The Research on How Social Media Affects Active Ageing: China's Perspectives

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Abstract: A few years ago, the issue of aging started to become an important obstacle to global development that cannot be ignored, and China, as one of the world's countries with the largest population, is in fact particularly affected by the negative effects of aging. Compared to other measures to alleviate the aging problem, society seems to pay less attention to the situation of elders on social media. Because of this, it is of great significance to examine the aging issue from the perspective of social media. This paper uses social media platforms and existing active aging systems as research subjects, employing methods such as relevant interviews and literature analysis to discover ways to make social media more relevant to older adults, thereby better promoting active aging. According to the research, creating a social media platform that is friendly to older adults and thus achieving positive aging on social media requires the collaboration of multiple parties, including the government, media, family members of older adults, and older adults themselves. The implementation of active aging on social media benefits not only the elderly but the entire society.

Keywords: active ageing, social media, literature review

1.   Introduction

The world's population is aging, according to WHO, as a result of continued fertility declines and increased life expectancy. According to World Population Prospects 2019 Revision data, 1 in 6 people worldwide (16%) will be 65 or older by 2050, up from 11 (9%) in 2019; and 1 in 4 people in Europe and North America will be 65 or older by 2050. For the first time, the global population aged 65 and up surpassed the number of children under the age of five in 2018. In addition, the population of people aged 80 and up is expected to triple, rising from 143 million in 2019 to 426 million in 2050.

In comparison, China's elderly population of 60 and over is expected to reach 267 million by 2021, accounting for 18.9 percent of the total population. The elderly population aged 60 and up will have surpassed 400 million by 2035, accounting for more than 30% of the total population, and will be entering a stage of heavy aging [1].

Active aging is a multifaceted concept influenced by a variety of factors such as physical functionality, lifestyle, urban environment, and social inclusion [2]. Active ageing was defined by the World Health Organization in 2015 as "...the process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation, and security in order to improve quality of life as people age," whereas healthy ageing was defined as "...the process of developing and maintaining functional ability that enables well-being in old age." [3]. In the World Health Organization's World Health Report on Aging, the importance

of public health strategies in promoting and maintaining health in older adults was emphasized. An operational definition of healthy aging, on the other hand, is still being debated, and no agreement has been reached.

The aging population is causing dramatic demographic, epidemiological, and anthropological changes, emphasizing the significance of active and healthy aging (AHA). The concept of active ageing seeks to dispel the often-negative image of the aging process, which is socially and culturally associated with the concepts of dependency, lack of productivity, frailty, and the end of life [4].

Regardless, as China set out to promote plans such as delayed retirement, the main aspect they focus on is actively exploring diversified aging options such as aging in place and customized apartments, and the progress of active aging is less clear on social media.

This study will focus on the impact of social media on the progress of active ageing within China. As social media technology advances at a rapid pace, who will teach older adults to keep them up to date? Does the presence of social media facilitate or hinder the process of active aging? The purpose of this paper is to explore, through the collection of relevant interviews and literature analysis, the key points to focus on when implementing active aging in terms of the media.

This paper, in a total of four chapters, will explore the current state of active aging in the social media world, starting with the background of the implementation of active aging. And then analyze the strengths and weaknesses of that status quo, try to find ways to improve the status, and give an ideal model of active aging in the social media world.

Conventionally, "elderly" has been defined as being 65 years old or older, with those 65 to 74 years old referred to as "early elderly" and those over 75 years old referred to as "late elderly" [5].

2. The Background of Social Media Usage among the Elderly

2.1. The Need for Social Media Use by Elders

Older adults do not use social media does not mean that they do not have a need for it. As long as social media is approachable enough, people can see that older adults have the same variety of needs to use social media as other age groups of social media users.

According to Self-Determination Theory, human motivation is driven by basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Perceptions that we determine our behavior and act in accordance with our goals and values are central aspects of the need for autonomy. The need for competence entails gaining mastery in critical areas of life. The need for relatedness includes a desire to connect with others as well as a desire to care for and be cared for by others. Despite the fact that these basic psychological needs are universal, individuals vary in their level of satisfaction with these needs [6]. On some levels, social media can precisely meet the needs of the elderly.

Specific needs of older adults to participate in social media are expressed in, for example, keeping in touch with family and friends, learning about current events, entertainments, shopping online, and so on. Especially with the onset of the epidemic, social media allows people to transcend the physical sense of separation, stay connected and participate in an entertaining social life.

2.2. Pandemic Reinforces the Needs

A report released by the World Health Organization this March 2022 shows that the new crown epidemic has increased mental stress in people everywhere during the global pandemic. In the first year of the pandemic, 2020, the global prevalence of anxiety and depression increased by a whopping 25% [7].

The elderly and people with underlying medical conditions are also vulnerable groups. Cao Yuan, a research assistant professor in the Faculty of Medicine and Social Sciences at Hong Kong Polytechnic University who took part in a study of the psychological situation of the local population

after the fourth wave of the epidemic in Hong Kong, stated that problems with the mental health of the elderly remain.

"Many of them are experiencing negative emotions, and the majority of them are concerned about their health problems or even death as a result of the infection. The fear is still widespread." Cao Yuan explained.

Aside from fear, many seniors are concerned about the vaccine; they are concerned about whether the vaccine will cause side effects and who will care for them if this occurs. This is especially true for elderly people who live alone. Because seniors are a high-risk group for the new vaccine, many family members forbid seniors from going outside, and many places are closed for extended periods of time under social distancing measures, reducing the number of times seniors see their family and friends [8].

2.3. Possible Obstacles

Internet use is beneficial to the psychological well-being of older adults and alleviates feelings of isolation. This positive effect is mainly reflected in expanding interpersonal networks, promoting social integration, advancing technological empowerment, and facilitating access to health information. While social media is an important tool to achieve these functions.

However, in 2018, Tencent released the "Mobile Internet Report for Elderly Users", showing that the number of elderly Internet users in China has reached 80.28 million, accounting for 20% of the elderly population, which means that 1 in 5 elderly people use cell phones to access the Internet.

Internet use by the elderly is in a disadvantaged position: on the one hand, there are single learning channels, the absence of community and social learning and training, and insufficient support for the Internet access environment. At the same time, the content of Internet use by the elderly mainly stays at the level of universal functions such as voice and video chatting, browsing information, leisure and entertainment, and the use of instrumental functions such as health services and elderly support is insufficient, which is not conducive to the improvement of the elderly environment and the realization of elderly needs [9].

How can the other 80 percent of elders who do not use cell phones and social media meet their sociability needs in the virtual world? In what extent can the existing system help them to engage in social media? These questions remain unsolved.

3. The Advantages of Social Media for Active Ageing

The social media-based social behavior of older adults was significantly and positively associated with information behavior, expectations, positive mood levels, and life satisfaction [10].

3.1. Increased Socialization

Many people in their forties and fifties communicate and gather information primarily through the Internet and social media.

In terms of accessing online information, the study found that 75.8% of middle-aged and older adults can read news online, and more than half (56.6%) can conduct their own online searches. Furthermore, because WeChat is the most popular social media platform in China, nearly half (45.9%) also follow WeChat public articles. According to the interviews, middle-aged and older adults primarily use social media to learn about the most recent national and social initiatives, as well as related news, and rarely pay attention to entertainment content. The most popular search results among middle-aged and elderly people are recipes and travel and tourism information. They also pay attention to health, exercise, and fitness-related content and, on occasion, general life knowledge.

The vast majority of seniors use WeChat's chat function, and the majority of them also post messages and pictures on Moments, as well as send and receive online red envelopes. Middle-aged and older adults enjoy shooting and sharing short videos they make while traveling, and they are eager to share information about their health and family. The online videos that have been forwarded are mostly amusing and entertaining. To some extent, this demonstrates that people in their forties and fifties use WeChat not only as an instant communication tool, but also as an interactive platform to express their emotions and thoughts.

Real-life social opportunities for older adults who have retired from the workforce are limited. The existence of social media fills a void in the social lives of those seniors, allowing them to connect with peers their own age and feel connected to society outside of aging at home.
Living in "aging-friendly" online communities and joining community-based social media groups helped people feel more connected to a group or community by actively engaging with people who promote meaningful social connection throughout their lives.

3.2. Raise Voice of the Elders

Chronic conditions are more common in older adults, and these people are more likely to seek help online. In China, we frequently see social media questions like, "I'm experiencing such and such symptoms, how do I cope?" Blogging and participating in online health discussions are two of the most popular activities among people suffering from chronic illnesses. Having a chronic illness significantly increased the likelihood that Internet users would claim to work on a blog or contribute to an online discussion when all other demographic factors were held constant (a forum that helps people solve personal problems or health issues). And online discussions do provide a forum for people suffering from the same or similar illnesses, as well as some who do not.

For seniors living alone, voice and video conversations create a virtual family context, shifting traditional conversation patterns into an online environment where "absent" family members can interact and stay in touch at all times. Social media, as a medium, turns the companionship that seniors seek into a virtual reality. The older generation is more active on WeChat than the younger generation, breaking free from the traditional state of family life and achieving the goal of being noticed and emotionally cared for through voice, video, red envelopes, likes, comments, and republished articles. Finally, social media can help bridge generational gaps. While the outcomes can be messy at times, these social spaces bring users from all walks of life together and allow them to share skills across generations.

3.3. Entertainment

Entertainment is also one of the important implications of social media for older adults. In fact, because of their progressively disconnected and marginalized position in society, older adults tend to have less demand for media content than other age groups.

In terms of life applications, the proportion of people in their forties and fifties who use the Internet is relatively low. 40% of middle-aged and elderly people will pay cell phone bills online, 30% will do online shopping and navigation, and a quarter will use taxi software or pay water, electricity, gas, and other living expenses online, while the proportion of middle-aged and elderly people who can register online, book train tickets and air tickets, book hotels, and other convenient services is low.
In terms of entertainment and leisure, most (59.3%) of the middle-aged and elderly people would use their cell phones to watch videos; some of them would use their cell phones to make fun functions such as photo albums (25.0%) and WeChat emoji packs (20.0%) [11].

4.   The Disadvantages

4.1.   Specific Defects

The use of new media by older adults is motivated not only by a desire to learn about new media and technologies, but also by "herd mentality" in their social relationships, "peer pressure," and the psychological need to remain connected to their social circle. When it comes to social media, older adults are frequently forced into positions of vulnerability, passivity, and lack of judgment.

When compared to other age groups, older people are more likely to be recipients than creators of social media messages. As a result, it is more common for the elderly to forward content they see to their social connections rather than actively publishing original content created based on their own perceptions on social media platforms. This also forms the basis for their greater vulnerability to social media threats.

4.1.1. Possible Economics Threats

Newspapers, television, and books are media that older people are more familiar with than social media, and without a doubt, the information disseminated by these traditional information media is manually reviewed. Even though these platforms have the potential to spread false and misleading information, they are simpler and more regulated than social media, where anyone can create content. Due to various reasons such as shrinking social circles and declining cognitive abilities, older adults' judgment is sorely lacking when false news and baiting messages appear on social media. Older adults are very weak in their vigilance for eye-catching headlines. As a result, it is often difficult for seniors to give scientific responses when messages on social media try to lure them into making purchases that are otherwise unnecessary, or when they try to scam them.

According to CITIC Bank's credit card center, the elderly group, as a "slower" group in today's fast-developing society, lacks corresponding financial knowledge and faces more serious problems. With the rapid development of digital technology, many unscrupulous elements will extend their black hands to the elderly group, often with "free gifts," "points exchange," and other enticements to commit fraud, and even in the name of unofficially informing you that there are "abnormal transactions," "blacklisted," and other enticements to commit fraud. To intimidate the middle-aged and elderly groups, there is even an unofficial message that you have "abnormal transactions," "blacklisted," and so on [12].

According to data, nearly 30% of WeChat's elderly users have been duped by online marketing [13]. According to data released by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences' Institute of Social Development Strategy, 17.25% of interviewed elderly people have been cheated in the network [14].

4.1.2. Negative Psychological Effects

Just as young people may believe that the Internet has increased their inner loneliness, the psychological condition of older people may be less than ideal as a result of social media's popularity. To fully enjoy the opportunities and convenience brought about by the advancement of media technology in the digital age, a certain level of media literacy is required. However, the quality of social media information varies, and negative phenomena such as online fraud, online violence, and group polarization have significantly diminished users' media experiences [15].

Because of their declining eyesight, memory loss, and lack of information acquisition and screening ability, older people will inevitably feel intimidated when using social media. When using social media, they will inevitably become intimidated, anxious, and even resistant. In the long run, these negative emotions will have an impact on the elderly's daily lives and may even reduce their subjective perception of happiness [10].

4.2.   The Ways to Mitigate Disadvantages

Making social media a tool, rather than a hindrance, in the lives of older adults is a critical step toward active aging. In addition to the older population, other social participants should play a role in this change. Whether it is the government that provides policy support, social media providers that provide the platform and technology, older adults' families, or the average social media user, society has a lot of work to do to make social media more accessible to older adults and to better highlight its benefits.

4.2.1. Government's Perspective

For the less digitized elderly, the first problem to be solved is the popularity of smart devices, and the supply of smart devices can be increased through subsidies and gifts, and unified teaching in villages and communities to provide the elderly with the key to integrate into the social media society; for the moderately digitized elderly, people should vigorously popularize the knowledge of social media, distinguish the authenticity of information, and protect their data and privacy. On the other hand, people should give full play to their initiative and promote them to become "KOL" in the circle, and drive the elderly around them to join the social media society together to enhance digitalization.

4.2.2. Family Perspective

In the West, intergenerational interactions within families have become an important channel for bridging the digital generation gap, and intergenerational sharing of information and playing games have fostered mutual awareness and emotions, not only bridged the digital generation gap, but also enhanced parent-child relationships.

Thus, within families, younger generations are "digitally assisting" older generations by having younger people, who are more sensitive to social media and electronic devices, help older people learn to use and involve in social media.

Family members with access to social media should pay close attention to and monitor older adults' social media use in order to help them compensate for their lack of judgment and intervene when potential scams and threats arise.

4.2.3. Digital Design's Perspective

Poor eyesight and comprehension are two of the most noticeable characteristics of the elderly. As a result, media for audiences that include the elderly should develop a unified aging-friendly component that fully considers the special needs of the elderly groups and makes great efforts in the aspect of "big," introducing new functions such as big subtitles, big mouse, big word spacing, and big interface.

4.2.4. Media's Perspective

Social media should pay enough attention to the elderly as a group that needs access to information. Some social products for seniors should be more widely promoted and more effectively optimized. Social media platforms should also better monitor and manage the content of their platforms to eliminate false and fraudulent information as much as possible and fully reduce the probability of elderly people being exposed to risks.

Social media should also play the role of spreading information, so that society can pay more attention to the elderly and promote positive aging in a meaningful way.

4.3. Ideal Active Ageing Status in social media

The ideal social media is one that allows older adults to easily join. It needs to have features that allow older adults to get enough and effective information from it, while protecting their privacy and reducing financial risk as much as possible. In such social media, the needs of older adults for social and other activities can be adequately met. At the same time, relevant laws and regulations can maximize the protection of older people's personal privacy in participating in the aforementioned social media, keep the economic risks to a limited extent, and provide a sound system of regulation and punishment.

In addition, the ideal social media for active aging should thoroughly create an age-friendly atmosphere. Age groups other than the elderly should be given adequate/equal respect for older users on these social media.

The aforementioned platforms should also encourage older people to increase their participation on social media, actively show their lives, make their voices heard, and authentically join the social life in the network to improve their quality of life.

5. Conclusion

"Active aging" views the aging process as positive and dynamic, and advocates for opportunities for older adults to live healthy lives and contribute to society.

The process of "active aging" involves the entire society. It is important for the individual older person to have not only a healthy body, but also the opportunity to participate in society. However, in an age when online socialization and social media are so important, active aging is incomplete if older adults are unable to participate in social media.

For society as a whole, "active aging" is not only a process in which the proportion of older people gradually increases relative to younger people, but it is also a process in which older people's survival and development rights and interests are gradually guaranteed. The issue of population aging is never just a problem of individual elderly people or elderly groups; it is also a problem of social coordination and balanced development of elderly people's and other age groups' rights and interests. Allowing the elderly to find their place and make their voices heard on social media will make all of us feel more optimistic about the future. Allowing the elderly to satisfy their psychological needs through social media, receive timely information, and gain attention is critical. Simultaneously, it is critical to reduce the digital divide for seniors and make it as simple as possible for them to join the social media frenzy. Attention should also be paid to lowering the risks that older adults take when using social media.

This process, however, necessitates the participation of numerous parties. Attention should be paid to the aging of social media from the micro level of the family to the macro level of society. Today, Chinese society must make additional efforts in this direction.

Future researchers could concentrate on how to make active aging initiatives in social media more appropriate to the Chinese context. Given the education level, income level, and quality of life of older adults in China, there is plenty of room for social media optimization today.

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