

The Circle Breakout of the Silver-haired Group

— Digital Integration, Visual Content Production, and Subjectivity Construction

Wei Meng^{1,a,*}

¹Hankou College, 299 Wenhua Avenue, Jiangxia District, Wuhan, Hubei Province, China

a. 584704142@qq.com

*corresponding author

Abstract: In recent years, the emergence of silver-haired internet celebrities on social media platforms has become a fascinating cultural phenomenon. Exploring the production of short videos by the silver-haired internet celebrities provides an important window to observe the digital integration of the silver-haired community. This paper takes a perspective of circle communication and constructs a communication path for the silver-haired community's breakthrough based on the grounded theory. The research reveals that driven by external forces such as media empowerment, capital valuation, and empowerment of diverse actors, the silver-haired community utilizes narrative techniques within the context of daily life, personalized communication styles, and visual body expressions to produce visually appealing content, attracting and engaging their circle members, and promoting cross-circle communication through ritual interactions.

Keywords: silver-haired community, short videos, circle communication, grounded theory, positive aging

1. Introduction

The size of the elderly population in China is continuously growing. According to the data from the 7th National Population Census in 2021, the population aged 60 and above in China is approximately 264 million, accounting for 18.7% of the total population. This indicates that China has entered a stage of mild aging society. [1] At the same time, with the rapid development of 5G technology and the advent of the artificial intelligence era, the internet, as a new medium, has fully integrated into people's daily lives and learning. The 49th Statistical Report on the Development of China's Internet Network in 2021 indicated that the number of internet users in China reached 1.032 billion by December 2021 [2]. However, different age groups often experience intergenerational digital divide due to differences in digital technology literacy, leading to the marginalization of the elderly in the information society. The rapid development of digital and media society has exacerbated the "Matthew effect" of ICT usage and access. Therefore, it is urgent to break the closedness of intergenerational circles and overcome the echo chamber of media discourse for the elderly. This paper attempts to take the perspective of circle communication as a starting point, using the Grounded Theory to construct a communication path for the elderly to break through their circle and explore

their process of digital integration. At the same time, by showcasing the media presentation methods of elderly internet celebrities, this paper aims to explore the way they construct self-awareness in the digital and self-alienation processes of commercial logic. By addressing these issues, it will help further clarify the underlying mechanisms behind the digital integration of the elderly.

2. Research Design

This paper mainly adopts the purposive sampling method and participatory observation method for sample and data collection. The purposive sampling method is a sampling method in which the researcher selects samples and makes inferences based on subjective judgment and experience. Its main characteristics are convenience and flexibility [3]. Participatory observation method, as a qualitative research method, is based on experiential materials to establish theories. Next, using the Grounded Theory, the collected data will be coded at three levels - open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Open coding involves extracting concepts and categories from the raw data, determining the relationships between concepts and categories, and eliminating biases and subjectivity towards the raw data, integrating the abstracted concepts to form initial codes. [3]Axial coding establishes connections between the codes formed in open coding and proposes more abstract concepts, such as causal relationships, differentiation relationships, and intervention relationships. Selective coding identifies the most important core concepts among the developed concepts in the previous step [4].

2.1. Sample Selection and Data Acquisition

According to the 49th Statistical Report on the Development of China's Internet Network released by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), as of December 2021, the number of short video users in China was 930 million, with a usage rate of 90.5%. [2]The elderly population is keeping up with the trend and actively integrating into the digital world, using short video platforms to present themselves and enrich their senior lives. TikTok, as one of the largest short video platforms, has certain representativeness in studying the "internet access" practices and media production of the current Chinese elderly population. Therefore, this paper will use TikTok as the online location for participatory observation, as well as the source of samples and data acquisition.

By using the purposive sampling method, the number of followers and likes of TikTok accounts will be used as criteria for selecting research samples. Searching for keywords such as "grandfather," "grandmother," "maternal grandmother," and "maternal grandfather," TikTok accounts with over 4 million followers will be selected, resulting in a total of 19 self-media accounts. Then, since each account has a vertical theme, there are differences in popular content vertically. Therefore, this study will select the top five short video contents with the most likes from each silver-haired internet celebrity account as the research samples, resulting in a total of 95 samples. At the same time, the text in the titles of the selected TikTok short videos will be inputted as character data, and all the samples will be archived. According to the above operational plan, the specific details are as shown in Table 1:

Table 1: Basic information of silver-haired internet celebrities.

No.	Account Name	Platform	Number of Fans	Number of Likes	Main Content
1	I am Tian Laolao	TikTok	35.885 million	660 million	Sharing family interactive stories

Table 1: (continued).

2	Pan Laolao	TikTok	28.708 million	270 million	Sharing rural cuisine recipes
3	Uncle Mona	TikTok	16.301 million	210 million	Exquisite elderly lifestyle and fashion
4	The Grandma in Heels	TikTok	14.822 million	150 million	Exquisite fashion and life philosophy
5	Surfing Expert Ayi	TikTok	13.831 million	250 million	Family interactive stories
6	Shaanxi Lao Qiao	TikTok	13.097 million	62.681 million	Sharing home-cooked cuisine recipes
7	Jigong Grandpa You Benchang	TikTok	10.347 million	110 million	Life philosophy
8	Zhang Shuangli	TikTok	7.831 million	70.047 million	Exquisite daily life
9	Little Mischievous Grandpa	TikTok	7.180 million	81.884 million	Sharing daily life and love
10	Cai Yunen	TikTok	6.943 million	130 million	Food mukbang and family interaction
11	Hu Hanxi	TikTok	6.603 million	120 million	Analyzing family interactive stories
12	Dai Jianye	TikTok	6.448 million	22.642 million	Sharing knowledge of ancient Chinese literature
13	My Grandma and Me	TikTok	6.031 million	57.369 million	Heartwarming short dramas
14	Luo Gupo	TikTok	5.922 million	87.129 million	Humorous interpretation of life philosophy
15	Xuehua	TikTok	5.235 million	95.320 million	Sharing family interactive stories and performances
16	Qian Wenyan	TikTok	4.342 million	10.470 million	Sharing professional knowledge of dermatology
17	Aunt Xuerui	TikTok	4.228 million	40.950 million	Sharing daily life
18	Fashion Grandma Group	TikTok	4.237 million	42.487 million	Life fashion and life philosophy
19	Kang Kang and Grandpa	TikTok	4.172 million	57.845 million	Fashion and style

2.2. Data Analysis

This study conducted an in-depth field investigation and used participatory observation method to fully observe the digital integration and visual production process of the silver-haired population. The selected 95 sample data were processed into text form, and the original video materials were analyzed using the material analysis method of grounded theory and NVIVO12 software through three-level coding.

2.2.1. Open Coding

Open coding is the process of extracting concepts from raw data and qualitative texts, breaking down the text to identify and develop concepts, and analyzing and categorizing them. It includes three steps: (1) Conceptualization: By summarizing and extracting codes from qualitative texts, dialogues, images, and scenes in the videos, the transformation from audio-visual language to textual language is completed, forming preliminary concepts and making annotations. (2) Concept categorization: The concepts are optimized, analyzed, and selected, grouping together concepts that belong to the same category, analyzing the relationships between words, and forming concept clusters belonging to the same category. (3) Categorization: Further abstraction and naming of concept clusters. [5]Examples of the categorization process of open coding are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Open coding categorization (partial examples).

Original Sentence	Initial Concept	Initial Category
1A“吃啥?吃啥饭啊”、“味儿咋样”、“哎呀妈妈妈妈呀,快快快快点”	Dialect Expression	Personification
10A“猫儿子,眼睛眯起滴”、 11A“这晚上黢黑咋领你啊”		
1B“鹅哈哈鹅鹅”、“吃饭啊”	Colloquialism	
2B“见证啥奇迹啊,鹅哈哈鹅鹅,啥奇迹,有啥奇迹”		
5B“哈哈哈哈哈”、“啊”、 7B“哇塞”、“谢谢你呀”		
1C“别别别别别夹别夹可 我吃不了,别夹了”	Personification	
2C“臭小子,姥姥做的你见 都没见过的,哈哈”		

After conducting open coding on all extracted raw textual data, 8 categories and 25 concepts were obtained, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Categories and concepts of open coding.

Index	Category	Concept
1	Business Capital	Soft Advertising, Hard Advertising
2	Technology Platform	Software Platform

Table 3: (continued).

3	Social Relationships	Inter-generational Relationships, Workplace Relationships, Friendship Relationships
4	Personalized Expression	Dialect Expression, Personalized Expression, Colloquial Expression
5	Narrative Scenes	Rural Setting, Family Setting, Shopping Setting, Everyday Life Setting
6	Narrative Themes	Life Moments, Satirical Interpretation, Talent Showcase, Professional Skills, Fashionable Dressing, Food Preparation, Value Concepts
7	Body Imagery	Facial Expressions, Body Movements
8	Interactive Mechanisms	Fan Greetings, Fan Topic Selection, Conversations with Fans

2.2.2. Axial Coding

Axial coding is the second stage of grounded theory, which involves summarizing and abstracting the concept categories formed by open coding, and finding the logical relationships between the concept categories formed by open coding in order to induce and summarize the overall categories. Based on the relationships between the concepts in open coding, this study grouped the initial 8 categories into three main categories through induction and combination. The process of axial coding is shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Axial coding process.

Main Category	Initial Category	Category Connotation
Driving Force	Business Capital	Product Placement in Video Advertising
	Technology Platform	TikTok Provides Technological Platform
	Social Relationships	Participation of Various Actors in Video Production
Attraction	Personalized Expression	Expressing Personal Traits through Dialect and Colloquialism
	Narrative Scenes	Filming Everyday Life Scenes at Shooting Locations
	Vertical Narrative Themes	Verticalization of Content Themes, including Everyday Life Sharing, Talent Showcase, Knowledge Sharing, and Value Transmission
Propulsion	Body Expression	Exaggeration of Facial Expressions and Body Movements
	Interactive Mechanisms	Inclusion of Fan Greetings, Conversations with Fans, and Fan Topic Selection in Videos

2.2.3. Selective Coding

Selective coding is the third step in grounded theory. In this step, core categories are further selected from the main categories, and the core categories are interconnected with the main categories to explore their mutual relationships, forming a theoretical framework. At the same time, the relationships between them are verified by returning to the original raw data. The core category determined in this study is “breakthrough of the circle”, and there is a causal relationship between the main categories of driving force, attraction, and impetus, forming a relationship structure between the main categories and the core category. The specific relationship structure is shown in Table 5. Finally,

the path model of the silver-haired population’s breakthrough of the circle is derived, as shown in Figure 1.

Table 5: Relationship structure between main categories and core category.

Relationship Structure	Relationship Structure Definition
Driving Force → Circle Breakthrough	Business Capital, Technology Platform, and Social Relationships are external driving forces that facilitate the digital integration of the silver-haired group’s circle breakthrough.
Attraction → Circle Breakthrough	Personalized Expression, Narrative Scenes, Body Imagery, and Vertical Narrative Themes are attractions that enable the silver-haired group to achieve circle breakthrough through visual production.
Propulsion → Circle Breakthrough	The establishment of interactive mechanisms serves as the propulsion for the silver-haired group to achieve circle breakthrough and establish self-identity.

2.2.4. Theoretical Saturation Test

After selective coding, random contents were randomly coded to complete the theoretical saturation test. In this study, three silver-haired self-media account contents were randomly selected from the original video sample, and no new codes or categories were found, indicating that the theoretical saturation test was passed.

3. Research Findings: Path Model of Silver-Haired Community Breaking Through Social Barriers

After three stages of encoding analysis rooted in theory and theoretical saturation testing, this study has developed a path model of silver-haired community breaking through social barriers (as shown in Figure 1). The research results indicate that the breaking through of the silver-haired community is mainly influenced by driving forces, attractiveness, and impetus.

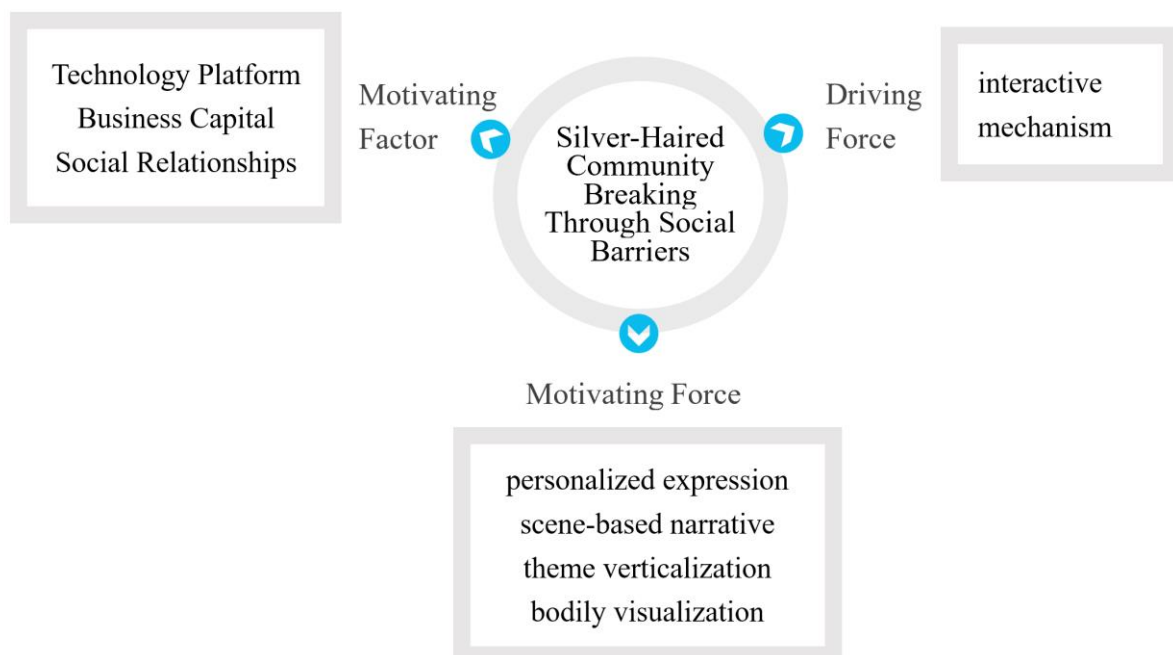


Figure 1: Model of silver-Haired community breaking through social barriers.

Silver-haired group, driven by technological platforms, business capital, and social relationships, silver-haired internet celebrities attract other circles by expressing their personal life views, values, professional knowledge, and life experiences in a personalized manner, using narrative techniques in a contextualized setting, and presenting themselves in visualized forms through short videos. They engage in self-narration and sharing of their own lives while establishing emotional connections through interactive engagement, thereby promoting the silver-haired group's breakthrough in social circles.

3.1. Digitized Integration: Objective Conditions of Silver-Haired Community Breaking Through Social Barriers

3.1.1. Media Empowerment - Technological Logic

The silver-haired community, often regarded as “digital migrants” in stereotypes, is considered the “weak” in the digital age. Due to physical limitations and deficiencies, they are forced to be on the fringes of the digital society, experiencing a widening digital divide. However, with the advent of the social media era, especially the development of short video platforms, not only has it activated individual social communication networks but also the replacement and advancement of media technologies have gradually shifted and decentralized the power of discourse, leading to the reconstruction and optimization of media ecology. With a large user base and big data algorithms, social media platforms like TikTok have emerged, not only providing the silver-haired community with the ability to access information but also opening up channels for them to express themselves. Silver-haired internet celebrities such as “Jigong Grandpa You Benchang” and “Aunt Xuerui” express themselves through short videos, sharing their knowledge and conveying their values. These silver-haired internet celebrities are no longer seen as “marginalized” in the internet era. On the contrary, they actively engage in short video content production, becoming central figures in their communities, and participating in social interactions, dialogue, and media practices.

3.1.2. Capital Valorization - Economic Logic

Driven by commercial capital, content practices on mobile short video platforms have become important means of capital accumulation and growth in the current social media landscape. TikTok, known for its autonomy and freedom of labor, has attracted billions of content creators and ordinary users through technical support, content subsidies, and the creation of popular topics. Content creators engage in creative labor and produce visual content according to the rules of TikTok, while also attracting the attention, likes, and comments of ordinary users through interactions and humor, thereby gaining followers and platform traffic. With the impetus of capital, a platform economy is built by the platform, content creators, and ordinary users, achieving a harmonious media ecology. Silver-haired internet celebrities commercialize their activities through methods such as “showcasing products in the storefront,” “live streaming sales,” “product placement in advertisements,” etc., opening up new opportunities in the silver-haired economy. This has also, to a certain extent, increased the discourse power of the silver-haired community in the internet short video industry, allowing them to have the potential to cross social barriers and influence other communities.

3.1.3. Empowerment of Diverse Actors - Social Logic

The image of the elderly in traditional media has always been associated with social issues. Now, the silver-haired community, with the support of intergenerational relationships, enters social networks through short videos, and their content production is not just a form of entertainment expression but also brings the landscape of elderly life into the public sphere. In the context of active aging policies

promoted by the government, the rise of self-expression among the silver-haired community empowered by media, and the exploration of the elderly market by the capital market, the silver-haired community has achieved breakthroughs in social barriers, promoting the rise of discourse power of vulnerable groups in the internet space.

3.2. Visual Production and Subjectivity Construction: Media Means for the Silver-haired Group to Break Through Circle Layers

3.2.1. Construction of the “Mirror Self” Through Visual Body Narratives

Language and body have always been the two major narrative codes in our lives. The arrival of the visual culture era has dissolved the dominant position of text representation, allowing the body to once again become the object of media expression, transforming the previously concealed body into the narrative subject. With the empowerment of new media, the desire for expression among the silver-haired group has continuously increased. The combination of technological logic and commercial capital visually presents people’s daily lives, and the body as a narrative code becomes an important means to construct the “mirror self.” Silver-haired internet celebrities construct personal images through social networks and consciously control their behavior in accordance with established norms. They present their personal lives in virtual online spaces through performances, completing the dual interaction of “mirror self” and “mirror self and others” through emotional resonance. American scholar Feiske believes that the pleasure of the masses is mainly “operated through the body and experienced or expressed through the body.” [6]The relatively private content of the silver-haired internet celebrities, such as their daily meals, gatherings with friends, morning runs, and daily outfits, is presented through body narratives, integrating self-expression and presentation into the public space. The transition from static textual expression to dynamic visual representation has provided the silver-haired group with a stage for self-display, and body performances have become an important social means for the silver-haired group to break through circle layers. In the discourse of silver-haired group’s short videos, the body has become a narrative medium. For example, in the case of “Uncle Mona” in Beihai, Grandpa Mo’s daily outfits have become a special symbol of his personal image. The body has been commoditized and has become a symbol and discourse of consumer society.

3.2.2. Emotional Connections Established Through Ritual Interactions

Scholar Collins proposed the theory of ritual interaction chains based on Erving Goffman’s interaction ritual. He believes that the interaction ritual chain is the foundation of social structure. Social individuals form a shared sense of presence through interaction rituals and obtain emotional energy through mutual attention and emotional connection. The party with high emotional energy will transmit emotions to the party with low emotional energy, further enhancing people’s sense of ritual. [7] On one hand, the TikTok platform establishes popular topics and creates emotional energy zones for each topic. In the production of short videos, the silver-haired group uploads their videos under popular topics, and fans generate emotional interaction through the exchange of works, spreading emotional energy. For example, the popular topic “Stories of Grandpas and Grandmas,” silver-haired internet celebrity Grandma Wang spreads her personal emotional stories, and fans generate embodied emotional imagination through video exchanges, completing the output of values. On the other hand, the interaction of likes triggers emotional resonance. Silver-haired internet celebrities produce content through interaction with fans, from active topic selection to passive topic selection. For example, in one of the videos of silver-haired internet celebrity “Aunt Xuerui” titled “The ‘Secret’ in the Hair of a 61-year-old Aunt, Sharing My Day,” the content production is completed through fan interaction, achieving knowledge sharing. The formation of emotions is based

on online interaction focused on common concerns, generating emotional connection and ultimately strengthening interpersonal cohesion, forming shared emotions. Fans gain a sense of recognition and belonging through likes and comments, and the comments from fans of silver-haired internet celebrities further establish emotional connections and interpersonal relationships. Short videos have opened up social space for the silver-haired group and facilitated interactive emotional energy.

4. Conclusion

The rapid evolution of new media technologies has once again brought the issue of “digital integration” of the silver-haired group into the spotlight. As a traditionally marginalized group, the silver-haired group has begun to actively engage in cross-circle communication as communication subjects. Empowered by media, capital, and support from diverse social entities, silver-haired internet celebrities convey their personal views, values, professional knowledge, and life experiences to audiences through short video images, engaging in self-narratives and sharing of their life stories. As representatives of the silver-haired group, silver-haired internet celebrities have taken the lead in breaking through circle layers by using visual content production as a means of digital integration and subjectivity construction, providing a good emulation path for their digital integration and subjectivity construction.

Although this prosperity demonstrates the subjective agency of marginalized groups in digital integration, we still need to remain vigilant and reflective about certain phenomena. First, we should be alert to the “false” contact of media and advocate for intergenerational support in digital reciprocation. Second, we should be cautious of the role of the new “digital labor” and establish guidelines for protecting the labor rights and interests of the silver-haired group. Finally, we need to be aware of the “visual carnival” and “excessive consumption” of the elderly living landscape, and advocate for the return of diverse social entities to rationality and contemplation, rebuilding the intersubjectivity between both parties through aesthetic taste and fostering a “positive aging” community.

Baudrillard believes that individuals’ subjectivity is lost under the control of consumer symbols, leading to a state of excessive consumption. Therefore, we need to reconstruct intersubjectivity through aesthetic taste, which involves equal communication and dialogue between both parties as subjects, rather than top-down and one-way communication. It is a process of collective participation, sharing, and co-creation. By enhancing the aesthetic taste of both parties, we can guide diverse social entities to return to rational contemplation and use a critical perspective to reshape the multiple relationships between the silver-haired group and society, technology, capital, and fans. While enjoying the dividends of media technology, we should pay more attention to and care for socially disadvantaged groups, leading them to actively embrace the digital wave.

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