additionally, there is a reading instruction included to provide a brief overview of the questionnaire and the purpose of the survey.

Overall, the questionnaire was mainly distributed through the WeChat Platform. After eliminating 3 invalid questionnaires, a total of 133 valid questionnaires were obtained. The questions setting mainly aims to investigate whether the general public has browsed the two types of content mentioned in the text, and to assess the appropriate evaluation of the phenomena mentioned in the text.

4. Results

4.1. Common opinions presented in the questionnaire

Among the 133 participants in the survey, 71 people browsed and followed silver-haired celebrities, while 57 people only browsed without following. The proportions were 53.4% and 42.9% respectively. To some extent, this indicates that the elderly group is quite active online and has attracted the attention. However, the focuses of these two groups are different. The viewers who followed celebrities mainly focus on the life domain, while those who only browse mainly focus on the film and television domain.

Furthermore, the questionnaire reveals two notable points. Firstly, although most participants had browsed internet content centered on the elderly, 60.2% of them believed that the life presented online was one-sided, and 9.8% even thought it did not accurately reflect the elderly's current living conditions. Among the four preconceived reasons, participants believed that the content created by the elderly was related to commercial interests, or the content was highly homogeneous, and its relationship with whether the elderly could directly or indirectly participate in the creation process was relatively small. Commercialization was also the second most significant reason for the participants' choice not to follow the elderly celebrities. Secondly, when browsing content for the elderly, most participants selected positive group impression labels (such as the group impression of the elderly influencers, the label of being healthy was chosen 37 times, and the label of having a young mindset was chosen 38 times), but negative impression labels were chosen fewer than 25 times in total.

4.2. Content analysis

From the results of the above questionnaire, it is clear that the general public tends to choose more positive group impression labels. In other words, the image of the elderly population on the Internet is generally positive. The lives of those who are lonely or suffering from illnesses are rarely shown. Another research report discovered by extracting 150 images centered around the elderly from public image libraries found that in most of these images, the elderly were accompanied. However, this may not reflect the actual situation, as it implies that there might be a considerable number of elderly people who are lonely or lack companionship. But such aspects are rarely addressed in public image libraries. Nevertheless, loneliness is an inevitable problem for the elderly. The representatives of this group of the elderly mainly involve the idealization of old age, which brings certain risks. Because when the experiences of the elderly do not match this representation, it may cause frustration for them [10]. Therefore, there are numerous reasons for this phenomenon. In addition to the aforementioned homogenization and excessive commercialization, a few participants also pointed out that they believed many elderly people themselves would not choose to reveal the negative perspectives of their lives.

5. Reasons and possible dilemma

5.1. Special reasons In China

5.1.1. Active aging and cultural trends

In 2019, the Chinese government established clear strategic objectives for actively addressing population aging. By 2020, the concept of “actively developing human resources among the elderly” was further proposed, marking the implementation of active aging at the national strategic level. Notably, through positive coverage of silver-haired internet celebrities, the public has gradually recognized the elderly as an emerging group characterized by proactive learning and adaptability [11]. Throughout this process, Chinese media has assumed the responsibility of promoting positive narratives. A study using People's Daily as a sample revealed that in 216 news reports, the image of the elderly was predominantly healthy, and they played a significant role in shaping positive two-way interactions between society and the elderly [12]. In short, this represents a unique phenomenon in Chinese society. Driven by national policies and official media, active aging has become a mainstream trend. However, this trend may also obscure the true living conditions of the elderly to a certain extent, presenting certain challenges.

5.1.2. Algorithm: prefer high completion rate and positive content with strong appeal

This study does not merely attribute this phenomenon to the push mechanism of the platform. The author believes that it is caused by a two-way selection process. In addition to the promoting role of the official media mentioned above, China's official media inherently have the responsibility to guide social trends through their propaganda. Secondly, this is also a choice made by the general public in China. In the Large-scale Survey Results on Online Communication Responsibility released in 2020, a survey involving 20 million citizens showed that 80% of the respondents preferred to watch positive and in-depth content, indicating that citizens have a widespread demand for positive information. Although there is no definite data to prove that Chinese people have a greater preference for positive news, the choice of 80% of citizens has led to the platform being more inclined to promote positive content, resulting in the real lives of the elderly being rarely seen.

5.2. Possible dilemma

Just as initially predicted, first of all, for those elderly people who are not particularly keen on showcasing themselves on the internet and merely participate in online life as viewers, the inability of their real lives to be recognized is the primary potential dilemma. Various studies have shown that the content presented on the Internet is mostly positive and uplifting. Different types of elderly groups are merely represented by a single label. Over time, this often leads to society ignoring the difficulties endured by the elderly (such as lack of companionship, lack of care, or suffering from illness), and it may also create new stereotypes about the elderly population. Even worse, it is very likely to make other elderly people feel frustrated because these idealized portrayals do not match their real-life experiences. In addition, for those elderly people who have already engaged in internet activities, society needs to strengthen supervision of the media, and the government needs to conduct strict reviews of companies to prevent the elderly from being exploited for commercial interests or being attacked by public opinion, so as to ensure that they do not fall into another new predicament while actively participating in social activities.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the dilemmas faced by the elderly are real issues. Under such circumstances, the real lives of the elderly may not have been seen by the general public. However, the reasons behind this are not solely due to the homogenized online creative content. These reasons are also closely related to commercial activities, media promotion, and other factors. This study still has some limitations. Due to the small number of samples and the relatively general nature of the research questions, in the future, the author hopes to obtain more survey data and further divide the research directions (such as for elderly online influencers in the life sector), and conduct interviews with different audiences to comprehensively analyze the various problems brought about by active aging and provide reference value for society and the media.

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