

# The Media Images of Old Influencers on TikTok: A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis

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Drawing on the insights from multimodal critical discourse analysis, this study mainly focuses on two super-gerontic celebrities by selecting 60 videos to elucidate how their images are represented through linguistic (e.g., captions, and hashtags) and other semiotic resources (e.g., accessories, semiotic tools, and etc.). The findings suggest that images of the old celebrities are characterized as being attractive, wise, stylish, healthy and young, indicating that they are breaking up the stereotypical images of old people who are unattractive, dependent and senile. The phenomenon of old influencers making themselves visible on the social media suggests that they are moving towards successful aging with the backdrop of aging society in China. This present study suggests that multimodal construction of old celebrities can inform relevant practice to combat ageism in the media and helps to empower the old people in the media discourse. In doing so, the pedagogical implication of present study lies in its education about how we view aging in the aging society.

*Keywords:* media images, old influencers, multimodal critical discourse analysis, social media

## Introduction

In recent years, there is a growing population of silver haired internet influencers who gain millions of fans by sharing useful information, and actively engaging with online social life on social media such as TikTok especially in China. However, the new phenomenon in this demographic has yet to attract research endeavors. Therefore, this study intends to address this missed opportunity.

Previous studies addressing the images of old people in newspapers, magazines, television advertisements and programs are “ineffective and unattractive” (Vickers, 2007), “fragile, lonely, dependent and technologically illiterate” (Joyce et al., 2015), disempowered and vulnerable (Makita et al., 2020). Overall, images of older people are associated with negative features on social media. However, it is noticeable that in recent years the senior images of media portrayal are shown in a positive light. For instance, Drawing from a multimodal critical discourse perspective, Kenalemang (2020) argues that older women in cosmetic advertisements are constructed as sexual and young visually, overtly rejecting old stereotypes of declining and senility. Nevertheless, it is criticized as visual ageism. In China, Huang & Zhu (2020) use multimodal discourse analysis to explore images of older people on Spring Gala Show during last 30 years and suggest that visual images of older people are not static and stereotypical, therefore calling for attention to positive depictions of the graying. Li (2021) explores the

self-representation of old people on WeChat Public Account from the perspective of communication and media studies. The study reveals that the images of older people are more diverse and positive from their own view. Despite a gradual increasing interest in the images of old people, there is still a scope here for more research. Therefore, this study pays attention to the images of old influencers to redefine old people's images on the social media against the backdrop of aging society.

In this study, we intend to adopt multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) which may be useful to understand older adults' images and social values embedded in them by adopting semiotic and discourse perspectives. We will address the following research question: (1) what kind of images are constructed through the use of linguistic and visual resources. In what follows, we will introduce our analytical framework prior to our description of data. Gerontic celebrities' images constructed by multimodal resources will be illustrated. The images will be discussed in relation to successful aging in China.

### **Analytical Framework**

This study involves mixed-methods by conducting verbal and visual analysis to examine construction of gerontic celebrities' images on the social media TikTok within the analytical framework of MCDA. In terms of verbal analysis, it is concerned with using evaluative words to construct grandfluencers' images. Evaluative words can be divided into explicit and implicit expressions. For example, grandfluencers utter explicit expressions such as "young", and "fashion" to construct their youthful images. Implicit expressions refer to the fact that the advice given by the seniors can lead to a certain evaluation. For example, to construct their wise images, a lot of practical advice given to young people will be articulated by them. Thus, positive attribute of "wisdom" is constructed indirectly. The second level of analysis is from visual semiotic insight. In our approach, we prefer to draw upon classificational process, actional process and analytical process (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). Classificational process relates participants to each other in terms of a same class. To further illustrate, they have same attributes. In the present study, for example, the old celebrities are represented with young group categories. Actional process refers to the process of doing. For instance, what old celebrities are doing in the videos, such as dancing and outputting life wisdom, constitutes their social and productive activities. Therefore, their active, vigorous images are represented on the media. In analytical process, a part-whole relationship between its participants to whole attributes is constituted by displaying their parts of "outfit", make-up and other items that he/she "possesses". For instance, instead of putting on dull clothes, older adults dress themselves beautifully and elegantly, sometimes even stylishly. Drawing upon Ledin and Machin (2018, p, 29), semiotic materials such as semiotic design and semiotic technology can facilitate and shape certain types of communication. In videos, old celebrities use semiotic technology to construct version of themselves in vogue rather than be conservative. Therefore, the analytical framework for our present study is diagrammed as follows in Figure 1:

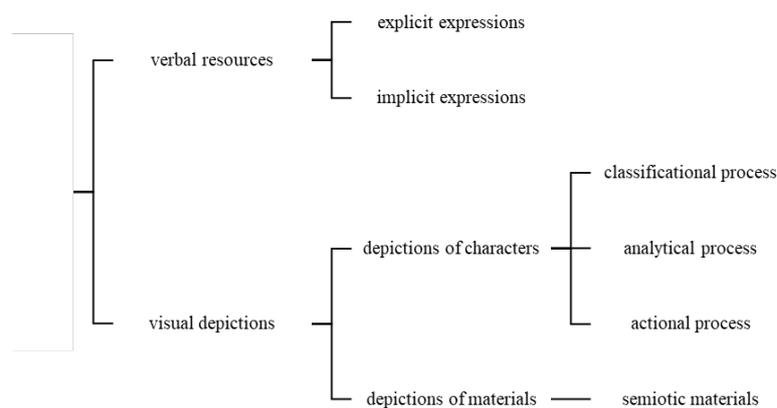


Figure 1. Multimodal constructions of images.

## Method and Data

This study investigated 2 influential senior bloggers who are over 70 (see Table 1) who posted massive videos from June, 2018 to December, 2019 when older celebrities are coming to the fore. They were chosen as they attracted young fans by the millions, making it big on social media. 60 videos were selected from their original videos (20 from Mona Dashu and 40 from his counterpart). During that period, Grandma Wang posted 20 videos in total. Therefore, her 20 videos were all selected in the data. While for Yang, he posted 84 videos in total over that period. Leaving out some theme-repeated videos and irrelevant videos, we finally selected 40 videos. It is noticeable that all of the selected videos generated millions of likes and thousands of comments. A large following and sharing assume that their TikTok accounts are less likely to be perceived as private space. Each video was coded manually through a deep read of the posts consisting of subtitles, hashtags, textual captions, and videos. Therefore, old celebrities' images are classified in the present study.

Table 1

### *The Old Celebrities on Tiktok*

TikTok Account	Gender	Character	Fans
Mona Dashu	male	Yang Beihai	1368.7 w
Granny Wang Who Only Wears High-heeled shoes	female	Gradama Wang	1592.1 w

## Analysis

Having analyzed the 60 videos carefully, we have identified four major images constructed by old superstars on TikTok, namely, youthful, exquisite, wise and stylish. In what follows, we will analyze how their images are constructed through verbal, visual and tool material resources.

### Youthful

Unlike previous old images which are senile, dull, and inactive, the old celebrities in the videos are constructed as youthfulness. The youthful image is constructed by explicit expressions, analytical process, actional process and classificational process. We observe that explicit expressions like “lass (小姐姐)”,

“anti-aging (减龄)”, “youngster (少年)”, “lad (小哥哥)”, “young people (年轻人)”, “a handsome brother (欧巴)”, “child (孩子)”, “positive mind (心态积极)”, “ageless Prince Charming (不老男神)” are used in the subtitle on TikTok, successfully constructing them as younger generations. Being self-positioned as young people, old celebrities de-emphasize their chronological age and present themselves as the continuation of younger group (see Text 1). In Text (1), “vigorous” explicitly evaluate Grandma Wang’s physical condition and even their mental state as she classifies herself as young people through the use of inclusive word “our”. According to Chinese health criteria for the elderly (2013), positive self-evaluation is an important aspect to constitute good health for seniors, which suggest that old celebrities in China are gradually moving towards active aging.

#### Text (1)

It is heard that this movement can be only done by our lasses # vigorous grandma.  
(听说这个动作只有我们小姐姐才能做#活力奶奶) (11-13-2019)

Expressions uttered by old celebrities construct their youthfulness as well. For example, in Text (2), Grandma Wang considers herself as young people. Although old influencers can’t resist biological ageing, they can still choose the way they age through being positive and active. It is consistent with McDaniel’s (2005) view that successfully aging persons ignore their age. Following Rozanova (2009), successful aging is a personal choice. To illustrate, older influencers choose the way they age through making the right decisions about their attitudes towards aging. Meanwhile, part of Grandma Wang’s wisdom is shared accordingly.

#### Text (2)

I am a young person, too. As long as you are young at heart, age doesn’t matter.  
(我也是一个年轻人。只要心不老，年龄不算什么) (12-29-2019)

In terms of classificational process, old celebrities tend to occur with younger generations who are in chick outfits to foreground that they are member of young group. 12 videos feature old social media influencers shooting videos with young people. For instance, Figure 2 depicts Yang assuming a pose in a cool way with his young son. Classificational process identifies Yang as a group of young people. But it can also be seen as analytical. The colorful shirt, sunglasses, the hat and stylish pose indicate that old celebrities choose to dress themselves youthfully and stylishly rather than in dull and unattractive clothes.



Figure 2. Yang’s stylish pose with young people (20-7-2018).

### Exquisite

Exquisite images are constructed through the use of verbal and semiotic modes simultaneously. TikTok videos with the dominant theme of “life full of sense of ceremony” focus on showcasing their exquisite accessories, diet and made-up face. In terms of the analytical process, For example, in Figure 3, exquisitely garbed in skirt, Grandma Wang wears exquisite make-up, adornments like Beret and earring, and gets her nails painted red, which constitutes parts of her exquisite life style. In terms of actional process, old celebrities often demonstrate their exquisite life style by presenting the procedure of skin care including cleansing their face with the cleanser, using lotion and creams, putting on makeup and making exquisite breakfast and so on. In doing so, what is foregrounded is their effort for a kind of decent and exquisite lifestyle.

Yang Beihai is almost always in suits and ties in his videos. 21 out of 40 videos feature subtitles like “traveling needs sense of ceremony”, “going out needs sense of ceremony”, “sense of ceremony in happy life”, and etc. Other explicit subtitles like “an exquisite day (精致的一天)”, “old gentle man (老绅士)”, “live life to the fullest (认真生活)”, “elegance (优雅)”, and “decent life (体面生活)” occur frequently to deconstruct sloppy stereotypes. To put it simply, they are aging gracefully from the inside out.



Figure 3. Exquisite images of Grandma Wang (05-12-2019).

### Wise

The value of wisdom and their life experience shows up in every video. Old celebrities are willing to share their wit, experience with younger generation and their cohorts in the videos by implicit expressions, and actional process. Text (3) and Text (4) are typical examples to convey Grandma’s life wisdom about appearance and meeting etiquette.

#### Text (3)

Grandma’s sayings: It is okay to meet old friends without makeup. However, wedding dress is necessarily needed to meet old friends’ besties! # Vigorous Grandma

(汪奶奶语录：见老朋友可以邋遢，但是见老朋友的闺蜜要把婚纱穿上才能见！#活力奶奶)(02-12-2019)

#### Text (4)

Before 20, your parents give your appearance. After 20, you should be responsible for your own appearance. Be nice to your hair!

(20岁前的容貌是父母给的，20岁后的容貌是自己经营的，要对自己的头发好点呀！)(20-12-2019)

Typically, the actional process complements the implicit verbal language for old influencers' self-branding. For example, in Figure 4, Grandma Wang is sharing health and fitness routines in the video. The process of doing exercise constructs that they are healthy, young. And the subtitles projected on the screen give advice to young people that “working out is the best way to keep fit rather than go on a diet”, therefore setting up positive example role models for younger generations. Cumming (1968) once argued that old age comes with disengagement from society because their knowledge no longer meets society demands. In contrast, the wisdom of old celebrities suggests that they still play an important role in social interaction through the use of social media.



Figure 4. Outputting of Grandma's wisdom about fitness (29-12-2019).

In Young's videos, almost all of his videos are about sharing his life experience for younger viewers like choosing fruits, vegetables, cooking and other life tips. Figure 5 demonstrates Yang's social action of picking grapes. The implicit language is projected onto the screen to share his wisdom about how to pick the sweetest grapes with viewers so that they can apply his wisdom to their own personal experience. In this way, they are not old age but golden age by reference to their own life experience.



Figure 5. Life tips for picking grapes (15-11-2019).

The social practice of sharing their life wisdom can be considered as their active engagement in productive activities to turn their old age into good old age. It constitutes another aspect of successful aging which stresses the social engagement to achieve a sense of personal fulfillment. The implication here is that old people actually have a lot of life experience and wisdom than the young people, therefore, in terms of media representation of the elder, media outlets are encouraged to represent old people as roles in the society to promote their wisdom related with life experience. By taking this step, older adults may escape the label of social exclusion.

### Stylish

Their stylishness is not only represented by their clothing, hairstyle, and accessories, but also their awareness to catch up with trends with semiotic design. By using semiotic technology, the old influencers demonstrate that they can keep pace with the development of social media and thereafter attract many followers and millions of likes. The video begins with old celebrities looking as plain as possible. Then with a finger snapping, they are at their hottest. Simply put, old celebrities change their outfits, or makeup in some dramatic way with the use of social technology. It is the latest Chinese meme: “Karma’s a Bitch Challenge (变装秀挑战)”, which was started in China by creative teenagers. Then it takes the TikTok by storm. Seven out sixty videos has witnessed that the old celebrities catch up with trends to perform drag show with the use of social technology. It also reveals that old celebrities are not technology illiterate. Instead, they are technology savvy. The verbal language “marvelous (超6)” evaluates Yang’s capacity to interact with the semiotic design in Text 5.

#### Text (5)

# Don’t blink. I am going to perform “transformation”. Ageless Prince Charming who is close to 80 uses TikTok marvelously. He is still young at heart.

(#别眨眼，我要“变身”了 奔八不老男神抖音玩得超6，心态不输年轻人) (05-07-2018)

TikTok is connecting older people with younger generation. Stereotypical images of old people leading boring lives have been left behind by fashion and new technology, which indicates that the proliferation of the use of semiotic design among older people in China has a promising potential for providing opportunity to present a more positive images of themselves. As Djonov and van Leeuwen elaborate (2018), social media as semiotic technology has its potential to transform social practice. The semiotic technology, complemented by verbal language and actional process, constitutes self-expression, thus diversifying their image on social media.

### Discussion

The positive image constructions of old celebrities’ on TikTok supports the conclusions of previous research that pointed out that China’s aging in more recent years on the whole are moving towards healthy aging (Yang & Meng, 2020). First of all, this study finds that there is a major discrepancy between negative mediated images of older people and positive self-represented images of old influencers. Following Li (2021), we know that “the elderly has the potential to reverse the negative public image”, which should be attributed to successful or healthy aging in China in recent years. It is noticeable that the older group is typically considered as silent group without having a voice themselves in the landscape of social media. However, in 2016, with the rapid development of ageing population, the government initiates national strategy of Healthy China 2030 to promote healthy population which is not only characterized by physical health and also social healthy such as social participation for promoting health among the aged, high quality of life and etc. TikTok as a social media provides a perfect platform to engage in various social activities like sharing cute moments from their life, responding to netizen’s comments, dancing to popular TikTok songs and so on. And the older people take advantage of TikTok to depict themselves in non-stereotypical ways by showing their positive images which are young at heart, full of wisdom in relation to life experience and age, graceful and exquisite, stylishly dressed. Old celebrities’ active engagement with TikTok echoes one of the aspects of Row and Kahn’s (1998) claim that active engagement with life is the

key paradigm to aging successfully. Though, the videos selected are old influencers, it is assumed that other old people use social media have increased, contributing to their social participation through media usage.

### Conclusion

It is noticeable that old influencers take advantage of social media to build their own self-images, which can be realized by explicit/implicit verbal language, visual resources and social technology. The present study demonstrates that old celebrities in the social media are socially active, physically health, mindfully resourceful, contrary to stereotypical images of old age characterized by decline, dullness and etc. In terms of practical implication, old influencers help to promote the positive images of older people in the media. In this sense, it can inform policy and practice in combating ageism in the media to create a media-care environment for the elder, thereafter opening more possibilities for their later life to turn old age into gold age. Besides, the present study also provides new insight into the pedagogical implication for aging education, that is how we view aging experience.

The limitation in this present study lies in the fact that only old influencers are taken into consideration and other older people are neglected in the corpus. But it can also be predictable that other older adults try to represent positive images on social media as China is promoting digital health to help older people to be familiar with all kinds of social media under the notion of successful aging in China. In doing so, the present study hopes to call for more attention to older people and their discourse construction on social media.

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