

Reasons Why the Ageing Population Stands Out on TikTok and the Analysis of Its Commercial Potential

Aolin Cheng*

Univeristy of Sheffield, Sheffield S1 4DH, UK

Abstract. Even in an era of information explosion, many older people still miss out on important information due to technical limitations. But TikTok, a global short video platform, has attracted more and more senior users in recent years through its creative and entertaining content, diverse community interactions, and easy-to-use methods. It is even creating senior netizens with millions of followers. These older consumers and content contributors are showing their energy and vitality through TikTok to rewrite the way people expect older people to behave on social media. This paper investigates the accounts of older celebrities on Chinese TikTok platform to understand how older people are expanding their reach by making TikTok videos and how they can engage with the rapidly developing society through this online platform, which is regarded as a virtual playground for teenagers. In addition, this paper also discusses the undervalued commercial potential of an aging society. The data analysis reveals that older people may challenge stereotypes brought about by ageism and conclusions can be drawn that the aging group on TikTok is standing out on the platform because of its positive image and optimistic attitude towards life. Moreover, because of the increased digitalisation and the changing attitudes of older adults, their purchasing power is continuing to grow, and the aging industry is booming.

1 Introduction

Despite the widespread belief that older adults are technophobic [1], the number of older people who are tech users has increased significantly over the past decade. The number of people aged 65 and older with a social media presence has more than doubled since 2010 [2]. TikTok, a mobile app launched in September 2016, allows users to create and share short videos with a community of like-minded individuals. It utilizes various marketing techniques such as 15-second clips to engage its users and has been installed on over 300 million devices globally. In February 2019, it reached one billion users; in mid-2021, it got a total of three billion [3]. Most people know that older adults are more likely to be passive consumers of active digital content producers [4]. The coronavirus pandemic in 2019 has led to widespread negative attitudes toward older adults on Facebook. The social media hashtag #BoomerRemover has also sparked a debate about the harmful effects of ageism [5]. In an environment where both ageism and intergenerational tensions have proliferated [6], Generation Z and Millennials, the primary users on TikTok, are having challenges from older users with millions of followers [7]. To analyse videos from elderly celebrities on TikTok is because the platform has received little attention among researchers in the field of gerontology. Also, TikTok is more suitable for young people than any other social media application [8], so their reactions and interactions indicate a trend where

stereotypes resulting from ageism are being challenged.

This paper analyzes three elderly Internet celebrities on Tiktok through case studies and explores the reasons why the elderly group stands out on this platform. The author further analyzes the commercial potential of the elderly group under the background of China's aging, which is helpful to enrich the related research on the elderly group on new media platforms.

2 Reasons for the Aging Group Standing Out on TikTok

Although TikTok is commonly referred to as the virtual playground of teenagers [9], some of TikTok's older users have not only become content creators, but also amassed millions or even tens of millions of followers, debunking the notion that older people are passive users of social media [10].

2.1 A Positive Image

Most of the short videos posted by older adults on the platform and widely shared tend to promote healthy, active, and happy lifestyles. And some of the older TikTok celebrities have also profited from the platform [11]. In the past, the image of the elderly was mainly rigid, conservative, monotonous, outdated, etc. But the "silver old celebrities" on TikTok convey a completely different feeling. They are stylish, vivacious, and optimistic, with a

*Corresponding author: acheng2@sheffield.ac.uk

unique temperament endowed by age. It is this contrast of image that brings them a lot of fans.

For example, "Grandma Wang, who only wears high heels", writes on her TikTok page that age is just a number and her amazing life is just beginning. The 80-year-old Grandma Wang has nearly 15 million followers on TikTok. She is always dressed in slim-fitting clothes and high heels in her TikTok videos and often displays high standards of living and positivity. Grandma Wang calls her fans "little girlfriends" and often gently instructs them to discipline and love themselves. According to the data released by the TikTok short-video live-streaming data analysis platform "XinDou", the age group of Grandma Wang's fans is mainly distributed between 31-40 years old, followed by users aged 18-30. In March 2020, Grandma Wang officially started live-streaming with the goods. Grandma Wang's selection of products greatly caters to the needs of her young fans, with 42.43% of beauty and skin care products, followed by household products and food. The first live broadcast met expectations, with more than 8 million total viewers and sales of 4.7 million yuan. According to relevant media reports, as of June 2020, Grandma Wang's 30-day "Yinlang" (Virtual Currency on TikTok) revenue exceeded 84.47% of the live-streamers on the TikTok platform, and merchandise sales exceeded 99.53% of the platform's live-streamers. Fans of these older celebrities or consumers who buy these products tend to be people who recognise and appreciate a healthy ageing lifestyle. And these older adults, who are appreciated for their videos for staying active, elegant, and maintaining a high standard of living, are one of the groups that can stand out on TikTok. People tend to comment on this group by saying things like "I wish I could grow old like that" or "I wish I could be like her when I'm old".

At the same time, the amusing, entertaining, and down-to-the-earth older adults can also gain a lot of fans on TikTok and "I am Grandma Tian" is one of the most representative characters. During the epidemic, short videos once became a tool for most people to spend their time. In this context, Tian's grandson shared clips of Grandma Tian's daily life on TikTok. Due to the funny content and Tian's very personalised laughter, her videos went viral, and now she has more than 36 million followers on TikTok. In Grandma Tian's video, the funny daily routine between the mischievous grandson and the funny nagging grandmother brings a lot of joy to people. Unlike Grandma Wang's videos, Grandma Tian is more like a real older person. She does not have a slim figure and she wears loose clothes, likes to gossip with neighbours and friends, and is even a little grumpy and stingy. However, it is because of these imperfect characteristics of Grandma Tian that the audience can feel the vividness of the characters. Additionally, the real-life scenes make people feel warm and familiar to resonate with Grandma Tian. In the usual TikTok video, Tian's grandson will insert some brand advertisements through oral narration. And in terms of live streaming with products, Grandma Tian and her team will choose food, clothing, household items, etc. On June 21, 2020, Grandma Tian also cooperated with the local community to conduct live streaming to help farmers - using her

TikTok account's popularity to help sell the local agricultural products. And she was awarded the "2020 Qianshan Area Network Charity Person". Grandma Tian's unique personality is making more and more people love her, and her fans often comment, "Grandma is really cute!" "It's so funny".

Elegant or funny older people on TikTok can indeed gain a lot of fans, but at the same time, another group of older people is getting more and more attention on TikTok. They usually are low-income families and want to improve their living conditions by selling goods through TikTok live-streaming. They live-stream in their home, with no complicated equipment, rehearsed words, or even little expression. Throughout the process, they usually sit up straight and introduce the goods in less-than-standard Mandarin. But they are gaining more and more fans because of their sincerity and earnestness.

2.2 The Establishment of Intimate Relationships with Strangers

When those older adults post their work on TikTok to bring positive energy to people, they also feel the warmth that the community brings to them. Many supportive words and emojis like roses or thumbs up can always be seen in their comments area. Their interaction suggests [12] a concept of 'stranger intimacy'. They define stranger intimacy as "an open, conditional relationship, albeit a very brief one. It is possible for two people who do not know each other to establish the emotional structure of understanding and even friendship or love through this relationship," The "stranger intimacy" seniors can obtain on TikTok creates a caring atmosphere, and its presence fosters their social participation. TikTok helps seniors transcend their physical location and get emotional support by providing them with new forms of convenient face-to-face communication and the opportunity to chat in real-time [11].

The fact that more and more older people can be active on the TikTok platform shows people a trend that the rapidly developing society has not abandoned the elderly. There is a group of older adults who are willing to accept and try new things, lead the lives of young people with their unique experiences, and infect young people with an optimistic attitude towards life.

3 Analysis of the Business Potential of the Ageing Population

In China, the official definition of middle-aged is over 40 years old, while the definition of elderly is over 60 years old. However, in a research reported by Wavemaker, an international marketing agency, "Seniors in China are the Hidden Treasure", it was found that if middle-aged and older people were to define their own age boundaries, they would consider people to be middle-aged until they are 49 and older until they are 66. This is a phenomenon that Wavemaker has named 'ageing procrastination'.

3.1 The Increased Digitalisation

In the report, middle-aged and elderly Chinese are divided into three generations according to their different social backgrounds during adolescence. Those born between 1934 and 1950, who experienced the first 15 years of the founding of New China during their youth, are known as "WITNESS OF REVOLUTION" and have a strong sense of collective values. The generation born between 1951 and 1963 experienced the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution when they were young but resuming their journey. They are known as the generation that "TOUGHENED NEW-CHINA 1st GENERATION". The generation born after 1963 experienced reform and opening up during adolescence and is known as the "THE OPENING UP NEWBORNS".

If these three generations are used to redefine 'middle-aged and older', then a number of judgements about this group will have to be re-examined. For example, it is often said that middle-aged and older people are slow to accept new things, such as new technology, new ways of consuming online, etc. But even in the generation of "WITNESS OF REVOLUTION", the digitalisation rate is around 30%. In the "TOUGHENED NEW-CHINA 1st GENERATION", the level of digitalisation is already close to 50%. And in the generation of the "THE OPENING UP NEWBORNS", the level of digitalisation is already more than 70%. Looking at the overall figures across these three generations, it can be found that they are not less exposed to new technology and new ways of consuming. For example, 40% of people usually go to Taobao, Pinduoduo and other websites for online shopping. The number of people who usually use Alipay is 48%. The percentage of those who use wearable devices is 20%. Also, more than 3/4 of the middle-aged and elderly group usually use websites such as Tencent and IQIYI to watch videos online. In addition, there has been a great controversy about the lifestyle of the elderly - for example, the stereotype like loneliness. The Wavemaker report shows nearly 70% of older adults say they "rarely" feel lonely. On the contrary, their lives are colourful, including walking, watching TV, going online, listening to music, and drinking tea. Many people also like gardening, shopping, and dancing. Regarding lifestyle, many older adults are not lonely and hope to have more independent time and arrange their own life.

3.2 A Continued Increase in Purchasing Power

According to data released by the National Bureau of Statistics, China's population over the age of 60 will double to 400 million around 2033 and reach 1/3 of the country's population by around 2050. It is predicted that between 2014 and 2050, the scale of China's elderly industry will grow from 4.1 trillion yuan to about 106 trillion yuan, and the proportion of GDP will increase from 8% to around 33%, making China's elderly industry with the most significant market potential. According to Wavemaker's calculations, in the present day, the annual spending power of the ageing population in China's first to third-tier cities is as high as RMB6.64 trillion per year, already far exceeding the assessments of different

institutions.

3.3 Vigorous Development of Ageing Industry

In addition, many industries have been severely challenged by the sudden arrival of COVID-19 in 2021, and the public's health perception has risen to a new high. Wavemaker's survey of three generations of silver-haired people in China's first- to third-tier cities shows that the whole ageing industry demonstrates a vigorous development under the "healthy China" strategy and China's unique advantages. China's ageing industry presents three major changes in policy trends, industrial structure, and driving force. In addition, the number of new startups related to the ageing industry with registered capital (the total amount of capital contributions subscribed by the shareholders of a Chinese company, which must be registered with the business registration authority, that is, a competent office of the State Administration for Market Regulation) of more than 10 million yuan reached more than 1,900 in 2020. 2021 is destined to be a milestone starting point for developing China's ageing industry. The report also points out that the health industry, as the core of China's ageing industry, will develop towards greater segmentation and diversification. Among other things, the development of intelligent technology will further give rise to innovative practices in the ageing industry. The number of intelligent ageing products and services tripled from 2018 to 2020. The penetration of emerging medical devices and purification and innovative wellness products in households increases further.

Whether retiring from work and returning to life, building interest-driven social networks, or moving to a new city or community, old age opens up "new" roles and networks. Growing up in a collective-oriented social environment, they seek the sense of belonging and identity of the group, show increasing social needs and are keen on group action. This trend means a huge market space for the consumption of hobbies and social activities of the elderly.

In addition, for the elderly population with a large span of generations and age levels, the younger consumption attitude is also reflected in their choice of products. Moreover, their willingness to consume high-quality and imported products is increasing. This "new" elderly population, with more decent, comfortable, quality of second life expectations, will undoubtedly become a huge consumer market in the future.

4 Conclusion

The phenomenon of ageing is a social issue that is fraught with difficulties and opportunities at the same time. The importance of the huge consumer market lies not only in its commercial value but also in its social significance. This study explores the reason why the elderly adults can stand out on TikTok and the commercial potential of the aging industry. To conclude, TikTok's elderly adults have a unique affinity with the world, and their ability to bring in goods and business value is something worth tapping

into. Although the elderly are not as responsive as they could be in terms of mobile phone operation, their good spirits, confidence, and happiness have influenced this audience. Also, through their inexpensive and good quality products, they are more likely to win the goodwill of this audience and strengthen the adhesion of both parties. This not only strengthens their sense of self-development, self-fulfillment, and self-improvement, but also updates the knowledge and skills of the elderly and improves their social adaptability. Meanwhile, the rapid growth of the elderly population provides an important opportunity for the development of the ageing industry. Vigorously developing the ageing industry can not only meet the needs of the elderly and improve their well-being, but also become a positive driving force to expand domestic demand and promote economic growth.

References

1. Jenkins, J. A.: An ageing workforce isn't a burden. It's an opportunity. World Economic Forum (2019). from <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/01/an-aging-workforce-isnt-a-burden-its-an-opportunity/>.
2. Faverio, M.: Share of those 65 and older who are tech users has grown in the past decade. Pew Research Center (2022). from <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/01/13/share-of-those-65-and-older-who-are-tech-users-has-grown-in-the-past-decade/>.
3. Surabhi, S., Shah, B., Washington, P., Mutlu, O., Leblanc, E., & Mohite, P. et al.: TikTok for Good: Creating a Diverse Emotion Expression Database (2022). Retrieved 13 August 2022, from https://openaccess.thecvf.com/content/CVPR2022W/ABAW/html/Surabhi_TikTok_for_Good_Creating_a_Diverse_Emotion_Expression_Database_CVPRW_2022_paper.html.
4. Jenny, W.: Older adults as digital content producers | Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (2013). Retrieved 13 August 2022, from https://dl.acm.org/doi/abs/10.1145/2470654.2470662?casa_token=WZjorSgwyJ8AAAAA:nxDER-OgXnHHLAKvJioQ1qPiOSa6I-JcuYuhsRHPAbY94wkkL8h4HYMDP-OSvxwflczphOTQglV0Ow.
5. Fraser, S., Lagacé, M., Bongué, B., Ndeye, N., Guyot, J., & Bechard, L. et al.: Ageism and COVID-19: what does our society's response say about us? (2020). Retrieved 13 August 2022, from <https://academic.oup.com/ageing/article/49/5/692/5831206>.
6. Ayalon, L.: There is nothing new under the sun: ageism and intergenerational tension in the age of the COVID-19 outbreak (2020). Retrieved 13 August 2022, from <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-psychogeriatrics/article/there-is-nothing-new-under-the-sun-ageism-and-intergenerational-tension-in-the-age-of-the-covid19-outbreak/E14BB8E757B3861FFB198E8C0CDB38DA>.
7. Dellatto, M.: Meet the famous boomers and grannies of TikTok. Nypost.com. (2019). Retrieved 13 August 2022, from <https://nypost.com/2019/12/18/meet-the-famous-boomers-and-grannies-of-tiktok/>.
8. Muliadi, B. Council Post: What The Rise Of TikTok Says About Generation Z. Forbes (2020). Retrieved 13 August 2022, from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbestechcouncil/2020/07/07/what-the-rise-of-tiktok-says-about-generation-z/?sh=4592748a6549>.
9. Kurzrock, E.: Intensified Play: Cinematic study of TikTok mobile app (2022). Retrieved 13 August 2022, from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/335570557_Intensified_Play_Cinematic_study_of_TikTok_mobile_app.
10. A.K., L.: Social Media Use of Older Adults: A Mini-Review (2013). Retrieved 13 August 2022, from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/236224221_Social_Media_Use_of_Older_Adults_A_Mini-Review.
11. Yu, Y.: Can TikTok promote a healthier ageing paradigm? A case study of older digital celebrities from China (2022). Rgs-ibg-onlinelibrary-wiley-com.sheffield.idm.oclc.org. Retrieved 13 August 2022, from <https://rgs-ibg-onlinelibrary-wiley-com.sheffield.idm.oclc.org/doi/full/10.1111/area.12777>.
12. Koch, R., & Miles, S.: Inviting the stranger in: Intimacy, digital technology and new geographies of encounter (2020). Journals-sagepub-com.sheffield.idm.oclc.org. Retrieved 13 August 2022, from <https://journals-sagepub-com.sheffield.idm.oclc.org/doi/10.1177/0309132520961881>.