

Crossing Generations in the Digital Age: Silver-Haired Influencers, Digital Inclusion, and Social Sustainability on Douyin

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Abstract: This article examines how silver-haired influencers on Douyin foster intergenerational communication and digital inclusion in China's rapidly platformized society. Through analysis of popular short videos and interactive comment spaces, the study shows how everyday practices such as cooking demonstrations, personal storytelling, health knowledge sharing, and rural life performances become shared symbolic resources through which older and younger users negotiate meaning and social belonging. Drawing on social constructivism and symbolic interactionism, the findings reveal how older adults develop agency through platform-mediated interaction and the co-creation of intergenerational scripts in comments, duets, and mimicry. The study further identifies the ambivalent role of algorithmic governance, which amplifies positive and emotionally connective narratives while simultaneously constraining representations of aging. By linking digital participation to intergenerational well-being and social inclusion, this research contributes to SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 11 (Sustainable Communities), highlighting the importance of inclusive platform governance for social sustainability.

Keywords: Intergenerational Communication; Digital Aging; Silver-Haired Influencers; Platform Agency; Social Inclusion

Published: Feb 28, 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.62177/amit.v1i7.1111>

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Importance

Intergenerational communication and digital participation are increasingly recognized as central concerns within the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those related to social inclusion, well-being, and sustainable communities. As population aging and digital transformation unfold simultaneously, ensuring that older adults can meaningfully participate in digital environments has become closely linked to SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities)^{[1][2]}. From this perspective, the digital engagement of older adults is not only a matter of technological access but also a key indicator of inclusive and sustainable social

development. Examining how older adults communicate, gain visibility, and build social ties on digital platforms therefore offers an important lens for understanding the social sustainability of platformized societies.

With the rapid aging of the population and the continuous advancement of digital transformation, the extent to which the elderly participate in the digital environment has become an important indicator for measuring social inclusion and sustainable development. In China, policies promoting active aging and digital inclusion further encourage the elderly to use platforms such as Douyin for socializing, self-expression and intergenerational communication. It is precisely in this environment that silver-haired influencers have rapidly gained popularity among the public. They challenge stereotypical constructs linked to age and take up important positions in intergenerational communication and social innovation. Despite the rising scholarly interest, existing scholarship remains largely focused on influence, popularity, or mediated representations, therefore offering little insight into the micro-interactive practices by which older content creators develop intergenerational understanding^{[3][4]}. Indeed, studies very often overlook how content creators and younger users make meaning together in comment threads and co-creative videos. Moreover, how technical architectures—from algorithmic recommendations to more interactive affordances—shape older adults’ communicative presence is often paid insufficient attention to, again, in the literature^{[5][6][7]}. And finally, how exactly silver-haired influencers contribute to social inclusion and sustainable development remains underexamined, as much of the literature so far is descriptive rather than analytically oriented^{[8][9][10]}.

This research adds new insights to aging and media studies. It adopts a process-oriented, micro-analytic focus that examines how older adults negotiate identity and agency within Douyin. Rather than emphasizing follower counts or the mere presence of older creators, this study centers comment-based dialogue, collaborative videos and other spaces where intergenerational meaning is negotiated. It also highlights the structural conditions that affect the participation of the elderly, demonstrating how their visibility, knowledge sharing and cultural practices have emerged through rapid technological changes and the opportunities and limitations created by advice, interactive tools and computer-mediated communication. Moreover, this work advances debates on social inclusion and sustainability by examining how silver-haired influencers communicate around health, traditions, emotional bonds, and environmentally responsible practices, positioning older adults as active contributors to social cohesion.

1.2 Research Objectives

This project will focus on analyzing the top 44 silver-haired influencers as well as their most representative videos on Douyin, with a total of 132 pieces, through qualitative content analysis. Moreover, this project explores how the functions of internet platforms, such as algorithms, affect intergenerational communication. Conceptually, this project will treat intergenerational communication as a form of “role-taking” as defined in symbolic interactionist theories, with the internet-enabled short videos being the platforms for this form of intergenerational interaction.

Table 1. The Objectives and Questions of Study

Research Objectives	Research Questions
RO1: To explore how silver-haired influencers establish intergenerational communication with youth	RQ1: What content creation and interaction strategies do silver-haired influencers use to foster dialogue?
RO2: To reveal how digital platforms empower silver-haired influencers to facilitate understanding	RQ2: How do platforms like Douyin enable and shape the intergenerational connections created by these influencers?
RO3: To map the pathways by which silver-haired influencers promote social inclusion and sustainability	RQ3: How do the communicative practices of silver-haired influencers advance social inclusion and sustainability?

2. Literature Review

Digital inclusion and intergenerational equity are increasingly emphasized within the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals as foundational elements of social sustainability. The SDG framework highlights that meaningful participation in digital life is closely connected to well-being, equality, and the resilience of communities, particularly in aging societies^{[1][2]}. From this perspective, digital platforms are not merely technical infrastructures but social spaces

where inclusion is enacted through everyday interaction, communication, and knowledge exchange across generations. Intergenerational equity within the SDG agenda therefore calls for attention to how older and younger users engage with one another, negotiate visibility, and co-construct social meaning in digital environments. This interdisciplinary framing links policy-oriented sustainability goals with micro-level analyses of communication, interaction, and platform governance. It provides the conceptual foundation for the following review, which examines intergenerational micro-interactions, platform architectures, and pathways toward social inclusion and sustainable development in platformized media contexts.

2.1 Micro-Interactions between Older Content Creators and Younger Users

The rising presence of older adults as digital authors has offered new opportunities to share knowledge, personal narratives and emotional presence, ultimately fostering emerging forms of intergenerational connectedness^{[4][11]}. However, many current studies concentrate on how a video contributes to social impact at the general level or re-imagining of an aging identity and not enough to micro-level mechanisms that organize interactive meaning construction in short videos and comment threads^[3]. Recent research suggests that intersubjectivity involves negotiated meaning, relational language practices and symbolic resources for the way identity and emotions are circulated digitally^{[12][13]}. Older adults and younger participants connect around a shared experience, humor, affect^{[14][15]}, but the processual and relational dynamics of these kind of communications are under-researched^{[16][17][18]}. Symbolic interactionism also can be quite useful for analyzing the coconstruction of meaning and self-identity in these interactions^[19]. But, further empirical research is needed to help elucidate the specific processes by which seniors and young follows develop and maintain cross-generational relationships in virtual space^{[20][21]}. This study contributes to this gap by discussing the embedded, micro-interactional processes that occur via video performance and comment-based discussion.

2.2 Digital Platforms and the Architecture of Intergenerational Communication

As digital media increasingly influences cultural production and intergenerational interaction, organising the flow of information with recommendation algorithms, community structures and play rules^[5]. These spaces are sociotechnical systems which impact the visibility, self-presentation, and relational involvement of older adults^[22]. Recommendation policies could extend opportunities for silver-haired influencers' and reduce thresholds for younger participants to come into contact with their work, while features such as hashtags, comment sections, gifting options all contribute to new communicative space^{[6][7][23]}. Yet, studies to date have continued to focus on the technical opportunities of platforms and tend to say little about how these architectures structure everyday modes of relationship-making between silver-haired influencers and their younger audiences^{[24][25][26]}. From a social constructivist point of view, platforms act as cultural contexts for the production of meaning and negotiation of social identity^[27]. Platform empowerment is based on affordances, community norms and wider social norms^[28]. However, little is known about the role that these infrastructures play in facilitating older people's intergenerational communication practices and how such connections sustain over time. Addressing this gap, in this study we examine how Douyin's governance configurations and affordances mediate both the form and limits of intergenerational communication.

2.3 Pathways toward Social Inclusion and Sustainable Development

This paper sets forth the investigation of the contributions of older adults' digital participation in achieving social inclusion and sustainability in the digital society of China. By storytelling, involvement, and participatory practices, silver-hair influencers embody public-facing contributors, contributing to health promotion, bond, cultural heritage, and public advocacy^[29]. Empirical studies show that their involvement is associated with reduced prejudices, improved cohesion, and increased collaborative efforts between different ages, although comprehensive theoretical analyses of the same remain uncharted^[30]. Social inclusion, as achieved through equal involvement, free expression, and joint endeavors across different ages, is further supported through older producers' active contributions, such as echoed knowledge distribution^{[8][31]}. Although silver-haired influencers play their roles in establishing cultural memory and supporting sustainability, which encompasses health practices, fraud protection, expertise in crafts, and other environmental issues, the exact pathways through which these endeavors contribute towards better social inclusions remain uncharted^{[10][32][33]}. Some studies have also highlighted how young users learn through Douyin depending on emotional and cultural needs, which further shapes the way intergenerational

meaning is formed^[34]. Social constructivism mirrors the interactional pathways of meaning, identity, and negotiation, whereas symbolic interactionist theories deal with the principles of role taking, role undertaking, and role recognition, although none remain systematized as empirical studies till now. By this background, this empirical study fills the existing gaps in this fascinating topic through its initiating pathways, studying the contributions of older producers' communicational practices, focusing on pathways towards social inclusions, as well as sustainability within the digital environment of China.

3. The Chinese Context

China is facing a challenge in the rapid process of population aging^{[9][35]}, yet with changing images of older adults by media presentation and calls for active aging from national policies^{[29][36]}. The fast digital transition further stimulates the connection of older adults to digital spaces, with them now using digital technology today not only as content consumers but increasingly also as content producers in new media environments^{[30][37][38]}. New forms of participation start to appear with more and more elderly people using digital tools^[39] allowing them to communicate and present themselves in public life. Social media platforms such as Douyin have played a key role in this process, since they shaped how people view the elderly and how they interact with younger users^{[32][33][36][40]}. These changes remind people about the significance of understanding how social and technological changes taking place in the digital space have shaped how people age, how families connect, and how social inclusion operates today^{[35][41][42][43]}.

During these turns, silver-haired influencers on Douyin have emerged by creating short videos, livestreams and interactive content around health, companionship, fraud prevention, family memory, handicrafting and rural renewal^{[9][44][45][40]}. Their personal modes of storytelling interest young viewers, engaging them in active commenting, collaborative videos and challenges^{[8][46][47]}. Douyin's algorithm recommendations and community dynamics push the content to a variety of user audiences^{[32][33][40]}, enabling intergenerational communication, shared identity, and emotional connection^{[36][44][48][49]}. The open and participatory nature of the platform nurtures identity formation, new forms of community and so on^{[31][50][51][52][53]}. However, so far, the research on Douyin influencers has mainly concerned these popularity trends or mediated images^{[10][35]}, thus the interactional strategies that silver-haired influencers use to do this How does Douyin decrease barriers for participation of older adults and how do these practices maintain solidarity between generations and create new culture have not yet been studied^{[40][43][54]}. A systematic study of these communicative mechanisms is important to unlocking China's digital transformation in an aging society^{[36][52][55]}, and provides new perspectives on cultivating intergenerational understanding and social inclusion^{[18][40][44][53][56]}.

4. Research Methods

4.1 Methodological Approach

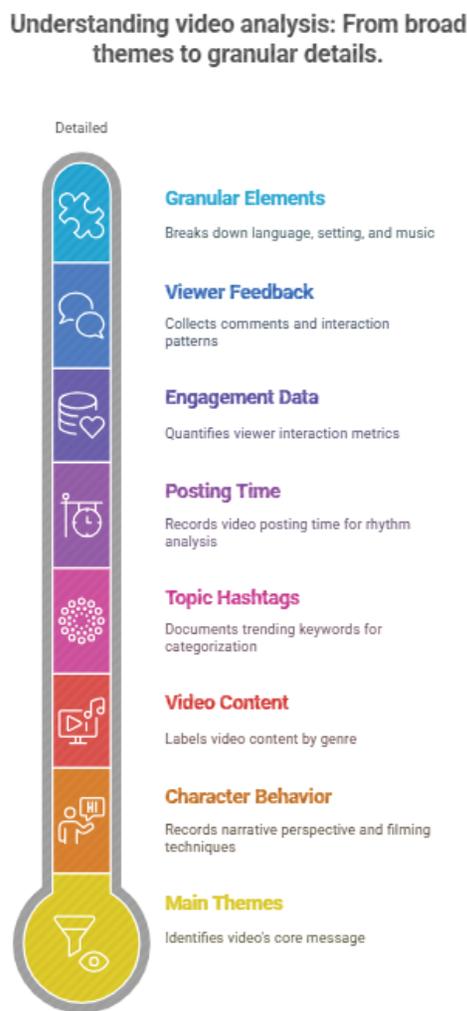
The research is framed by an interpretive qualitative approach based on social constructivist and symbolic interactionist grounds. These views understand communication as a process of involving an ongoing negotiation about meaning, identity and social relations. I use qualitative content analysis to understand how silver-haired influencers and younger users co-construct meanings through short-video performances and comment interaction. Instead of looking at normative figures, the analysis shows how digital agency and intergenerational communication are practised by older people through symbol work, role-taking, everyday narratives and interactional practices. Informed by these theoretical commitments, the analysis considers how communicative acts in form of videos, captions and comments mediate meaning making, identity practices and collaborative sense-making. This perspective then allows for a close analysis of how older producers, on the one hand, and younger audiences, on the other, are binding relational ties and co-producing generational scripts in the sociotechnical environment of Douyin.

4.2 Sampling and Data Collection

Sampling was opportunistic and purposive, we identified 44 active and popular silver-haired influencers on Douyin. Age identification was based on silver-haired influencers' self-descriptions, platform labels, or media reports. Selection criteria included: (1) a follower base of at least a moderate scale, (2) consistent content production over the previous six to twelve months, (3) a primary focus on everyday life themes such as family interactions, cooking, traditional skills, health,

companionship, rural life, or fraud prevention, and (4) exclusion of institutional, commercial-only, or inactive accounts. For each influencer, the three most-liked and most-viewed videos during the data collection period were retrieved, resulting in 132 video entries supplemented by their associated public comments and visible engagement metrics. These videos represent the silver-haired influencers’ most publicly salient content and the interactional spaces where intergenerational communication is most active. Each video was evaluated according to a standardized set of eight analytic dimensions, which structured the process of annotation and interpretation (see Figure 1). There is also limitations like potential sampling bias since focusing on top-performing videos foregrounds the most visible and engaging moments of intergenerational interaction, which suits the research objectives but may underrepresent routine, less successful, or conflictual exchanges. All data were collected manually and archived for analysis, permitting deep immersion in the material while safeguarding analytic accuracy and interpretive depth; reflexive dialogue among team members served as a check on premature closure, and supported a cooperative search for emergent patterns and alternate readings.

Figure 1. Analytical Dimensions for Silver-haired Influencer Short Video Evaluation



4.3 Analytical Approach and Theoretical Framing

The analytic process was informed by the interpretative and assumption of social constructivist and symbolic interactionist. Videos and their comment threads were thus taken to be sites of negotiated meaning and role-taking in which older fans and younger viewers co-constructed the norms, identities, and gesture systems in play within intergenerational encounters. This theoretical frame oriented the analysis to consider how performances were co-constructed in loops of feedback, how audience responses reframed silver-haired influencers’ self-presentation, and how features afforded or constrained these dynamics. For systematic interpretation, the research team adopted eight analytic dimensions that provided a uniform perspective between short-video content and interaction fields (Table 2).

Table 2. Analytic Dimensions Used in Coding

Dimension	Focus of Analysis
1. Topic/Theme	Core subject of the video
2. Emotional Expression	Affective tone conveyed by creators and audiences
3. Storytelling Structure	Narrative strategies and sequencing
4. Language/Rhetorical Style	Verbal choices, humor, framing devices
5. Invitations to Interaction	Prompts encouraging participation or dialogue
6. Platform Features	Visible uses of duets, hashtags, filters, stitching
7. Generational Address	Explicit/implicit references to age groups
8. Knowledge Transfer	Demonstration of skills, advice, life experience

Open coding was applied to the entire dataset in an iterative manner. The accompanying comment thread for each video was independently coded, capturing both explicit text as well as shifts in tenor or affect and moments of generationally confirming, reversing, or renegotiating roles. Codes that were often coded in close proximity with one another were collapsed into subthemes (eg, repetitive points on “family recipes,” “health routines,” and “life advice” constituted similarly themed subthemes around intergenerational exchange of knowledge, while jokes or shared memories formed themes like collaborative study or public intimacy). Interim concepts that pertain to one another were subsumed or collapsed into overarching themes through recursive interpretation. Coders repeatedly revisited particular videos in order to further clarify category boundaries and to test alternative interpretations, exploring how meanings were negotiated between performance and audience response. The method focused on cross-reading across videos and comment sections, enabling the research team to follow how the narrative and expressive tactics of silver-haired influencers were echoed, reframed or challenged by younger audience members.

Confidence was also achieved through a negotiated-agreement methodology. Team members coded their posted samples separately and convened to resolve any differences in coding. Regular coder meetings, shared coding sheets and reflexive memos promoted interpretive coherency across the different stages of the process, enabling deep immersion in the data to preserve authenticity and trustworthiness of interpretations, while ongoing team-stage reflexivity helped prevent premature closure and encouraged a collective search for emergent patterns and alternative readings.

4.4 Ethical Considerations

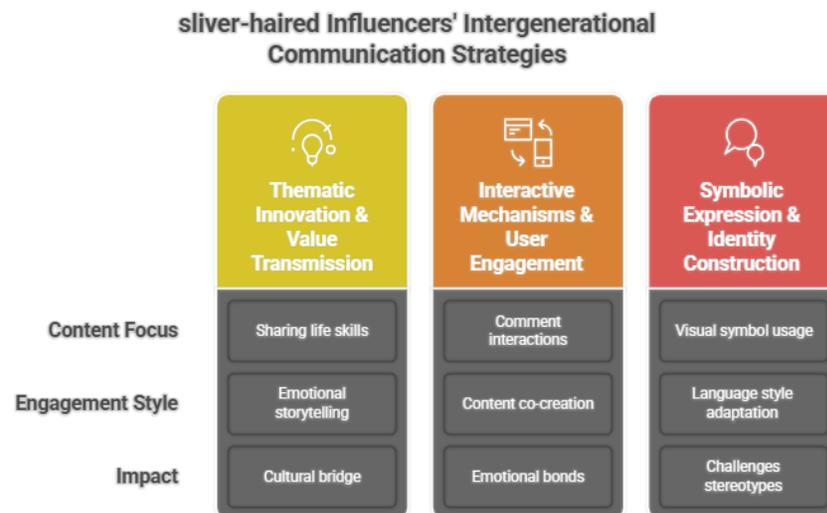
All of the data sources for this analysis are publicly available Douyin content. In order to minimize identifiability risks, as the participants included older people who are often perceived as a vulnerable population, usernames were substituted with pseudonyms, and we did not supply specific personal information or addresses that were not already publicly available in mass media. Great pains were taken not to disseminate anything that was controversial or which could be easily misconstrued. No private communications or non-public data were accessed, and all work was done in accordance with ethical standards on research involving digital trace data.

5. Findings

5.1 Intergenerational Co-Creation and the Transformation of Older Adult Identity

Responding to RQ1, in this section we demonstrate how silver-haired influencers position themselves by developing strategies of content creation and interaction that foster intergeneration dialogue (Figure 2). Across the data set, silver-haired influencers developed participatory meaning-making spaces that cut across routine practices, emotional exchange, and creative re-readings of age.

Figure2: Silver-haired netizens' diverse creations deepen intergenerational communication season



Influencers believed that such routine activities like cooking, crafting, or storytelling were invitations for younger audiences. Rather, the videos played a greater role as stimuli for youth audiences to imitate, modify, or supplement their own narratives. In the series of “Grandma Pan’s” culinary videos, audiences shared their own experiences in recreating Grandma Pan’s dishes, while “Old Qiao’s” crafting videos invited audiences to supplement their own experiences with such family histories. Such interaction began with the informal development of co-creation. This was further facilitated through the comments found within such videos. Young audiences began associating such information with their family experiences (“This is something that I learned for Grandma’s own use”), or with their own visions of their ideal older self (“This is something that I can hope for in terms of aging”). Such dialogue contributed to the development of emotional intensity focused on shared intimacy that reached beyond the confines of the video. Influencers began developing their own identity expressions, working beyond simple stereotypes that were associated with aging. Humor, fashion, as well as sophisticated identity presentation, as seen in “Grandma Wang’s” catwalk performances that presented “later” life as dynamic, engaged, as well as even desirable, began with comments that growing older was something that they “looked forward” to.

From the symbolic interactionist point of view, such cross-generational communications can be seen as demonstrating meaning-making and identity-construction as a product of perpetual role-taking^{[19][3]}. Silver-haired influencers do not only deliver knowledge, engaging in more interactional hinting that enables young audiences to envision their own future roles reflected in phrases like ‘the older self that I would like to be,’ but also position the YouTuber as their conversational partner, as opposed to ‘experts.’ By their imitation, joking, storytelling, and supplementing, youth’s mimetic, joking, or storytelling practices are a form of interactional, mutualistic role-taking, informing others about their own impression of the silver-haired influencers’ identity, as well as youth’s expectations from ‘the elder.’ Such dialogue-like practices form a shared, mutually believed ‘meaning’ in being ‘a good elder,’ ‘a modern elder,’ and ‘a ‘relatable’ elder.’

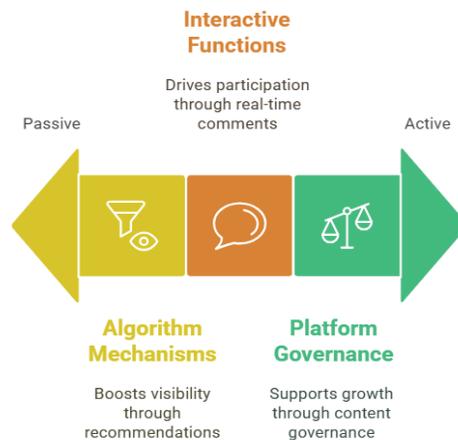
Social constructivism itself explains that these meanings are not just individualistic but co-constructed in platform-enabled settings. The comment threads and co-created videos are micro-level spaces where both generations mould age, authority, intimacy and belonging each in partly overlapping ways. Older and younger audiences transpose social roles through acts of performance through teaching, joking, remembering together and aging via participatory participation. The result is a negotiated, dynamic repertoire of generational symbols that extends far beyond the family and into shared resources in the cultural worlds of Douyin.

5.2 The Structural Role of Douyin in Empowering Intergenerational Communication

This is how the Douyin code’s algorithmic design, interaction affordances, and value system condition the space of possibilities and limits for intergenerational communication are explored in response to RQ2 (Figure 3). This influence was enacted through the circulation of content, the organization of participation, and the amplification of particular normative scripts.

Figure3: The structural role of Douyin in empowering silver-haired influencers to communicate across generations

Douyin's support for silver-haired influencers ranges from passive to active



Among the sample, videos tied to concepts like family, tradition and earthy wisdom seem to have broad appeal. Douyin’s tagging and recommendation logic (e.g., the “elder daily life” category and “grandparents’ beautiful lives”, which enabled circulation across generations) that also contributed to broadening the audience for silver-haired influencers^{[32][40]}. Interaction features, such as comments, duets, stitching and challenges promoted reciprocal engagement. Several silver-haired influencers answered viewer questions, reacted to stories people shared or incorporated fans’ ideas into follow-up videos. These were the features, which facilitated a feedback loop where meaning was hashed out across interaction rather than cemented in the original posting. The governance values of Douyin also had a molding effect. Meanwhile, content in line with the platform’s preferred narratives of “positive energy,” harmony and family togetherness tended to be more stably promoted. However, posts on loneliness, conflict or frustration were not circulated that much in the algorithmic feeds which indicate that visibility is linked to certain normative desiderata.

Under a social constructivist perspective, recommendation systems and value-tagging are used to subtly shape what type of interactions are most legible, acceptable or promotable by the platform^{[5][27]}. The algorithmic and interactional structures of Douyin serve as active mediators in the coproduction of symbolic frontiers for generational communication. Instead of being a neutral channel, however, the platform reinforces narratives that resonate with such broader cultural values as warmth for family, continuation and “positive energy.” This curation implicitly defines what constitutes legitimate generational interaction, incentivizing silver-haired influencers toward scripts that emphasize concord and care and the transmission of culture. Therefore, platform governance is closely connected to meaning production, as it dictates which identities are made visible and what relational practices become aesthetically appealing to users that influence their expectations before they even interact with a profile.

Symbolic interactionist theories may shed some light on this process. Elderly individuals must decode the symbolic language presented through platforms such as Douyin, reading signs such as ‘tags,’ ‘trending sounds,’ and so on, so that their own performances will adapt accordingly. Young individuals, in turn, would also be reading the symbolic interactions presented through the creations of other users within this predesigned symbolic space, reinforcing some notions of aging, although implicitly minimizing others. Thus, as users interact with platforms, this symbolic interaction loop is further reinforced, increasing specific ‘performances’ based on ‘algorithms,’ which provide other users with ‘responses,’ further compounding Douyin’s own symbolic evaluative frameworks. Thus, Douyin’s own symbolic interactionist landscape further cements the space not only as a ground for inter-generational interaction but also subtly shapes its governance dynamics through notions of forms of aging.

5.3 The Social Role of Silver-Haired Influencers

This subsection responds to RQ3 in explaining how silver-haired influencers enhance social inclusion and sustainability

through health communication, value reshaping, and green behaviors (Figure 4). Their efforts democratize participation across generations by rendering ordinary sense, moral imagination and environmental responsibility as publicly shareable.

Figure 4 . The Social Role of Silver-haired Influencers



Structured demonstrations of nutrition practices, levels of physical activity, bedtime routines or fraud prevention prompted individuals to mimic these behaviours in their lives; frequently they left comments indicating as much (“I’m was taught this routine from Grandpa”). This trend mirrors the strength of inter-generational communication^{[8][15]}. Meanwhile silver-haired influencers subverted normative images of ageing. The use of humor, style and storytelling with an emotional connection helped replace the deficit frames, which led younger viewers to admire what they were seeing or reattach to memories of their own family. Such exchanges had promoted recognition across age groups while viewed ageing as socially meaningful rather than marginalized^[48]. Influencers also invited their audience to reflect on the themes of sustainability and rural revival. Portraying low-waste, resource-reuse or eco-friendly farming practices in “daily life” settings offered opportunities to put similar routines to the test and swap stories about their outcomes, according to accounts such as “Grandpa Zhao in the Village” would inspire young individuals. These stories were part of what made sustainability a habit for generations.

Symbolic interactionism helps light up the process of how silver-haired influencers archive ordinary acts such as cooking, storytelling and health-bragging into symbolic commodity for collective identity doing. These are performances, stages that older people use in order to demonstrate their competence, emotionality and social relevance and then invite younger audiences to listen by opening themselves up to receive memories, anxieties or hopes. In multiple acts of gifting, regenerating symbols of care, wisdom and new life are passed from generation to generation in a widespread circle of beneficence and if recognition is being enhanced it can be assumed that community is as well. Such a process of meaning creation helps to break the stereotypes of fragility or detachment from society, revealing that aging is a dynamic place that constantly participates in society.

In this social constructivist approach, such practices also demonstrate digital culture’s productive use in facilitating inclusive dialogue. By older persons defining issues of well-being, fraud, or ecologies as issues that concern multiple ages, they use such issues to define a space of mutual concern that draws youth in^{[32][51]}. Such practices of social interaction mutually define a discourse of social membership that imagines older persons as producers within the public well-being, not as merely being its beneficiaries. But such conduct within a social constructivist perspective equally emphasizes the fragility of this symbolic enhancement, as, for example, the harmony that digital platforms promote as inclusive can mask difficult aspects of aging as well, as digital inclusion remains dependent upon algorithms’ conditional visibility.

Despite the dominant tendencies that suggest a form of intergenerational co-construction, dialogue, and expanding social participation, the results also demonstrate some points of tension that complicate this positive dynamic. Throughout the collected dataset, occasional points of misunderstanding were found, such as instances where young users satirically critiqued traditional practices, questioned the applicability of older users’ advice, or reacted with annoyance towards moralistic

undertones. Also identified were conversations that were broken up, with the young users dropping off or abruptly changing topic, as if sapped of shared group interests. Several silver-haired influencers were found to be criticized for their ‘excessive positivity,’ forced acting, or monetary collaborations, where some viewers were skeptical of their authenticity or toning. Finally, the dynamics of the platforms presented additional limitations, whereby some videos, especially those discussing sickness, loneliness, or systemic gripes, were found to be less ‘algorithmically supported’ with noticeably quieter spaces of interaction, suggesting that not all elements of aging were easily or neatly slotted within desirable scripting formulas. Such negative instances did not refute the positive tendencies found within this corpus, but merely further asserted that intergenerational dialogue within Douyin was neither seamless nor inclusive. Rather, the pathways of intergenerational dialogue, recognition, and construction, as identified within this text, would be better located as uneven.

6. Discussion

6.1 Intergenerational Communication as Symbolic Negotiation: Strategies and Social Dynamics

The story of intergenerational communication on Douyin is best understood as a process of ongoing symbolic negotiation, in which silver-haired influencers and youth audiences continually co-produce meaning, identity, and recognition^{[4][19]}. Drawing on symbolic interactionism, this study found that silver-haired influencers rarely present themselves as fixed authorities; instead, they invite dialogue, adaptation, and sometimes gentle challenge from younger viewers, a dynamic noted in recent studies of micro-interactions in digital spaces^{[3][12]}. Their content strategies often blend the sharing of personal memories, demonstrations of practical skills, and displays of family ritual, echoing Goffman’s account of the social stage, where performance is always shaped by audience feedback and collective improvisation^{[11][13]}.

What different in Chinese is that people combine family stories with public self-presentation. This is becoming increasingly common as the elderly learn to play new roles in digital life^{[9][29]}. Many videos have contents about elderly people cooking traditional food or talking about daily life, which are more like scripts that others can join in rather than just individual performances. The behavior of viewers’ adding comments, creating duets or copying videos creates new shared meanings^[40]^[48]. with increasingly engagement of people, these scripts are constantly changing and enriching. The digital space in the West usually looks different that they tend to divide age groups or push older creators aside^{[5][8]}. On Douyin, people copy videos to each other and communicate across generations in a fast and direct ways. These behaviors indicate that users value social intimacy and shared meanin^[57].

But these interactions are not always smooth. People use titles such as “wise grandparents” or “fashionable elders” which changed over time. They acquired new tones like humor, hope or even resistance^{[35][42]}. These changes indicate what people’s needs and concerns are when considering age and authority. This process is positive and continuous that it reflects both the long-term cultural concepts and the limitations of platform settings^{[55][56]}. True intergenerational conversations do not remain unchanged, instead, people constantly redraw boundaries, identities and expectations^{[16][17][58]}.

6.2 Platform Power and Structural Ambivalence: Algorithmic Inclusion and New Hierarchies

Digital platforms like Douyin aims on opening up space for free expression, but they also play the key role of powerful mediators by determining who is included and who is excluded. This influence is obvious to silver-haired influencers^{[5][22]}. Social constructivist theory claims that the digital space is never neutral, each platform has its own values and goals reflected in the way content moves and gains attention^{[26][27]}. In China, Douyin platform uses its recommendation system and tools to promote “positive energy” stories and intergenerational relationships. These characteristics help the elderly gain early recognition and establish connections with the young^{[6][23]}.

The data shows a clear tension. This algorithm can push silver-haired influencers to the mainstream, help them quickly build or join in communities while guide them towards familiar themes. The content about family, nostalgia, health and rural life reflects the platform’s own choices and values^{[7][40][59]}. This model differs from many Western platforms, where viral content typically stems from conflicts, novelty or trends that focus on young people^{[5][8]}. In China, Douyin’s gentle guidance style has led to a consensus on people’s content preferences, but it has also narrowed down the types of sounds that can stand out^{[24][25]}. Moreover, Douyin’s interactive tools have shaped the way users engage with the platform: comment threads, video collaboration and challenges have created an active and lively form of participation. These characteristics also reinforce

certain social patterns and expected behavioral patterns^{[7][44][49]}. Young audiences may shower silver-haired influencers with praise and imitation, but these gestures sometimes reinforce established hierarchies or mask subtler forms of regulation and marginalization^{[31][56]}. The logic of commercial partnership, training, and governmental certificatization further incorporates ‘silver-haired’ influencers into the economy of the platform, as well as positions their use as symbolic markers of unity and progress^{[32][55]}. Indeed, structural empowerment within both Chinese culture and within the ‘Western’ experiences is inherently oxymoronic: enabling forms of agency, yet producing new forms of stratification and erasures^{[26][27]}.

6.3 Symbolic Circulation and the Ethics of Social Sustainability: Toward Deeper Inclusion

The impact of the silver-haired influencer can be seen more in their public role as advocates for health, information, and sustainability^{[29][48]}. But the meaning of their digital existence is not simply found within the practical movement that impels those practices^{[15][32]}. But at the same time, there is an other side of a coin in Chinese that the transformation of private wisdom. Platform and community also actively promote the amalgamation of family stories, artisanal knowledge, local customs/lifestyles into a co-created public resource^{[40][44][51]}. These creative activities broaden the dimensions of social inclusion, enabling younger generations to join the co-formation of collective memory and future possibility^{[33][48]}.

However, while social sustainability is sought on digital platforms, there is a danger of it being superficial and based on only what looks good and feels right^{[10][36]}. This focus on “positive energy” and harmonious stories helps build warm relationships among generations, and can also limit open differences and hide many real aging struggles^{[35][52]}. In the Western environment, the lack of strong algorithmic control may allow more voices to emerge while it may also lead to more division and exclusion^{[5][8]}. Against this backdrop, establishing a digital space where all sounds can be heard has become an important goal. This goal is particularly meaningful for those who do not conform to the main interests of the platform^{[31][33]}.

Social inclusion requires people’ constantly attention to how visibility and silence function in online public spaces^{[8][32]}. The videos of silver-haired influencers offered opportunity for intergenerational communication which may influence young users’ views on age while reveal the limitations of protocols on the platform^[56]. The digital ethics of care and sustainable development not only come from the stories shared by everyone^[47], but also from the stable work of listening to marginal voices^[40].

From a Sustainable Development Goals perspective^{[1][2]}, the findings of this study contribute to ongoing debates on how digital participation can support social sustainability in aging societies. By demonstrating how silver-haired influencers engage in intergenerational meaning-making, everyday care practices, and knowledge sharing, the study provides empirical support for SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) by highlighting the psychosocial benefits of recognition, dialogue, and emotional connection in digital spaces. At the same time, the negotiated and relational forms of participation observed on Douyin speak directly to SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), as they challenge age-based marginalization and expand opportunities for older adults to remain visible and socially relevant. Finally, by situating these interactions within platformed communities shaped by algorithmic governance, the analysis advances SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) by showing how digital environments can function as spaces of social cohesion, while also revealing the ethical tensions and structural limits that must be addressed to ensure long-term social sustainability.

Conclusion

This project explores the reality of life in China’s developing online world by tracking the experiences of silver-haired influencers on Douyin platform. The results show that this digital space is active and shifting. Elderly people are not passive users here, instead, they take actions to reshape social expectations along with open up space for the realization and recognition of dialogue. Intergenerational relationships seem to be a continuous work rather than a fixed pattern. Silver-haired influencers invite young people to join small rituals of memory making which are creative and concerned to offer flexible forms of communication. These silver-haired influencers are not legendary figures but ordinary people who were allowed to speak up on digital platforms like Douyin. Their existence grows through the rhythm of algorithms, the preferences of the audience and the continuous search of connections among users by mobile phones. From this perspective, China’s digital aging is not merely about narrowing the generation gap, but also a creative process in which people imagine new ways to view each other, learn from one another and remain present in the social imagination of different ages. Meanwhile, this study

demonstrates the hybrid nature of digital licensing. Platforms can enhance the voices of the elderly, but they also shape what can be seen and heard. Some stories gain strength, while others may be overlapped. The work of building tolerance will never end. silver-haired influencers demonstrate agency capabilities in a space that offers permission but imposes restrictions. Their work always involves negotiations and sometimes mild resistance.

In relation to the Sustainable Development Goals^{[1][2]}, this study underscores the importance of digital inclusion and intergenerational communication as key dimensions of social sustainability. The experiences of silver-haired influencers on Douyin illustrate how older adults can actively contribute to well-being, social cohesion, and inclusive participation, thereby supporting SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities). Rather than treating older users as passive recipients of technology, the findings emphasize their role as co-creators of meaning, care, and collective memory in platformed environments. These insights suggest that achieving SDG-oriented digital sustainability requires not only technological access, but also platform governance, design choices, and community norms that value diversity, relationality, and ongoing intergenerational negotiation. This research provides practical and feasible ideas for building a more inclusive and fair digital space. It points out that design choices and community norms should respect complexity, welcome diverse opinions, and provide meaningful opportunities for expression for all age groups. This research also expands the study of digital media by demonstrating how identity, authority and social relationships are formed in daily practice. The path taken by the silver-haired influencers on Douyin indicates that society attaches great importance to this unfinished work. Their stories remind us that inclusiveness in the digital world requires effort and imagination while intergenerational relationships can be redeveloped in a relaxed and humanized way.

Funding

No

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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