

Performing Age in Digital Spaces: Self-Presentation Strategies of Fashion-Oriented Silver Influencers on Xiaohongshu from a Dramaturgical Perspective

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Abstract— As digitalization converges with population aging, social media platforms represented by Xiaohongshu have become important spaces for older adults to reconstruct their social identities. Drawing on Erving Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory, this study conceptualizes social media as a “digital front stage” and examines how fashion-oriented silver influencers strategically present themselves to challenge stereotypical perceptions of older adults as frail, conservative, and socially marginalized. Using three leading Xiaohongshu influencers—Grandma Wang Who Only Wears High Heels, Aunt Xiao Su, and Kangkang and Grandpa—as case studies, this research analyzes their content production and self-presentation practices. The findings reveal that fashion-oriented silver influencers employ a coordinated combination of visual front-stage performance, textual scripting, and interaction management to construct three distinctive self-presentation strategies: idealized performance, aestheticized everyday life, and the backstage-as-frontstage approach. These strategies demonstrate the agency and creativity of older adults within digitally empowered environments. At the same time, this study offers a critical reflection on the emerging forms of digital discipline embedded in performative digital labor and the discourse of active aging. By highlighting the tensions between empowerment and regulation, the research provides a critical perspective for understanding the digital participation and media practices of older adults in contemporary social media contexts.

Keywords— Dramaturgical Theory; Silver Influencers; Self-Presentation; Xiaohongshu; Digital Front Stage.

I. INTRODUCTION

With the rapid advancement of digitalization and the accelerating process of population aging, social media has evolved beyond a mere information tool and increasingly become a space for the reconstruction of social identities and cultural expression. On platforms such as Xiaohongshu, fashionably dressed older content creators frequently appear on recommendation feeds. Through sharing styling advice and beauty-related content, many of them have gained remarkable visibility, with some posts receiving more than 100,000 likes and attracting greater attention than younger influencers. Such representations stand in sharp contrast to the conventional image of older adults as modestly dressed, physically frail, and disconnected from fashion. As a result, they challenge the long-standing stereotype that aging is incompatible with fashion and self-expression. Silver influencers have used internet platforms with minimal entrance barriers and wide reach to change themselves from mostly passive

communication subjects to active subjects of self-presentation and content production, thanks to the power of new media technology [1].

According to data released by the National Bureau of Statistics of China, by the end of 2024, the population aged 60 and above accounted for 22.0% of the country's total population, indicating a continuing and deepening trend of population aging. [2] For a long time, older adults in traditional media have often been portrayed through narratives of decline and otherness, with representations largely confined to family responsibilities, health maintenance, and caregiving roles. Such portrayals frequently overlook the agency, diversity, and multifaceted needs of older individuals. In contrast, fashion-oriented silver influencers on social media platforms such as Xiaohongshu have actively acquired communicative agency and visibility. Through content creation and self-branding, they construct personalized identities and contribute to a digitally empowered cultural ecology that reimagines later life through youthful, fashionable, and active representations. [Error! Bookmark not defined.]

Against this backdrop, this study addresses the following research questions: How do fashion-oriented silver influencers strategically present themselves within the specific digital environment of social media to redefine the relationship between aging and fashion? What underlying logic of identity construction is embedded in these self-presentation strategies? To answer these questions, this study adopts Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory as its primary analytical framework. By conceptualizing social media platforms as a “digital front stage” and influencer content creation as a form of performance, the study aims to systematically examine the strategic self-presentation practices of fashion-oriented silver influencers and to deepen our understanding of older adults' media practices and processes of identity construction in contemporary digital culture.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Erving Goffman, in his seminal work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, proposed Dramaturgical Theory, suggesting that social life can be understood as a theatrical performance where individuals act as “performers” in various social contexts. [3] Individuals carefully manage their

impressions to maintain socially desirable images in the eyes of “audiences.” Goffman distinguishes between front stage and backstage regions: The backstage is a place where people may act more genuinely and privately, away from the public eye, but the front stage is a location where formal social displays, which are frequently perfect and directed by social norms, take place. The separation of front and backstage is critical for successful performance.

In the digital era, social media platforms provide users with highly controllable digital front stages. Unlike fleeting face-to-face interactions, digital performances can be edited, curated, and repeatedly presented, transforming private backstage content into a publicly visible, selectively showcased front-stage performance. This fluidity blurs the boundary between front and backstage, creating a “life-as-performance” quality in online self-presentation. At the same time, the phenomenon of context collapse—where audiences from different social spheres converge—poses challenges for precise impression management [4].

III. IDEALIZED PERFORMANCE: CONSTRUCTING AN ARTIFICIAL FASHION MYTH

When discussing idealized performance, Goffman argues that individuals tend to present themselves in ways that conform to socially valued norms while concealing characteristics that may contradict the desired image. In digital environments, this tendency is amplified because content creators can employ cameras, carefully selected settings, and post-production techniques to perfect the front stage while excluding aspects deemed unsuitable for public display.

The visual practices of the Xiaohongshu influencer Grandma Wang Who Only Wears High Heels exemplify a highly idealized form of digital performance. By maintaining a strict separation between the front stage and everyday life, she constructs what may be described as an artificial fashion myth. From a semiotic perspective, the visual elements in her content function as symbols of authority and status.

First, her performances are characterized by the ritualization of space. Most of her videos are produced in professional studios or elaborately designed settings. These non-ordinary environments create a sense of distance and ceremony, elevating her content from everyday documentation to artistic display. Second, her clothing serves as a symbolic representation of luxury and fashion. Floor-length gowns, embroidered opera costumes, and high-end qipaos redirect audience attention away from physical signs of aging such as wrinkles and white hair, transforming her image from that of an ordinary elderly woman into a fashion icon. Finally, her carefully maintained makeup and image editing strategically reduce visible markers of aging, contributing to what previous studies have described as the de-aging representation of older bodies [5].

A representative example can be found in the post *The East Wind Brushes My Sleeves: An 84-Year-Old Grandmother in Opera Costume*. In this work, Grandma Wang appears in an elaborately embroidered opera costume, performing stylized gestures beside a traditional pavilion and pond. Through dramatic lighting and close-up shots, the

performance generates a strong theatrical atmosphere. The juxtaposition of her age identity with the symbolic meanings of opera costumes and ceremonial space not only challenges stereotypes that older adults cannot embody glamour and elegance but also reinforces her authority as a fashion mentor. Audience attention is thus redirected from the aging body itself to the artistic qualities of the performance.

Grandma Wang represents an extreme form of digitalized idealized performance. Through technological mediation, she pushes front-stage perfectionism to its limits. Yet this strategy also raises a critical question: while such performances challenge the traditional assumption that aging inevitably signifies decline, do they simultaneously create a new and demanding standard of successful aging? The expectation that older adults should remain youthful, flawless, and continuously engaged in visual self-discipline reveals the dual nature of digital self-presentation, where empowerment and regulation coexist.

To maintain her authority and mystique, Grandma Wang adopts a strategy of backstage closure. Personal details rarely appear in her content, and interactions with followers remain brief and carefully controlled. According to Goffman, excessive access to backstage information can undermine the credibility of front-stage performances. By preserving a strict boundary between public and private life, she protects the integrity of her carefully constructed image. Consequently, her perceived authenticity derives not from intimacy but from distance, perfection, and authority. Commercial collaborations similarly rely on maintaining this carefully curated brand image and are often conducted through highly controllable environments such as livestreaming and brand endorsement events.

IV. AESTHETICIZED EVERYDAY LIFE: PERFORMING ATTAINABLE ELEGANCE

Unlike the detached and highly idealized performances described above, Goffman also recognized that performers may intentionally reduce social distance from audiences by emphasizing familiarity and shared experience. This strategy is particularly effective when audiences seek lifestyles and practices that can be realistically imitated.

The content produced by Aunt Xiao Su follows this logic. Rather than situating performances in extraordinary spaces, she brings her front stage into locations familiar to ordinary audiences, including bookstores, cafés, and urban streets. Her clothing choices emphasize comfort, practicality, and accessibility. She typically appears with light makeup while retaining visible signs of aging such as wrinkles and natural hair color. Through these choices, she constructs the image of a lifestyle aesthete whose elegance appears attainable rather than exclusive.

This front-stage strategy creates what may be termed a calculated intimacy. In posts such as *Travel Outfits for Women Over 60: Comfort Comes First*, natural environments, understated styling, and relaxed body language communicate the idea that fashion should serve everyday life rather than dominate it. Her content consistently emphasizes concepts such as comfort, happiness, and self-acceptance. Fashion is

framed not as a symbol of status but as a practical resource for enhancing daily well-being.

Importantly, Aunt Xiao Su does not reject aging. Instead, she seeks to redefine later life by associating it with taste, self-care, and meaningful living. Audiences encounter a form of refinement that appears achievable, thereby lowering the barriers to imitation and strengthening trust. Her impression management strategy relies on the production of controlled authenticity, whereby selected elements of everyday life are incorporated into the front stage without exposing the entirety of the backstage.

In terms of audience interaction, Aunt Xiao Su adopts a strategy of backstage openness. She frequently addresses followers using intimate terms such as “friends” and “sisters,” shares shopping experiences, cooking activities, and travel diaries, and actively cultivates a sense of equality and emotional closeness. As John Fiske argues, audiences are capable of generating meanings based on their own social experiences, although textual structures continue to privilege particular interpretations [6]. Through conversational storytelling and seemingly spontaneous communication, her content minimizes the appearance of performance while simultaneously enhancing perceptions of authenticity [7].

However, this openness remains strategic rather than absolute. Rather than exposing her genuine backstage, she selectively presents aspects of daily life that reinforce her established persona. Carefully curated images of tasteful consumption, organized domestic spaces, and aesthetically pleasing routines function as supporting evidence for the lifestyle she promotes. This process generates what may be called accessible authenticity, fostering trust-based community relationships and facilitating relatively smooth commercial integration.

V. BACKSTAGE AS FRONT STAGE: AUTHENTICITY THROUGH EVERYDAY INTIMACY

Goffman emphasized that the distinction between front stage and backstage is essential for successful performance. However, social media increasingly blurs this boundary, producing what scholars have described as the front-stage presentation of backstage behavior. [8] Private life, once hidden from public view, becomes both visible and performative.

The account Kangkang and Grandpa exemplifies this approach. In their content, domestic settings and everyday routines dominate the visual narrative. This tendency is particularly evident in the series Grandpa's Radiotherapy Diary, where family life—traditionally understood as backstage—is transformed into the primary performance space. These intimate environments provide the emotional authenticity that underpins audience engagement.

Unlike highly polished fashion influencers, Grandpa appears without makeup or image enhancement. Wrinkles, white hair, and age spots remain visible. Yet these signs of aging are juxtaposed with fashionable clothing such as oversized suits, streetwear, and celebrity-inspired outfits. This contrast produces a distinctive form of authenticity. Audiences are not merely consuming fashion advice; they are witnessing

the lived experiences of an elderly man facing illness while maintaining optimism and enthusiasm for life.

The performances are also highly collaborative. Kangkang functions not only as a videographer but also as a director, planner, and editor, reflecting Goffman's concept of a performance team. In videos such as What Would G-DRAGON Look Like at 89?, clothing becomes a medium for expressing intergenerational affection rather than a primary object of aesthetic evaluation. As a result, audience attention shifts from fashion judgment to emotional engagement with family relationships.

Textual narratives further strengthen this emotional appeal. In the Radiotherapy Diary series, fashion remains present but is woven naturally into everyday storytelling. Casual remarks about meals, medical treatment, and future plans create an atmosphere of warmth and resilience. By embedding fashion within ordinary life, the content avoids debates about whether older adults should be fashionable and instead appeals to universal experiences of empathy, care, and family connection.

Comment sections frequently evolve into spaces where viewers share stories about their own grandparents and express emotional attachment. The collaborative production of meaning extends beyond the creators to include audiences themselves. Through this performance of intimacy, the account constructs a quasi-familial emotional community characterized by strong audience loyalty and high tolerance toward commercial content. Despite containing the highest proportion of direct advertising among the three cases, commercial messages rarely provoke resistance because emotional bonds have been successfully converted into social and symbolic capital.

VI. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Drawing on Dramaturgical Theory and three representative case studies, this study identifies three distinct self-presentation strategies employed by fashion-oriented silver influencers on Xiaohongshu: idealized performance, aestheticized everyday life, and backstage as front stage. Through different combinations of visual presentation, textual narration, and interaction management, these influencers construct the identities of fashion icon, lifestyle advisor, and affectionate elder. In doing so, they challenge traditional media stereotypes surrounding older adults and demonstrate significant agency within digitally mediated environments.

However, the implications of these practices extend beyond narratives of empowerment. This study argues that platform algorithms and the dominant discourse of active aging jointly contribute to the emergence of a more subtle form of age-related regulation. As algorithms continuously reward representations characterized by agelessness, vitality, and aesthetic refinement, a new model of “successful aging” is gradually being established.

On the one hand, this model may exert symbolic pressure on ordinary older adults by implying that those who are not fashionable, active, or publicly visible have somehow failed to age successfully. On the other hand, it compels influential silver creators to engage in ongoing self-optimization in order

to remain visible within competitive attention economies. Whether through meticulous visual management, intensive emotional engagement, or the commodification of private life, these practices require continuous investments of emotional, aesthetic, and temporal labor. In this sense, they constitute a form of performative digital labor.

The paradox is therefore evident: while silver influencers appear to challenge age-based stereotypes, they may simultaneously reproduce new and more demanding standards of aging. Empowerment and constraint become two inseparable dimensions of the same process [9].

For older content creators, sustainable development requires not only technological participation but also critical awareness of platform dynamics. Maintaining a balance between self-expression and excessive exposure is essential. For social media platforms, greater attention should be paid to the diversity of aging experiences represented within recommendation systems. More inclusive standards of visibility could provide fairer opportunities for older users with different lifestyles and identities. Finally, policymakers and the public should recognize that truly age-inclusive societies cannot rely solely on highly visible and fashionable elderly influencers. Equal attention must also be given to the large number of older adults who remain absent from digital

performances. Meaningful aging requires stronger connections between online visibility and offline social support systems.

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