From an aging person to an elegant senior: a humanistic approach to viewing older adults

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Abstract: The continuing growth in the number of adults aged 60-plus has raised global alertness of population restructuring. This demographic change, on the one hand, reduces productivity and increases public expenditure due to aging, resulting in prejudice, bias, misrepresentation, and discrimination against them. On the other hand, it develops a specific consumer market segment and extends the availability and accessibility of the elderly through employment, volunteering, or grandparenting. This study argues against the stigmatization of this age group from a functional perspective that damages social cohesion. It advocates a humanistic view toward seniors to eradicate marginalization and promotes the manageability of the senior population. With the aid of advanced technology and health equity, senior adults can retain everyday competence for self-care with dignity, as well as gracefully attain physical and psychological health, autonomy, and well-being in their later life. All these considerations give medical and nursing professionals insight into how to take care of the elderly.

Keywords: demographic revolution • elegant senior • gerontology • optimal aging • productive aging • silver economy

1. The myth of the demographic tsunami

Research reports the global presence of a structural population change, metaphorically depicting it as a demographic tsunami, “silver tsunami”,¹ or “gray tsunami”.² This analogy specifies the impacts of an unceasing rise of people who are aged ≥60 years.³ The aging of the baby-boom generation (1945–1965), low fertility, increased life expectancy, and reduced old-age mortality have caused population aging,⁴,⁵ with the result that 12% of the world population is now aged 60-plus and this segment is growing at a rate of 3.26% annually.⁶ Such a faster growth of the proportion of older adults compared to other age groups creates a “demographic revolution”⁷ that affects economical, political, and social dimensions. In particular, 22% of the aging population is in high-income countries, such as Japan (33% of its local population), Germany (28%), Italy (28%), and Finland (27%).⁸ Many scholars are alarmed by the negative effects on human capital⁹ and overall economic growth¹⁰ due

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2. Challenges of population aging

The fear of getting old originates from the rejection of the natural life span leading up to death, which emphasizes the losses while neglecting the gains acquired in late life. These losses relate to health, economic capacity, status, and power, implying impotence and helplessness.

2.1. Increasing medical costs

Aging erodes physical fitness and health, with a high prevalence (25%–30%) of neurodegenerative diseases, such as dementia and Parkinsonian syndromes, together with chronic illnesses, including cardiovascular diseases, hypertension, osteoporosis, constipation, memory loss, vision and hearing impairments, and poor oral health. Additionally, malnutrition and obesity are not rare among this population. These produce limitations, e.g., gait abnormality, recurrent falls, and swallowing difficulties. Such age-related disabilities not only weaken everyday competence, but more importantly, they increase the risks of psychiatric problems, including depression and sleep disorders, along with weaker emotion regulation due to an aging brain. These factors restrict their social life. Therefore, heavy long-term care costs are incurred.

Reinhardt argued that age-specific health-care spending is not necessarily the sole factor of public medical expenditure. Life-threatening illnesses occur in younger age groups as well, e.g., heart attack and stroke. Early-onset dementia and Parkinson’s disease affect the middle-aged. Medical expenses cover all ages. Medical specialists recommend health promotion in early life, such as a good diet and a nonsmoking, nonalcoholic lifestyle. Such health-care planning and preventive measures maintain good health fundamentally, especially for diminishing medical costs in low-income or underdeveloped countries.

2.2. Reducing economic growth

Scholarly studies elucidate a negative correlation between the growth of population aging and the gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, pointing to a decrease of 5.5% in the GDP due to a 10% increase in 60-plus-year-old citizens. This decrease is caused by a shrinking labor volume and lower productivity, with a 0.2% yearly reduction over the following 2 decades, directly mitigating national competitiveness.

Apart from demographic restructuring, age discrimination in the workplace limits the employment and career promotion opportunities available to older people. Prejudices against the elderly stem from misunderstandings regarding them, e.g., poor job performance, low retraining ability, inflexibility, less adaptability, resistance to change, higher medical leave rates, and higher wages, which result in excessive operational expenses and push them to retire involuntarily, especially in the process of escalating economic development during urbanization.
2.3. Augmenting retirement expenses

Despite the fact that social pensions and retirement schemes can improve the financial conditions,76 health,77 and well-being78 of the elderly, the monetary amount provided by social security occupies a significant proportion of public expenditure.79 However, the effects of wealth redistribution are debatable,80, 81 and the poverty rate among the elderly increases with age,82 urging pension reforms.83,84 Turner85 refuted that age-driven economic burdens are probably overestimated or overstated.

Gerontologists warn that weak health, fiscal incapacity, and discrimination press the elderly to experience social withdrawal,86 and vice versa,87 which are connected to higher risks of suicide88 and mortality.89

3. Opportunities of population aging

The elderly deserve a graceful life, for which a holistic range of health ("a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being")90 is crucial to substantiate their abilities in developing a silver economy. This makes them capable of active aging, successful aging, productive aging, optimal aging, and vitality aging.

3.1. Energy maintenance

The postponement of functional declines91 is a key strategy for aging care, which ameliorates self-efficacy for cognition performance and physical capability,92 in addition to achieving a balanced emotional state.93 This cultivates active aging among those who are ardent in personal, social, cultural, physical, mental, behavioral, financial, and civic affairs,7,94 thus accomplishing social engagement and contribution by the elderly.95

Active aging elicits successful aging for those who benefit from the dynamics related to "low probability of disease and disease-related disability, high cognitive and physical functional capacity, and active engagement with life".96 This group of "third age"97 pursues both individual and societal care,98 including physical, mental, occupational, environmental, and social activities.99 For instance, dancing100 and physical exercise101 improve their motor, sensory, and cognitive performance, health,102 and social development,103 enriching intra- and interpersonal relationships.104 Their enthusiasm in personal growth105 and social connection106 reinforces their subjective self-satisfaction107 and life fulfillment.108

3.2. Silver economy

The misperception regarding the economic burdens induced by population aging has been disputed. The elderly are eager to advance contributory opportunities to society,109 which is known as productive aging.110,111 Hence, a silver economy of older entrepreneurs and a white economy for medical services for the elderly population112 have been developing. Silver economy refers broadly to "all types of goods and services for older adults and an aging population, including extending the working life, volunteerism, and active citizenship of older people".113

With the aid of advanced technology,114 the dimensions of elderly employability115 and silver entrepreneurship116 increase the involvement and potentiality of old adults in business ventures, gaining financial rewards, autonomy, self-attainment, and recognition in their later lives. This sets them forward as social assets and resources for expediting the use of social capital.117

Meanwhile, the silver consumer market118,119 is growing rapidly and profitably,120 and attracts tremendous investment.121 It expands product development and marketing expenses.122 Aside from private medical services for the elderly,123 community-based programs124 and leisure products125 – for instance, recreation centers,126 spas127 and senior tourism128 – are also some of the major components in the silver industry.

Productive aging enhances their accessibility and availability in the family and society,129 including in grandparenting130 and volunteering.131,132 Social engagement enhances subjective and objective health.133 Simultaneously, their contributions push society in a positive direction toward this group of people.134

In summary, the notion of optimal aging brings about a distinct domain pertaining to the wisdom and expertise of the elderly to assist other people, optimize capabilities, attain a meaningful life, and deal with death anxiety,135 with an emphasis of vitality aging on independence, resilience, and an energetic quality of life.136

4. From aging person to senior

This demographic trend is not necessarily a tsunami137 when it is perceived under a proper lens. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights138 affirms that "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights", which values all age groups. In order to comply with this belief, the United Nations should take forward-looking leadership to advocate a humanistic approach toward the elderly and pioneer innovative methods.

4.1. Reframing the concept of the elderly

In accordance with the Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries,139 as a noun, “aging” refers to "the process of growing
old”, while as an adjective, it means to become “older and usually less useful, safe, and healthy”, implying deterioration. Similarly, population aging is socially constructed as a group of feeble, lonely, unproductive, dependent people who are poor of health and considered as “social other[s]”. In fact, age is not necessarily associated with negative consequences when such a functional–instrumental–biomedical model is reviewed.

Instead, the term senior represents adults or people either at a more advanced level or higher in rank or status. Life exhibits a course of maturity within the continuum of a person’s life span, which is perceived differently in the light of cultural variations. People affected by Asian cultures comparatively emphasize how they value the elderly. For example, the Chinese respect senior members with filial piety. They recognize the promising experiences, contributions, expertise, knowledge, wisdom, and autonomy of these “golden years” with dignity.

Elderly subjectification views the senior as subjects, increases awareness of this group, and promotes their values. This empowerment eliminates the dichotomous connotation between junior and senior, dismantling an age divide, and entitles the elegant senior to secure a social identity. Without this divide, the elegant seniors are accepted by themselves and society, which increases self-actualization, self-achievement, and self-fulfillment, as well as facilitating better life enjoyment and social integration. This study suggests the development of a senior-respecting community built on an age-friendly society, nourishing the well-being of the senior.

4.2. Managing senior competence

Although aging is unavoidable, it is manageable, thereby boosting “age management” effectively to nurture the smart senior through technology and flexibility.

Cyber technology positively affects the health and longevity of the elderly. Extensive utilization of an e-medical system for physical health and emotional care is able to improve their physical and cognitive functions and, hence, increase social connections. Recent bioengineering equipments and three-dimensional printing have revolutionized medical applications. These investments in health equity for seniors enable their longevity while minimizing severe disabilities, in spite of having functional physical limitations. Meanwhile, lowering health risks can strengthen psychological resilience, forming “the life span diamond” that interacts among relational resources, physical well-being, positive mental states, and engaging activity.

With the assistance of advanced technology, a smart home provides automated convenience services, senior-friendly furniture, and tailor-made facilities, accommodating the specific needs of seniors while enhancing their quality of life.

Chronic stress escalates the senescence process among adults physiologically and psychologically. Thus, a flexible employment pattern and retirement behavior, when prevalent among seniors, results in not only a reduction in stress but also in the retention of their knowledge and skills. The use of their professionalism in the silver market in collaboration with available technology, elevates silver productivity. Amazingly, senior entrepreneurship fosters a novel work culture.

Studies signify an inverse relationship between education level and cognitive decline. Cognitive performance in late life helps retain social connection, as well as prevent disability and social isolation, resulting in better life satisfaction. Continuing education for seniors refines their sociopsychological adaptability and personal development, building stronger self-confidence, self-esteem, self-worth, and self-efficacy.

5. Conclusion

This study investigates the challenges and opportunities in the context of the growing senior population in order to de-stereotype the negative images regarding the elderly. Destigmatizing this group is critical for the demarginalization and sustainability of the elegant senior, who can then proceed toward a graceful ending with dignity in his/her life. A decent discourse concerning them is essential to providing the support of health equity and an age-barrier-free environment, to ensure the fulfillment of their psychological needs, a meaningful life, and wellness. This research reframes, with humanistic concerns, a population in which the number of seniors is continuously rising. Additionally, these shed insightful light on geriatric care for helping professionals, including medical and nursing teams.

Ethical approval

Ethical issues are not involved in this paper.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.
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