NAVIGATING THE DIGITAL WAVE: THE UNIQUE CHALLENGES OF ORDINARY OLDER SHORT VIDEO CREATORS IN CHINA

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Introduction

Concerns about the aging of the Chinese population (Wang & Su, 2024), and with the Chinese government's acknowledgment of the silver-haired economy's significant development, there is an urgent need for research into the social media engagement of the older adults. Short videos, representing a novel form of information dissemination and social engagement, offer the elderly a means to connect across time and space (Zhang & Xiang, 2023). Short form video is dynamic and intuitive, making audio-visual information and public communication particularly accessible to older audiences. Notably, On 15th January 2024, the General Office of the State Council of China published the "Opinions on Developing the Silver Economy and Enhancing the Well-Being of the Elderly." This document marks the inaugural national policy directive specifically addressing the "Silver Economy" by the Chinese Government (Huang, 2024). The issuance of the Opinions policy underscores the critical role of the older demographic within the ambit of China's contemporary digital and cultural milieu, highlighting the government's commitment to integrating this segment of the population into the broader socio-economic framework.

The "Survey Report on the Use of Short Video by Middle-aged and Old People," collaboratively published by the Population and Development Research Centre of Renmin University of China and Douyin, indicates that platforms like Douyin serve as innovative tools for the older adults to acquire knowledge, engage in socialization and entertainment, and express themselves (Zhai, 2021). The short video involvement not only fortifies the social connections of older adults but also bolsters their social adaptation and participation following their exit from the workforce. The report underscores the critical contribution of short video engagement to promoting active aging among older individuals.

However, existing research, both domestically and internationally, has predominantly examined the participation of older adults in short video platforms from the user

perspective, often overlooking the significant number of older individuals actively contributing as content creators within the short video culture. Consequently, this research addresses this gap and is dedicated to examining the involvement of Chinese older individuals in the realm of short-form video culture, specifically as content creators.

Objective(s)/Research Questions

In accordance with the aforementioned gaps identified in the literature, there is an urgent need to understand the phenomenon by exploring the context behind short form video culture among old people. Thus, this research delved into the daily lives of older short video creators, with the following objectives:
a) To explore the challenges faced by those older short video creators, and;
b) To determine the range of solutions adopted by them against those challenges.
Ultimately, the researcher endevours to provide implications for future research to better understand this phenomenon.

Methodology

Data collection:
Given the prevalence of elderly short video creators on Chinese social media platforms, Douyin has been selected as the focal platform for this investigation. Consistent with the methodologies of prior studies with similar explorative aims, the researcher selected a sample size of 15 participants (Kay et al., 2023; Munsch, 2021). Selection criteria based on age and follower count, leveraging a snowball sampling methodology. The researcher initially identified potential participants through publicly accessible profiles on Douyin, with following recruitment facilitated through participant referrals.

Semi-structured interviews have been adopted and divided into three distinct phases. The initial phase was a warm-up session which allows elicitation of background information and the motivation underlying the participants' pursuit of creator status. The next phase was designed to gather the challenges and corresponding solutions adopted by the participants. Lastly, the final phase aims to capture any additional insights that are missed. Before data collection, consent forms for participation and audio recording were sent to the respondents.

All respondents are 60 years or older who are ordinary content creators. For the definition of "ordinary", the following criterion was established: the number of Douyin followers constitutes a pivotal metric for delineating the subject population, namely, the "ordinary creators." Nevertheless, the precise threshold for followers that categorizes an "ordinary creator" remains undetermined within the Chinese context. Consequently, this study adopts the delineation posited by Gupta and Mahajan (2020), stipulating that ordinary creators are those with fewer than 10,000 followers. This benchmark, while not empirically standardized within the region, provides a pragmatic basis for sample selection in the absence of region-specific metrics.

Data analysis:

The chosen data analysis method was thematic analysis, which proved particularly apt for uncovering and exploring latent dimensions and under-researched aspects within the scope of this inquiry (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method was well-suited for encapsulating the complexity of individual experiences, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the participants' perspectives. Moreover, the analysis process was iterative, with concurrent data collection and analysis, and ceased upon reaching theoretical saturation. The researcher transcribed audio recordings verbatim.

Results

This study reveals the multifaceted challenges faced by older content creators on Douyin and the adaptive strategies they have adopted to overcome these barriers. The findings indicate that self-perceived technical barriers, psychological challenges, time constraints, and privacy concerns significantly hinder older adults' participation in digital spaces, exacerbating existing digital inequalities. Despite these challenges, older content creators demonstrated their adaptive capacity through self-directed learning, reliance on intergenerational support, and proactive strategies to maintain online privacy and security.

The digital divide faced by older adults extends beyond technological access to encompass broader social, psychological, and economic dimensions. Limited self-perceived digital literacy, age-related cognitive decline, and lower literacy levels impede older creators' ability to fully engage with platforms. Psychological barriers, such as self-doubt and perceived lack of competence, further contribute to their sense of exclusion. Additionally, socio-economic factors, including caregiving responsibilities and rural livelihoods, limit their time and ability to engage in digital activities. These findings challenge the simplistic notion that older adults have ample time to engage in digital activities after retirement, underscoring the importance of understanding the diversity of contexts in which they live.

The study also highlights the importance of social support networks in bridging the digital divide. Family members, particularly younger generations, play a crucial role in helping older adults use digital platforms. However, this reliance may foster dependency, revealing a delicate balance between empowerment and over-reliance. Participants' adaptive strategies, such as learning by doing and imitating successful content, reflect their determination to overcome digital barriers despite limited formal support.

Conclusion

In sum, to promote digital inclusion, platforms like Douyin must consider the needs of older users by providing more accessible tools and clearer guidelines. Policymakers and stakeholders should also recognise the socio-economic barriers that limit older adults' digital participation and provide targeted support, particularly for those in rural or disadvantaged contexts. Ultimately, fostering an inclusive digital environment requires both technological adaptation and broader systemic efforts to support older adults' fully engagement in digital spaces.

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