The media image of Chinese older people: From stigmatic stereotype to diverse self-representation

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Abstract
From the perspective of communication and media studies, this article explores a comparison between the image of older adults presented on media and online self-representation facilitated by the use of smartphones. The qualitative textual analysis was conducted with a sample (228 posts, from 1 January to 31 December, 2019) selected from a representative WeChat Public Account targeting at older adults in China. The results demonstrate that leisure and recreation is the most frequently mentioned topic (58%) with memories of past life receiving the least references (3%). The striking features of popular posts among older people include a highly emotional tone, bright colours and multimedia. Sentiment analyses shows 68.42%, 13.16% and 18.42% of positive, neutral and negative emotions, respectively. A generally positive attitude of self-representation is in a sharp contrast with the stigmatic media image of older adults. The article concludes that the visibility of Chinese older people may help to reduce the stigma surrounding old age in China.

Keywords
Older adults, public image, self-presentation, the smartphone, WeChat

Introduction
A decline in fertility and an increase in life expectancy have resulted in an aging population in China, with an increasing number and proportion of people who are above 60 years of age. In 2020, around 12.6% of the population in China is above 60 years old and the number is rapidly growing. It has been predicted that China will enter an advanced stage of aging by 2022 (China Development Research Foundation, 2020). Such a demographic shift has profound implications for Chinese people and society.

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It has been well documented that in traditional Chinese society, older people were widely respected and the concept of ‘filial piety’ (xiào) spoke to a popular recognition of old age as a ‘treasure’ to the society and their families (Levy & Langer, 1994; Yoon et al., 2000). Meanwhile, earlier studies show that ageism was more prevalent in Western countries than Eastern countries (Chang et al., 1984; Palmore, 1975). However, China has gone through a series of profound social transformations in the past century, and discrimination towards older people has become a social problem. In China today, it is common to see older adults as a burden (Bai et al., 2016; Zhenwu et al., 2014), despite the fact that some researches show that older adults contribute to the society in various ways (Lei et al., 2015). More recent comparative studies on age-related bias between Western and Eastern cultures suggest that the latter does not show more positive attitudes towards the elderly (Ryan et al., 2004). Cuddy et al. (2005) find both collectivist and individualistic cultures regarding old people as ‘warm but incompetent’ consistently. Some researchers even argue that age-related stereotypes reflect a major shift towards a negative attitude among Chinese people, potentially even more critical and negative than American attitudes (Boduroglu et al., 2006; Luo et al., 2013).

However, another profound social transformation is taking place, with a growing number of older people in China who have adopted the smartphones and gained access to the Internet. The smartphones and the Internet have become increasingly important for older adults. Many researches explore the connections between the Internet and social support, social capital and quality of life among the older adults (Baams et al., 2011; Damant et al., 2017; Sum et al., 2008). Through smartphones, the elderly can get social support and increase their sense of being in control (Leist, 2013), and it also can help older adults with limited mobility to maintain their social networks and well-being (Choi & DiNitto, 2013; Winstead et al., 2013). Other existing researches mainly concentrate on factors influencing the acceptance of the Internet and Internet utilization among the older age group (Gracia & Herrero, 2009; Levy et al., 2015; Menéndez Álvarez-Dardet et al., 2020; Seifert & Schelling, 2018; Zhou, 2019). There are also many studies which focus on the benefits and limitations of the use of the Internet by older individuals (Kowtko, 2012; Silva et al., 2018).

According to Safko, social media has transferred discursive power from traditional media towards individual and organizations, and this transition means that consumers can spread information by themselves (Safko, 2012). As smartphones have been an integral part of the daily life of older people in China, this previously ‘silent group’ have begun to take control over their own images and make their voice heard (Li, 2017). Although the change is significant in many ways, little academic research has been done about self-representation on the Internet among older adults in China. Based on a comparison between the images of the older adults portrayed by others and the images represented by older adults themselves, this article explores the image of older age in the Chinese media landscape and discusses the impact of social media on the self-representation of older adults in China.

**Mediated image of Chinese older adults**

Scholars assert that more negative attitudes towards aging may result from a combination of economic, demographic, cultural and social factors. Two specific reasons for ageism includes a lack of sufficient knowledge of aging and stereotypes against old age in media (Gellis et al., 2003; Kimuna et al., 2005). Cultural ideas of aging are reflected in the media, which both produces and reproduces ideas of age. Edström (2018) argued that the media serves as a point of reference supplying ideas of age which influences the viewer’s explicit and implicit attitudes and beliefs towards older adults and old age.
This article evaluates the mediated image of older adults using four key factors of media content: visibility, topic, sentiment and techniques. The ‘visibility’ of older people in the media can be understood as the proportion of the content related to older adults and its consistence with offline reality. ‘Topic’ refers to the media’s concern about older adults, for example, health conditions, loneliness and family conflicts. ‘Sentiment’ refers to the media’s emotional orientation and opinions towards the older age group, for example, positive, negative and neutral. ‘Techniques’ refers to the report strategies that the media has found to be effective in the content about the older people, for example, labelling and stigma.

**Under-represented older age in media**

A major problem is that older people are commonly ‘under-represented’ in media, which means that the proportion of content featuring older adults is not consistent with the age structure of the population in reality. In the mass media age, decisions regarding information dissemination are dominated by media agencies. Although the older adults tend to have more loyalty to traditional media forms, it has been found in several countries, for instance, that older adults are strongly under-represented in all kinds of TV programmes, including advertisements, talk shows and movies (Kessler et al., 2004). Ursic et al. (1986) found that older adults, those who appeared to be above the age of 60 years, are on average featured in 9% of advertisements for a given year, whereas people in the age of 60-plus constitute anywhere from 12% to 16% of the actual population. It is concluded that while older adults are seen on television, ‘old age’ is excluded (Kessler et al., 2010). The exclusion of old age is influenced by established advertising system in the West, but it is not uniquely western. Due to the advertising system, older people who have low purchasing power and intention have been absent from traditional media for a long time. The absence indicates an assumption that older people have lower income, less ability and lower social status.

Although more older adults gain access to the Internet, the proportion of netizens over 60 years is still relatively small (CNNIC, 2020). Older adults are potentially excluded from the digital society and online resource distribution is unfairly tilting towards mainstream audience as before. To be specific, elderly characters seldom appear in online programmes, series, variety shows and short videos which are mainly made for young people, and there is still a lack of content generated for the older age group as before. Media also pays more attention to male senior citizens than female, while in fact the latter are more familiar with the term ‘online social network’ and are also more frequent users compared to male participants (Vosner et al., 2016). The same is true in both urban seniors and rural seniors. This reflects the sexism and regional discrimination are embedded in ageism that makes it a complicated social problem.

**The stigma of old age**

Stigma means that the media has certain tendencies of emphasizing some characteristics of older people over others. Although old age is associated with both positive and negative traits, the exhibition of ageist attitudes has been more widely documented. Extensive researches show how mainstream society stereotypes the older population as more negative (incompetent, frail and dependent) than positive (warm, experienced and functioning), and the stereotypes are pervasive and persistent (Bai et al., 2016; Cuddy et al., 2005; Harwood et al., 1996; Jiao and Chang, 2020). The preference of media for reporting negative stereotypes of the elderly leads to a media image of the group as incompetent, frail, outdated and wretched.

It is evident that the mainstream newspapers in China tend to show the older population in an unfavourable light; they construct a homogeneous public image of older adults as incompetent.
The *Peng Yu case* in 2006 causes the stigma towards older people. On 20 November 2006, a young person called Peng Yu who helped a fallen old woman, Xu Shoulan, only to be sued for causing the accident. In the first judgement, Peng Yu was asked to make good the damage to the cost of more than ¥40,000, which caused much controversy across China. In the case, the focus of public opinion shifted from digging for the truth to abusing Xu Shoulan, though it was proven that a collision had happened. The majority of the news was spiked with malice towards the old woman, for example, ‘Being sued with 40,000 yuan for helping people?’ (New Express Daily), ‘The man helping old woman up was accused’ (Southeast Express), and ‘Peng Yu case causes a great retrogression of moral standards, according to netizens’ (China Youth Daily). The final result of the case led to the elderly being labelled with negative traits like ungrateful, mean, domineering and imperious.

Even as social media creates a two-way interaction, senior citizens still do not have dominance over discourse in the Internet era, due to social prejudice and their own physical and psychological characteristics (Li, 2017). Facing the distorted and stained image on the Internet, elderly people seldom have an opportunity to voice their opinions (Wang, 2014). As a result, the construction of the elderly image is still dominated by the other group, like the younger generation.

With more controversial events like grabbing seats (Figure 1-1), square dance noise (Figure 1-2) and scams (Figure 1-3) being reported, the resentment towards older people is common online. The widespread stigmatization of the elderly online further excludes them and even makes them feel guilt and shame about their own age group (Wang, in press).

**Research questions**

Although senior netizens make up a far smaller share of Internet users in China, the number has continued to grow in recent years (13.5% in 2018, 13.6% in 2019 and 16.9% in 2020). The figure of Internet penetration is even higher among older people in urban China (CNNIC, 2020). This indicates that the Internet has increasing penetration among older people and is becoming an important source for them to represent themselves. Beyond being a way to get information, the Internet provides opportunities for individuals to express personal opinions. It is therefore important to know about the older people’s self-representation on the Internet and three research questions are formulated as follows:

**RQ1:** What are the most concerned topics related to the older adults?

**RQ2:** How the old people represent themselves on the Internet?

**RQ3:** What are the emotional tendencies in the articles related to the older group?

**Methodology**

**Sampling**

The data used in this study are collected from a representative WeChat official account called *Zhiqingwang* 知青网. The sampling consists of two stages. The first stage takes a top article as a unit and only the top articles between 1 January and 31 December in 2019 are downloaded and saved. Then, the researcher examines and seeks out these articles. Four articles are duplicated and removed from the sample. Consequently, the final sample records a total of 228 articles from *Zhiqingwang* in 2019.
The study mainly focuses on this specific platform for several reasons. At the end of 2019, WeChat has become the most popular and important Internet platform in China, with 1.15 billion active users per month. With the help of the mini programme, official account and the other service, WeChat is not just an instant messaging service, but is also an integrated platform of communication, payment and information. According to statistics, more than 20 million official accounts, which are platforms focus on user service and management, have been registered and played an important role in online content production and consumption. Any individuals, media and organizations could post stories and information on official accounts, providing a new way for registered users to obtain information, read books and study. In particular, reading and sharing articles of WeChat public accounts has become one of the most common uses of the smartphones among Chinese older people (Wang, in press).

Zhiqingwang is an official account founded in 2012 and operated by several older adults, aiming to develop a platform for older adults to preserve memory. As an online platform, Zhiqingwang has established a normalized system for generating content. It releases several articles everyday (except for special cases), and its diverse content extends beyond collective memories, such as the latest news, tourism and health-related information. To monitor and analyse the impact of official accounts, QingBo Big Data corporation created the WeChat Communication Index (WCI) in 2014.
and have iterated the model multiple times to verify its scientific rationality (Xiang & Shen, 2017). WCI is widely regarded as an authoritative indicator system which takes multidimensional indicators into account to ensure its accuracy. After 8 years of development, Zhiqingwang has attracted a large number of subscribers, and according to QingBo Big Data, more than 22,000 active followers pay sustained attention on it. By calculating ‘page views’, ‘likes’ and other indicators in multiple ways, the WCI of Zhiqingwang is 1179.02. The figure indicates its great popularity and significant influence.

**Zhiqing (educated youth)**

Another reason that the Zhiqingwang WeChat platform is representative of the older generation is because of its name, ‘zhiqing’, which means ‘educated youth’. It is something that all older adults in China are familiar with. ‘Zhiqing’ is a particular historical ‘trademark’ of the Chinese older generation who were mobilized from the 1950s to 1970s and dispatched to rural villages (Yang, 2009). This cohort was involved in the Cultural Revolution and the ‘Up to the Mountain and Down to Village Movement’, where they encountered various physical punishments, emotional isolation and political prosecution. These experiences have a great impact on the older generation’s social identities and life course.

By the early 1980s, many ‘zhiqing’ had returned home. Since then, members of this generation tried to record and articulate past experiences through various means (Galik, 1982; Lau, 1982). Nostalgia has become a common collective emotion among this generation and is a means of identity construction by connecting the present to past, and of directing moral critiques at the present (Yang, 2003). More recently, the Internet, especially social media, has become a virtual space for former ‘zhiqing’ to bring long-separated friends together online. Diverse online forms, such as websites, forums, blogs, WeChat public accounts and WeChat groups, as well as short videos, bind the active participants into a virtual community to reflect upon the Cultural Revolution years, reminisce on their past life, maintain emotional connections and discuss social transformations.

It should be noted that not all Chinese older people belong to ‘zhiqing’ generation as they are a special group in Chinese society. Most of them are well-educated and live in urban area now, so they could not certainly represent all the older people with inherent complexity. According to China Internet Network Information Centre, by March 2020, the Internet users in rural area account for 28.2% of all netizen, which means urban Internet users account for the vast majority. Besides that, educated youth are more skilful at using the Internet and smartphones to obtain information and express themselves than rural netizen, because of their higher education and economic position. That is why the ‘zhiqing’ generation, who provide a possibility for the study to know self-representation of older adults, is a good sample of senior netizen in China nowadays.

**Coding**

A textual analysis of Zhiqingwang’s top articles has been conducted. A pilot study with 50 articles has been used to test the analysing schemes and train the assistants. The initial analysing scheme is formed after discussion about the first attempt. Then, each of the articles has been read by two people. We keep the analysis for articles when the team agree, and the conflicting results are resolved through team discussion. This produces more reliable data than analysis involving only a single coder.
Based on the research questions of this study, the following content were refined from each article: (1) topic categories; (2) the main content of each article; (3) title styles; (4) the usage of multimedia; (5) originality and (6) sentiment of the passages. From 1 January to 31 January 2020, the team analysed the 228 samples, reaching an average inter-rater agreement rate of 91%. That indicates acceptable levels of inter reliability.

Results of textual analysis of Zhiqingwang

Topics

The first research question (RQ1) focuses on the important topics related to the elderly on the Zhiqingwang. A textual analysis of the 228 posts yields the 6 topics and 17 specific content categories, as listed in Table 1 in order of frequency. To define topic categories, an inductive procedure has been followed. The 17 kinds of specific content can be subsumed under 6 general topics: leisure and recreation, healthy lifestyles, latest events, daily life, intergenerational relationships and reminiscence.

As Table 1 shows, the most frequent topic is leisure and recreation overall. This type of topic accounts for more than half of the sample (58%, n = 132). About 16% (n = 37) of the articles are about healthy lifestyles of the elderly and about 10% (n = 23) of the articles mentioned latest news. In addition, articles focusing on the daily life of older people, intergenerational relations and reminiscence account for 8%, 5% and 3%, respectively.

Table 1. Organizing topics of the selected articles on Zhiqingwang.

| Topic              | Main content                                | Counts | Total/ percentage |
|--------------------|---------------------------------------------|--------|-------------------|
| Leisure and        | Inspirational articles                      | 59     | 132/58%           |
| Recreation         | Festival celebrations and blessings         | 45     |                   |
|                    | Introduction of artistic works              | 12     |                   |
|                    | Tourist attractions introduction            | 10     |                   |
|                    | Introduction of traditional culture         | 6      |                   |
| Healthy lifestyles  | The tips of Yangsheng (self-care)           | 29     | 37/16%            |
|                    | The proper attitude towards health           | 8      |                   |
| Latest events      | New endowment way                           | 11     | 23/10%            |
|                    | New pension policies                        | 7      |                   |
|                    | General news                                | 5      |                   |
| Daily life         | Inspirational stories of old individuals    | 15     | 18/8%             |
|                    | Fraud prevention                            | 2      |                   |
|                    | Retired life                                | 1      |                   |
| Intergenerational  | Parent–child affections                      | 5      | 12/5%             |
| relationship       | Generational conflicts                      | 4      |                   |
|                    | Tips on how to improve intergenerational relations | 3 | |
| Reminiscence       | Nostalgic narratives                         | 6      | 6/3%              |
The content in selected articles is wide-ranging, including generational conflicts and affections, life values and skills, tourism and culture, latest news and past memories, self-care and retired life, and many other aspects of human life. This shows that rather than only focusing on aging, the older adults pay their attention to a broad spectrum of activities. The next session explores the specific content of the popular topics.

**Leisure and recreation.** The category of Leisure and Recreation covers all kinds of content which refer to recreation and pleasures of life. Examples of festivals celebration and blessings (see Figure 2) include New Year, Army Day, National Day, Mid-Autumn Festival, Teachers’ Day, Zhongyuan Festival, Father’s Day, Laba Festival and others related to Chinese solar terms.

Inspirational articles with the purpose of passing ‘positive energy’ are also known as ‘chicken soup for the soul’. Having experienced ups and downs in past life and unprecedented changes of the country, older people are still motivated by their generational ‘spirits’ that help them to undergo sufferings and hardship and also help them to live a better life nowadays. Optimism, industry, tolerance and self-discipline are central in their values, which also can be seen commonly in these inspirational articles. For example, the articles as shown in Figure 3 discusses the importance of keeping a positive mind and busy. One reads,

nobody’s life is always happy, and the key to have a happy life is to let worries go . . . if you are narrow minded, then a little trouble will lead to a big problem. Whereas if you have an open mind, no matter how big the problem is, it is not a big deal . . .

The other one reads,

a happy and meaningful life is always a fulfilling life . . . while indolence is along with negative emotions, like anxiety, mourning and sorrow, busy life is the key to make people energetic and optimistic . . .

The introduction to the artistic works on Zhiqingwang recommends various artistic forms for older adults related to their past lives, such as documentary film, music, TV drama, and dance epics. For example, a TV series called ‘The Age of Return City’ records the struggle and disorientation, love and friendship of the educated youth after they went back to city. ‘The East is Red’, the most popular song in the Cultural Revolution, continues to be sung by almost every educated youth nowadays. This kind of content record and reflect their special time in a subjective and aesthetic way and recall the collective memories of the ‘zhiqing’ generation.

The content about tourist attractions focuses on famous places in China, including both natural scenery and anthropological spectacle. The introductions involve specialty, delicacy, historical figures and culture. Traditional culture mainly refers to traditional arts (paper cut), folk custom (sweep the dust and put-up couplets) and polite expression (honoriﬁc).

The selected articles highly value festivals, especially Chinese traditional festivals. For the older adults, festivals offer opportunities for family gatherings, which are less common in contemporary China as a result of many young people moving away from home to work. It also shows that in contrast to the common stereotype of a monotonous senile life, a colourful lifestyle containing travel, reading and artistic appreciation exists. Moreover, some scholars suggest that the emphasis on past tradition and experience is a subversive way to challenge the present (Unger, 1993), while in the examined texts, the feelings tend to be positive towards both past and present life.

**Healthy lifestyles.** There is no doubt that health is the top concern of the elderly and this is reﬂected in the selected content. This topic embraces two content categories including values and tech-
niques of keeping healthy. As a traditional way of health preservation, yangsheng养生 has a long history in China and is closely related with self-care. The purpose is to promote well-being in individuals and communities, to generate strength and resilience, as well as an acuity of the sensory or spiritual faculties among the practitioner (Wang & Lo, 2019). Many activities, such as martial

Figure 2. The screenshots of specific samples of festival celebrations and blessings. The left is of Thanksgiving Day and the right is of Chung Yeung Festival.

Figure 3. The screenshots of specific inspirational essays.
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As people’s health awareness increases, the wind of yangsheng blows over China, especially among older adults. Hardship in the past meant there was a lack of food, clothes and money, which leads to many older adults would like to sacrifice their health for saving money. Refusing to go to hospital for treatment or physical examination is a classic example. However, it has been observed that many older people are now very keen to purchase healthcare products to support their health. The two articles about yangsheng (see Figure 4) not only emphasize the importance of health, but also discuss the right attitudes towards health. One (Figure 4, right) reads ‘nothing belongs to you, except for the body...it makes no sense to be wealthy without health’. In contrast, the other (Figure 4, left) argues ‘health is a key factor but not the purpose of life...old people should choose suitable diet structures and exercises for themselves rather than simply following others’.

The other texts are related to the specific techniques of yangsheng, such as sunbathing and dietary therapy and many of them comply with the 24 solar terms. For example, the two posts in Figure 5 introduce particular tips of yangsheng in different seasons. The left one recommends eating fresh ginger and mutton and to avoid cold food in Great Cold, while the right one says that in the Autumnal Equinox, Chinese herbs like ginseng and lotus seeds are better for nutrition.

The list of this content suggests that older adults attach great importance to health and that traditional methods, especially yangsheng, are their primary choice over medical treatment. Combining health maintenance with solar terms is the unique feature of Chinese older adults that shows their appreciation of traditional culture and reverence for nature. The dissemination of
yangsheng knowledge and information on WeChat facilitates the continuity of the tradition of yangsheng among nowadays older people.

**Latest relevant events and news.** Articles under this topic mainly deal with new events relevant to older adults themselves. News about pensions is often central in the texts. Facing the challenge of caring for a large aging population, there is an increasing concern for elderly care in the city, with the ‘4-2-1’ family structure being common. The articles in this collection bear this out. Almost 80 percent of the articles read up on the new pension policies and introduce new ways of caring for the aged. House-for-pension scheme (also known as reverse mortgage loan), collaborative care, time banks and the other new forms of elderly care have been introduced on the platform. The remaining articles provide city news about daily social life, like the Military Word Game held in Wuhan, and the National Day parade.

It is important to note that the reporting of the relevant events and news does not only serve as an information resource for older people but also serve as a way of combating misperceptions and fake news towards older people. For example, as influenced by Confucian filial piety which sees elderly care as the primary responsibility within the family, it is common to see most Chinese older adults are reluctant to live in old people’s homes. In this context, reporting on old people’s homes shows that they are changing mindsets and reconsidering some alternative forms of elderly care. Another example is about medical insurance. In 2019, a rumour that said private medical savings accounts would be cleared was widespread and caused social panic to some extent. Many older adults were also worried about their medical reimbursement. Zhiqingwang pushed an article to interpret the policy concisely and stopped the spread of misinformation among the elderly.

**Daily life.** Content under this topic refers to values, skills and everyday life of older adults, such as ways of arranging daily life after retirement and into old age. By telling inspirational stories of older adults’ lives, articles in this category always convey life wisdom. For example, an article (as shown in Figure 6) tells the life history of Huang Yongyu, a famous painter in China, and his
free-and-easy attitude towards aging and his ‘child-like’ passion for life. It should be noted that almost all individuals appear in the texts are of higher social status, such as officials, presenters, movie stars, artists and college professors.

According to the ‘White Paper on Combating Fraud Among Middle-aged and Elderly People’, the older people are gullible and often suffer great losses. While in the selected texts, content about fraud appears relatively uncommon. There are two articles in the collection about how to prevent and protect older adults from fraud. Finally, only one article is associated with retired life. The article begins with the miserable situation of some retired people and then suggests that older adults should offer practical and emotional support to each other to live in comfort in old age.

Narratives referring to content under the topic of daily life also connect past experiences with present life and are full of active attitudes towards daily life. Facing a possible dilemma with the aging population, the older adults are trying to find possible solutions from the past, some representative older individuals and mutual help and support in the group.

Intergenerational relationships. As a result of different life backgrounds and experiences, the older and younger generations hold diverse values and behavioural patterns, so the relationships between them are very complicated. The content under this topic refers to multiple aspects, covering both intergenerational tension and affection, and the central issues are unfilial behaviours, gratitude and company separately. Several articles mention how to get along with the young generation and give some useful suggestions.

Social support, including strong family relations, is crucial for older adults’ well-being, especially for those who live in a collectivist culture. While age-segregated daily life leads to a lack of the mutual interaction and understanding in reality. With the declining status of seniors in China,
older adults tossed to the edge of the society are facing more loneliness. The popularity of this topic reflects the general desire and need for better communication with the younger generation among older people.

Reminiscence. Zhiqingwang positions itself as a home for educated youth to go back to past time and as a place of shared memory. But only six articles have a direct link with reminiscence of zhiqing years in the examined texts, five of which are poetries, letters and articles created by the former educated youth. The works are full of a strong sense of pride and yearning of past life and friendship. All the six articles compare the educated youth with younger generation and draw a conclusion that being different from younger generation, the educated youth are characterized by generational spirits containing hard-working, sharing weal and woe, bravery and emotional solidarity.

Even though the specific category of ‘reminiscence’, which is directly associated with the past experience of educated youth (zhiqing) only accounts for 3% of all the posts, its impacts remain profound for older people. The experience of revolutions helped constitute the people who were involved in them, who also shape themselves in and through revolutions. The lived experience is deeply embedded within them and has affected them throughout their lives. This is evident even in terms of smartphones use and online communication, which is reflected in popular narratives with a revolutionary tone, and in aesthetics such as extreme bright colours (Wang, in press). In these ways, the older generation connect with the present by articulating their past, and moreover, they maintain and strengthen their identities by highlighting their generational spirits.

The ways of self-representation

The research question 2 (RQ2) aims to understand how older operators represent themselves on the public account. The study takes title style, usage of multimedia and originality into account, which are key factors of article quality.

Title style. The title is an important factor in attracting audience to click and read the articles. Extensive researches prove that the style of a title has an obvious effect on the click rate and reading volume. This study identifies the style of a title by looking at sentence patterns as declarative, interrogative, exclamatory and multiple-formulated. The latter refers to sentences containing two or more different sentence patterns.

As Table 2 illuminates overwhelmingly, most titles involve exclamation, with 71% of sample articles including exclamation only. The analysis of title styles shows clearly that the elderly people have a visible preference for exclamatory phrases, which is often used to express one’s

| Title style         | Percentage | Example                                                                 |
|---------------------|------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Exclamatory         | 71%        | A missed call!                                                          |
| Multiple-formulated | 18%        | What opportunities exist in the field of retirement? This document from the Ministry of Home Affairs says it all! |
| Declarative         | 7%         | The ideal state of life.                                                |
| Interrogative       | 3%         | Is the state going to subsidize 20,000 for per care bed?                 |
opinions and strong feelings. Compared to other sentence patterns, exclamatory sentences have the advantage of catching the attention of followers by using hyperbole and certain tone. In addition, the typical political slogan-like rhetoric was commonly used in revolutionary times, so it is familiar among the older generation.

Interrogative means the titles end up with question mark and it makes up only 3% of the sample, while the declarative titles make up a proportion of 7%. Multiple-formulated titles consist of two or more different sentence patterns and the example in Table 2 shows a typical combination of interrogative and exclamatory sentences. The typical titles can be seen in Figure 7.

Multimedia usage. Multimedia means using several different ways or materials for communication. In addition to text, multimedia technology allows for pictures, flash and film to be used together on a screen. WeChat is a multimedia platform naturally, which is also an influential factor in the effectiveness of communication.

It is found that at least two different forms of media are used in each article; Figure 8 shows some typical samples. To be specific, more than two-thirds \((n = 145)\) of selected articles use two kinds of media and about one-third use three kinds, with the remaining seven articles using more than three.

According to statistics in Table 3, except for text, pictures are the most common media used in given articles and the combination of text and pictures dominates. While video can be seen in many articles, music is rarely used overall. It should be noted that as a new form of media, GIF has been increasingly used by the elderly.

In addition to the usage of different media, the front size and bright colours applied in articles are worth discussing. Compared to articles on other WeChat official accounts, the articles of Zhiqingwang are edited in a larger font size. Taking older adults’ traits, such as impaired vision into consideration, larger font is an audience-friendly measure to provide a better user experience. In the same way, bright colours are always effective ways to attract and maintain the audience’s attention. This can account partly for why older adults prefer to apply red, green, blue, yellow and other bright colours in the articles.
Figure 8. The screenshots of multimedia use in content samples. The left one uses picture and texts in different size and the right one uses video, text and GIF simultaneously.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of the usage of multimedia.

| Number of media usage | Combination mode (Text+) | Count |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|-------|
| 2                     | Pictures                  | 136   |
| (N = 145, 64%)        | GIF                       | 7     |
|                       | Video                     | 2     |
| 3                     | Pictures + Video          | 34    |
| (N = 76, 33%)         | GIF + Video               | 27    |
|                       | GIF + Pictures            | 10    |
|                       | Music + Pictures          | 3     |
|                       | GIF + Music               | 1     |
|                       | Music + Video             | 1     |
| 4                     | Pictures + Video + GIF    | 6     |
| (N = 7, 3%)           | Pictures + Video + Music  | 1     |
Historically, the two visual elements are not just for audiences but also for self-expression. Large fonts were typical characteristic of Dazibao (big character poster), which was a prevalent form of propaganda from the 1950s to the 1980s. In revolutionary times, many educated youths posted Dazibao to mobilize the masses, express opinions and expose bad behaviours. Despite adverse effects, this unique form of expression has been inherited and used sequentially on the social media by the zhiqing generation to articulate their opinions and represent themselves.

Furthermore, as observed in fieldwork in Shanghai (Wang, in press), older people were commonly exposed to the highly uniform aesthetics of socialism during Mao’s time (Chen, 2001). For a long period of time during the Cultural Revolution, colourful things, except bright red, which are the symbol of the revolution, were generally regarded as the taste of ‘petty bourgeoisie’ and were therefore viewed as politically incorrect. The colours of factory workers uniform, such as grey and dark blue, had dominated ordinary Chinese people’s daily life. For many of the urban older people, the preference for multiple bright colours in their later life is not only a celebration of a much improved quality of life, where people can afford to develop a more sophisticated lifestyle in the consumer society, but is also a compensation for what they have missed in their early life (Wang, in press).

**Originality.** Originality is an important standard to measure the quality and impact of content and it has been proven that original content is more effective. In this study, only six articles are original works in selected samples, and these articles are distributed in different topics as two in leisure and recreation, two in intergenerational relations, one in latest events and one in daily life. We numbered the six articles in terms of page views and counted the number of comments and likes to measure the popularity of each essay. The specific information are shown in Table 4. After connecting originality with popularity, there was no significant correlation.

In order to further verify the factors influencing popularity, the top 10 popular articles in 2019 were selected according to page view, and the detailed information are shown as Table 5. The most popular essay attracted more than 100,000 browsers and the essay placed 10th also has a pageview of 72,563 and none of them are original. The data suggest that content originality has little influence on the popularity on Zhiqingwang.

The connection between popularity and detailed content is clear. The most popular articles are most frequently about celebrating and blessing festivals, the tips of yangsheng and inspirational articles. They are the most significant content of Zhiqingwang, and it means the audience trends are basically as the same as the account values. The preliminary conclusion is that the popularity mostly lies in the selected topics.

| Table 4. The topic and popularity of the original articles on Zhiqingwang. |
|----------------|----------------|---------|---------|
| Number | Topic                      | Pageview | Comment | Likes |
| 1      | Leisure and recreation     | 100,000+ | 78      | 1526   |
| 2      | Intergenerational relations | 18,000   | 16      | 525    |
| 3      | Latest events              | 14,000   | 15      | 340    |
| 4      | Intergenerational relations | 11,000   | 17      | 258    |
| 5      | Leisure and recreation     | 10,000   | 8       | 151    |
| 6      | Daily life                 | 9,606    | 9       | 159    |
Sentiment of headlines. Research question 3 analyses the emotional tendencies related to the old people. The study focuses on the headline rather than the full text for several reasons. Headlines serve as cognitive shortcuts that draw the reader’s attention to the article. They may also influence readers’ opinions and affection about a specific topic or group. Unlike a knowledgeable or engaged audience, non-engaged readers who do not have strong opinion about an issue are more likely to be influenced by its tone (Bleich et al., 2015). In the Internet era, with millions of people sharing information every day, far more media consumers read headlines rather than the full text (Kim et al., 2016; Scacco & Muddiman, 2020). By analysing headlines, we are able to get data that reflect the sentiment of a certain group.

A total of 228 headlines were saved and then put into a corpus where the sentiment analysis was performed by ROST CM 6. The results (see Table 6) show that in the headline of top articles from Zhiqingwang, those with positive emotions, neutral emotions and negative emotions account for 68.42%, 13.16% and 18.42%, respectively, of the total sample. This indicates that positive emotions dominates, but negative emotions also correspond to a certain proportion and should not be ignored. The neutral emotion exhibits the lowest proportion. The results indicate an obviously positive attitude towards topics related to older adults.

Overall positive attitude of self-representation

In the terrain of media image, Chinese older adults have been brought into the spotlight since 2006, but as a silent group, they are at the centre of public opinion without having a voice themselves.
Older adults have mixed features, yet the media tends to stress negative traits about them rather than positive. It is a remarkable fact that an increasing number of older adults are getting access to the Internet via the use of the smartphones and showing great enthusiasm for social media. Furthermore, WeChat with other social media have become an essential part of people’s lives. WeChat Public Accounts offer a convenient and sufficient way for older adults to demonstrate themselves. From passive public image to active self-representation, the senior citizens expand their discursive power to enrich and diversify their image in the smartphone age.

As a public platform operated by older adults, Zhiqingwang is more like a public space to represent images of older adults than an exchange channel within a group. Aside from articulating information, the platform also strengthens the identities and opinions of the older adults. The older people represent a diverse and generally positive self-image from their own views. In summary, there are a few striking features are shown in self-representation on the social media platform.

1. **Promoting health by self-care.** Psychosocial status, physical health, life attitude and cognition all have positive correlations with the image of aging (Bai, 2011). Instead of a fear of being old and declining physically, the study finds the older people pay more attention to their fitness and they start to understand being old is integral to human experience. Yangsheng is a typical focus of the elderly, and Chinese people combine it with the 24 solar term to offer flexible tips to suit with the four seasons. Beside traditional Yangsheng practice, people also take the initiative to learn other techniques to prevent disease.

2. **Looking forward to an active and colourful later life.** The image of old age represented in media has been generally low-spirited and colourless. An old man sits on the wheel chair and looks out of the window is a typical scene. However, the study finds that such an image conflicts with what is posted on popular WeChat public accounts. The elderly people do not just care about health and lifespan, they also pay attention to the everyday life and social transformation. The self-image presentation on social media is literally colourful, where multiple bright colours were widely adopted and welcomed among older people.

3. **Having an optimistic life attitude.** Having endured various difficulties in their past life, the older generation formed a set of values and attitudes to survive under hardship and adapt to the rapid social change. This internalized revolutionary spirit in the past time also influences their beliefs about their present life. The philosophy of life on the platform delivers a positive attitude towards endowment pressures, generational relations and the other stuff of daily life.

4. **Keeping pace with the development of society.** Being Used in daily communication to get various news, social media is regarded as the way to keep pace with the development of society for the elderly. By using different forms, bright colours and larger font size, the aging people represent and satisfy themselves as well as meet the needs of audience. They attract many followers and millions of hit and likes. While the prevailing view insists the older group is incompetent, especially when facing with new technology, the study shows they have the possibility to adapt to it.

5. **Constructing a strong sense of identity.** As members of a typically collectivist culture, older adults have a great sense of belonging to a work unit. After retirement, they suffered a strong feeling of puzzled and overwhelmed. While by posting past life and experience on social media, they share collective memories, communicate with old friends, bring personal narratives into the public sphere, and eventually validate and reconstruct their identities within the special groups.
In contrast with their stigmatized public image, the self-representation of older people is more positive and diverse on social media platforms. Taking the discursive power given by social media, the elderly has the potential to reverse the negative public image and represent a more objective image of themselves.

**Conclusion**

This study set out with the aim of investigating the public image of the older population and how they build their self-image on social media. This is done by comparing the image of older people depicted by the other group and the one presented by older people themselves through the Zhiqingwang WeChat public account. A qualitative approach is applied with regard to the textual analysis of this WeChat public account. The textual analysis systematically showcases the major content related to older people, their abilities to express themselves and their emotional orientation in this process.

First of all, the study finds that there is a major discrepancy between the mediated image of older people and self-presented image among older people. The negative mediated image of older people reinforces the stigma surrounding old age in China. The proliferation of the use of WeChat among older people in China, however, has a promising potential for providing older people with the capability and opportunity to present a much more positive image of themselves. The study shows some older people have applied digital platforms to actively share information among their peers and reverse negative stereotypes of old age.

Having said that, it is worthwhile to note that the popularity of the bespoke WeChat public accounts that are for older people and run by them are essentially confined to this age group. Wang’s (in press) ethnography on the use of smartphones among older people in Shanghai illustrates that it is common that the well-known WeChat accounts among older people, such as Zhiqingwang, gain no attention from younger people at all. Meanwhile, the general impression of older people shared by the whole society remains largely influenced by mainstream media, which tends to determine the stereotypes of older people. Therefore, in terms of the public image of older people in general, one needs to be cautious not to exaggerate the positive impact of self-representation by older people on social media.

Chinese society is commonly categorized as a ‘past-orientated’ society (Wang, 1988; Wong, 2003). However, study finds the strong emphasis on the present and future among older people. The nostalgic narratives also exist in a way to remind people of how much their life has been improved and therefore one should appreciate the current life and hold hope for the future. Wang’s (in press) ethnographic research among older people in Shanghai and their use of the smartphones provides a possible explanation. The specific historical time which was charged with political turbulence and personal struggles this older generation in China went through makes it rather challenging to examine the past properly. Therefore, this older generation, in particular, tend to focus on ‘living the daily life well and looking forward’. Such specific collective mentality as observed in Wang’s ethnography also manifests in the popular content on the WeChat public account Zhiqingwang, such as the prominence of topics relating to recreation in daily life, as well as the popular philosophy of living a free-and-easy life.

Furthermore, the WeChat account Zhiqingwang showcases both ‘continuity’ and ‘transformation’ in people’s life. The ‘continuity’ is reflected in the popular content of Zhiqingwang: such as the traditional Yangsheng practice or the typical ways of conveying historical features during
Mao’s time. Meanwhile, the ‘transformation’ manifests in the way that the social media has become a major platform for older people to express themselves. Older people are commonly seen as lacking access, basic skills and motivated desire to use Internet technology. In this study, we find that older people are rather experienced in generating content and operating online platforms, which can be seen in the popularity and influence of the public account. They also are able to apply different media to improve their communication effects and novel media forms like GIF are being accepted rapidly. Therefore, rather than being on the other side of the digital divide, the Chinese older people could be actually digital savvy. The research questions this study explores will remain relevant for a long time, and more empirical research is needed in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the image of older people in the age of social media.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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