

**Aging as a mythological cognitive construction: A case of elderly self-identity in the rural  
elderly-service stations in Beijing**

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August 31, 2024

### **Abstract**

The traditional Chinese practice of venerating the elderly within family discourse has significantly eroded, impacting self-identity. This paper explores the symbolic perception of aging among the elderly in Chinese society and their interaction with aging myths. Aging encompasses physiological changes (M. Kaeberlein et al., 2015) and holds mythological significance, turning into aging symbols. Changes like grey hair, wrinkles, and decreased mobility have cultural and social significance, including feelings of being undervalued, unproductive, and dependent (Thornton, 2002).

This study investigates the construction of aging myths in rural areas of developing societies. Six semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted at five elderly care stations in Beijing, involving 11 individuals aged 60-90, structured by gender, education, and age. Coding of the 150,347-word corpus identified 69 initial categories, from which four main categories emerged: social cognition, interpersonal relationships, emotional attitudes, symbols, resulting in 17 axial codings.

An attitude-changed model of the aging's mythological framework, based on selective codings, was developed. Respondents' affective attitudes toward aging were reshaped by stereotypes and myths, compelling them to accept aging identity perceptions. Attitudinal equilibrium is achieved when cognitive perceptions of interpersonal and social interactions align with aging myths.

Results indicate that aging myths significantly impact social cognition, identity construction, and interpersonal dynamics as the elderly enter specific age groups, reshaping their relationship with society. The elderly who increasingly embrace aging symbols fall into two categories:

Equilibrium and Disequilibrium. Equilibrium occurs when attitudes align with aging symbols.

Conversely, disequilibrium occurs. Two paths to restore equilibrium were identified:

The study lacks an examination of how myths about aging are constructed and developed through historical, cultural, and social factors, resulting in an incoherent logical framework.

## **Aging as a mythological cognitive construction: A case of elderly self-identity in the rural elderly-service stations in Beijing**

### **Introduction**

The aging population phenomenon in China, a consequence of declining mortality and fertility rates, has become increasingly pronounced (Chen & Liu, 2009). This demographic shift is particularly pronounced in rural regions, where the "hollowing out" of elderly populations is evident (Liu et al., 2010; Zhou, 2008). Concurrently, the imperative of elderly care seems to be gradually overlooked by families and society at large (Liu, 2014), reflecting a waning of traditional Chinese family values that historically placed a premium on the veneration and support of the elderly (Zhou, 2000).

This study aims to dissect the evolving perceptions of the elderly concerning symbols of aging, their social cognition, identity, and interpersonal relationships. It is dedicated to exploring the symbolic cognition that envelops the concept of aging in rural areas of developing societies, which extends beyond the mere physiological manifestations such as grey hair and wrinkles to encompass mythological significance (M. Kaeberlein et al., 2015). These aging myths are potent symbols imbued with profound cultural and social implications, affecting how elderly individuals construct their identities (Thornton, 2002). The research aims to uncover the identity construction of the rural elderly, revealing how these mythological perceptions shape their sense of self and their place within their communities.

In the context of China's rapid modernization, the traditional values and familial discourses that have long underpinned the social fabric are transforming (Fei, 1982). As the younger generation provides cultural feedback (Li, 2020), the older generation finds itself in a state of transition where the once-traditional tapestry of their cultural heritage is gradually fading. This erosion is a deeper disconnection from the cultural and linguistic practices that have shaped their identity and social interactions. It is not merely a generational gap but a profound challenge in the cognitive and affective domains, where the elderly find themselves unable to fully articulate their experiences and participate in a rapidly evolving cultural narrative. This struggle is

emblematic of cultural aphasia—a phenomenon where the interplay of societal change and the preservation of cultural memory culminates in a tangible impediment to articulating the cultural subtleties that were once intrinsic to their lives (Sierra, 2015).

The study will examine the attitudinal shifts of the elderly as they engage with the symbols of aging, reflecting on the process of resistance, acceptance, and active embracement. The findings aim to shed light on the cultural development of an aging society and to enrich the ongoing discourse on gerontological theories in China, offering insights into the lived experiences of the rural elderly and their evolving place within a rapidly changing cultural landscape.

### **Literature Review**

Identity is a fundamental concept in understanding how individuals perceive themselves within the broader societal framework, shaped by both self-perception and societal expectations (Stets & Burk, 2003). In the context of an aging society, identity takes on particular significance, as it is continuously redefined in response to the changing roles and statuses that come with age. Stuart Hall's cultural identity theory emphasizes that identity formation is a fluid, dynamic process shaped by ongoing self-reflection and interaction with societal norms. Hall (2022) argues that this process is neither static nor singular but is instead characterized by constant negotiation between internal self-conception and external societal influences. This perspective aligns with the notion that in aging, individuals continuously reassess their identities as they navigate their evolving place within social structures (Xu, 2023). The importance of identity in aging underscores the need to understand how older adults perceive themselves and are perceived by others within the context of societal expectations and cultural narratives.

Hall's theory emphasizes that identity is relative, situational, and multifaceted. For older adults, this means that their recognition and acceptance of aging are influenced by their interactions with societal expectations and cultural norms. The process of identifying oneself as "old" is not merely a biological acknowledgment but a socially constructed understanding influenced by how society views aging (Huang & Morley, 2022). As Liu Yan (2008) elaborates, identity is shaped through discourse and symbolic representation, where societal narratives

around aging play a significant role in how older adults perceive their aging process.

Social narratives around aging significantly shape how older adults perceive themselves and their aging process. In Western societies, aging is often stigmatized, leading older adults to distance themselves from being categorized as "old" (Richeson & Shelton, 2006). This contrasts with Chinese culture, where old age has traditionally been associated with respect and high social status, although this is changing due to modernization (Liang, 2014). The shift in social attitudes in China, influenced by Westernization and the diminishing influence of filial piety, has led to an increasing devaluation of old age, with older adults in China now more likely to internalize negative perceptions of aging (Lai 2009). In contrast, the portrayal of aging in American media often emphasizes negative stereotypes, associating old age with dependency, illness, and unattractiveness (Keyes & Dicke, 2016). These narratives reinforce societal attitudes that marginalize older adults, leading to ageism. This cultural narrative is further compounded by media representations that consistently promote youthfulness while depicting aging as a decline (Chonody & Teater, 2016). The impact of these narratives is profound, as they shape public perceptions and influence the policies and practices surrounding aging populations (Fischer, 1978).

Furthermore, discourse theory provides a lens through which these societal narratives can be critically examined. Miller (2012) suggests that discourses surrounding aging often become institutionalized, creating a dominant narrative that is difficult to challenge. This institutionalization of negative aging stereotypes perpetuates a cycle where older adults are seen as a burden, reinforcing ageist attitudes and policies.

Aging is a socially constructed concept (Phelan, 2010) and societal perceptions of aging are shaped and reinforced through cultural narratives (Phoenix, Smith & Sparkes, 2010). Heider's (1958) exploration of interpersonal relations and mythmaking highlights that aging is not merely a biological process but also a socially constructed phenomenon embedded within cultural myths. In Western cultures, this myth of aging as decline is particularly pervasive, with media and cultural narratives frequently reinforcing the association between aging, loss of productivity, and

diminished value (Thornton, 2002). Such narratives become institutionalized over time, creating a dominant discourse that is resistant to change and perpetuating the marginalization of older adults.

This institutionalization of negative aging stereotypes supports existing power dynamics by framing older adults as dependent and less valuable, thereby justifying the allocation of fewer resources to them compared to younger, more “productive” members of society (Angus & Reeve, 2006). This critique points to the need for a paradigm shift in how aging is perceived and represented, moving away from reductive myths and toward narratives that recognize the ongoing contributions and inherent worth of older adults. However, there is a notable gap in research exploring the specific processes of attitude transformation toward aging, particularly within the framework of balance theory as discussed by Heider (1958).

Research on aging has primarily focused on Western contexts and has emphasized quantitative methods. For example, Hugerl, Vakil, and Levy (2022) conducted experiments using a set of 96 common object images from the Bank of Standardized Objects (BOSS) to assess how healthy aging affects associative memory for identity, spatial, or temporal relationships among different groups of older adults. Keyes and Dicke (2016) used a 2x2 analytical model to identify popular aging images presented in media across three historical periods. Similarly, Barker et al. (2007) employed the Aging Perceptions Questionnaire (APQ) to evaluate beliefs about aging. However, these methods often overlook the nuanced individual experiences of older adults, particularly in culturally rich societies like China, where obtaining authentic data can be challenging. In contrast, studies such as those by McFadden (1999) and MacKinlay (2001a), which rely solely on qualitative interviews, provide deeper insights into these personal experiences but may not be generalizable to broader populations.

## **Method**

### **Methodology**

This study was conducted using the Glaserian grounded theory methodology. This approach does not aim for a precise description of the material but rather seeks to reveal latent patterns. These latent patterns cannot be “observed”; they transcend the data and represent a

higher-level, transcendental conceptual reality that exists beyond the data (Wu & Li, 2016). This paper aims to generate theory through a process of step-by-step induction from empirical materials, derived from in-depth discourse analysis of respondents and research subjects. Rather than deducing theoretical propositions from existing knowledge frameworks, this approach seeks to avoid being constrained by pre-existing research frameworks and questions set by respondents and researchers, particularly in the context of shifting attitudes toward older adults influenced by the myths of aging.

Grounded theory methodology has not been commonly used in research about the specific attitude transformation among the elderly. Grounded theory methodology is suitable for balance theory (Ron, 2009), especially in elderly's identification. An advantage of studying it by using grounded theory methodology is that it allows Culture Aphasia voices and authentic perceptions to come out. Additionally, because older adults often find it difficult to use electronic devices, conducting remote interviews to expand the sample data is not feasible. In-depth face-to-face interviews, as used in grounded theory, not only help to alleviate the psychological burden older adults may experience during interviews but also help to reduce their sense of loneliness. This approach ensures the accuracy and diversity of the data collected.

### **Participants**

The study subjects included elderly individuals aged between 60 and 85 years old, residing in various elder care facilities, such as the Rainbow Village Elder Care Home in Chaoyang District, Beijing. The researchers obtained a list of eligible elderly participants from the managers of these care facilities. The study was conducted from November 2023 to July 2024 and involved six semi-structured focus group interviews. A total of 11 participants were interviewed, with focus groups evenly distributed by gender and education level. Additionally, special interview settings were designed for three participants with unique circumstances to prevent the loss of core information due to psychological factors.

### **Data Collection and Data Analysis**

The empirical study was conducted in two phases. The aim of the first phase was to inductively identify the triggers and processes behind various attitude changes experienced by older adults during aging. The interviews were open-ended, as the goal was to understand the respondents' genuine experiences. Participants were asked to discuss the following topics: (1) Self-perception, including views on their age and identity, (2) Perceptions of aging and changes in attitude, (3) Time and events experienced during the aging process, (4) The impact of aging on themselves, including changes in physical health and appearance, (5) The impact of aging on interpersonal relationships, such as relationships with family members, elders, grandchildren, friends, co-residents, and staff members in the community, (6) Perceptions of social changes and their own role. Participants were asked to keep a diary for a month or record entries as needed, focusing on the same themes discussed in the interviews. Data were analyzed using the constant comparative method (comparing each event with all other events) until preliminary core processes emerged from the data.

The first phase of the analysis involved open coding. NVivo 14 software was used to assist with this process, with the text being independently coded by two coders. The codes were then merged and categorized. In the initial coding phase, 69 codes were generated. After excluding codes that appeared less than twice, 17 initial categories were retained.

The second phase involved determining which initial codes most accurately reflected the data. The most significant and frequently occurring initial categories were then consolidated into more targeted, selective, and conceptual core categories. Through comparison, the initial codes were found to preliminarily point to four dimensions: "mythological symbols—interpersonal relationships—social cognition—attitude transformation." After further summarization and refinement, 12 core categories were identified, each corresponding to secondary categories and their meanings.

Grounded theory always leads to the emergence of a core category. Data analysis revealed that aging gradually forms a mythological symbol, influencing the emotional involvement and



attitude changes of the elderly population. On one hand, the myth of aging generates emotions of rejection and withdrawal, as individuals try to resist the impact of aging on their interpersonal relationships and social attitudes. On the other hand, societal myths continuously affect all aspects of older adults' lives, compelling them to undergo necessary attitude changes.

Based on this, a model is proposed to illustrate how the myth of aging influences attitude changes within the elderly population.

core process	Subprocess	Further subprocesses
<b>Social cognition</b>	Changes in social cognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Impairment in social role fulfillment</li> <li>Resistance to social change</li> <li>Nostalgia for the past</li> <li>Experiencing Social estrangement</li> <li>Perceived societal change</li> <li>Incomprehension of younger generations</li> <li>Diminished desire for social interaction</li> </ul>
	Social expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Weakening of social responsibility</li> <li>Social clock regulation</li> </ul>
<b>Interpersonal relationships</b>	Active initiative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Active expansion of social networks</li> <li>Multidimensional relationships with caregivers</li> <li>Gradual estrangement</li> </ul>
	Relationships with younger generations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Understanding intergenerational relationships</li> <li>Negative impact of the family environment</li> <li>Denial of the generation gap</li> <li>Presence of a generation gap</li> <li>Attempt to integrate</li> </ul>
	Emphasis on self	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Emphasis on personal rights</li> <li>Emphasis on self-worth</li> </ul>
	Weakening of familial identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Perceived meaninglessness of familial care</li> <li>Compromise on familial authority</li> <li>Disorientation due to changes in familial status</li> </ul>
<b>Emotional attitudes</b>	Positive attitude	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Acceptance attitude</li> <li>Positive approach to aging</li> </ul>
	Negative attitude	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fear of aging</li> <li>Rejection and avoidance</li> <li>Reluctant acceptance</li> </ul>
	Denial of stereotypes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Shifting perceptions of aging</li> <li>Resistance to reminiscence</li> <li>Denial of psychological changes</li> </ul>
<b>Symbols</b>	Physical condition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Decline in physical functionality</li> <li>Changes in appearance</li> <li>Perception of illness</li> </ul>
	Perception of interpersonal relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Emergence of a generational gap with children</li> <li>Gradual awareness of aging's impact</li> <li>Involuntary changes in intimate relationships</li> <li>Reduced contact with friends</li> <li>Deterioration of physical strength</li> </ul>
	Deterioration in abilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Altered lifestyle</li> <li>Decreased vitality</li> <li>Impaired memory</li> </ul>

## **Results and Discussions**

### **Ethical Considerations**

This study focuses on aging individuals, where any discussion of changes in their attitudes and moods must be approached with great caution. This is particularly important as the study addresses intimate relationships, which are more sensitive for these individuals and do not simply fade away over time.

In this study, the principle of informed consent was strictly adhered to. Informed consent is an ethical requirement that ensures researchers obtain voluntary participation from subjects after providing them with information about potential risks and benefits. Participants were informed of several key aspects related to the study, including their role as participants, the purpose of the study, the types of data being collected, the nature and extent of their involvement, the criteria for their selection, and measures to ensure their well-being when conducting the interviews.

### **Analytical Results**

According to the research findings, the core process of aging perception is centered on the conflicting relationship between social symbols and attitude transformation. Socially entrenched stereotypes gradually evolve into powerful mythological symbols, which, upon individuals reaching a certain age, exert a profound influence on their mindset. It is important to note that attitude transformation in this context is a bidirectional process. This means that individuals not only experience cognitive changes under the influence of aging symbols but also aspire and attempt to resist the impact of these symbols. In other words, it is a dynamic interaction where both sides influence each other, with individuals continually adjusting to avoid remaining in a state of attitudinal imbalance.

### ***Cognition of Aging Myth***

Some of the unique symbolic carriers, will try to introduce a new entity into their existing interpersonal relationships and social cognition. This significantly alters the relationship between

individuals and their significant others, who typically include children, partners, friends, and other social connections.

### **Fear of Aging**

***Rejection and Avoidance.*** Some participants tended to reject and avoid discussions or reminders related to advancing age. Others showed a reluctant acceptance of the aging process, acknowledging the inevitability of age but still grappling with the emotional turmoil it entailed.

*M07 (Female, 77): Nowadays, I'm a bit scared of celebrating my birthday.*

*Sometimes I really dislike it when people keep mentioning it. When I was young, I didn't have time to think about it, but now that I'm old, I can't bear to think about it.*

*M09 (Female, 65): When you really reach 50, there's a period where it feels quite terrifying.*

***Resistance to Reminiscence.*** There was a noted resistance to reminiscing among certain participants. This resistance was linked to a fear of being trapped in the past and a desire to focus on the present and future, reflecting a dynamic engagement with the aging self.

*M05 (Male, 72): The past is past, why dwell on it?*

***Denial of Psychological Changes.*** Some participants denied the psychological changes that often accompany aging, such as shifts in cognitive abilities or emotional responses. This denial was an attempt to maintain a sense of continuity in their psychological identity.

*M09 (Female, 65): When you get a bit older and reach that age, you actually feel indifferent.*

*M05 (Male, 72): When I was young, aging felt very distant. Although I said I was afraid of getting old, I didn't really take it seriously.*

### **Deterioration in Physical Abilities**

***Decline in Physical Functionality.*** The participants reported a decline in their physical functionality, which they attributed to the natural aging process. This decline was a source of

frustration and concern, as it limited their ability to engage in activities they once enjoyed. The visible signs of aging, such as wrinkles and graying hair, served as a constant reminder of their advancing age.

*M05 (Male, 72): As I've aged, my eyesight has gone, and nothing works as it should.*

*M09(Female, 65): Out of ten of us, eight have diabetes.*

*M11(Male, 69): I can't taste the saltiness or spiciness anymore, I cough after two puffs of a cigarette, and I need reading glasses to see the words.*

**Altered Lifestyle.** The aging process necessitated an altered lifestyle for many participants. They had to adapt to new routines and adjust their living environments to accommodate their changing physical abilities.

*M05 (Male, 72): I used to practice Tai Chi and play chess, but now I don't have the energy for these. Moreover, we're too lazy to do or even want the good stuff. At my age, why should I enjoy the taste? In fact, I don't have so many demands in terms of food anymore.*

*M11(Male, 69): We can't ride electric scooters; it would be the end of us. What young people do now is too much, like skating and swimming. We can't do those; we're lucky if we can walk slowly.*

**Impaired Memory.** Memory impairment was a significant concern for the participants, affecting their confidence and independence. The fear of developing more severe cognitive issues, such as dementia, was a source of anxiety for many.

*M08(Female, 59): Sometimes when you're old, you forget things, like people's names.*

### **Perception of Interpersonal Relationships**

**Emergence of a Generational Gap with Children.** The participants observed an emerging generational gap with their children, which was attributed to differences in values, lifestyles, and

communication styles. This gap sometimes led to feelings of isolation and a sense of being disconnected from their family.

*M04 (Female, 71): It's better to interact with people our own age; we have a common language. When you talk to young people, you can't communicate on the same level; what they say is beyond our understanding.*

*M08(Female, 59): The ideas of two or three generations, the gap is definitely significant, and we don't interfere with each other.*

***Gradual Awareness of Aging's Impact.*** Participants recognized that their changing physical and mental states affected their interactions with others and their ability to maintain close relationships. Some participants experienced involuntary changes in their intimate relationships due to the aging process.

*M11(Male, 69): I used to practice Tai Chi and play chess, but now no one plays with me, so I just take walks every day.*

*M04 (Female, 71): After my spouse passed away, I realized that I was not as capable as I used to be. Now that I'm alone, I'm thinking of finding a nursing home.*

*M08(Female, 59): Siblings, after getting old, we don't meet anymore.*

### ***Three Pathways of Attitude Transformation***

Under the influence of aging myth symbols, individuals face identity transitions that do not align with their established life rhythms (Xu, 2023), resulting in a state of tension and imbalance in their relationships (Xu, 2019). As illustrated in Figure 1, if the cognitive subject's existing attitudes toward both aging symbols and interpersonal relationships or cognitive habits are consistent (either both positive or both negative), then interpersonal relationships are in a balanced state. This study defines the following terms:

P: Subject

O: Interpersonal relationships and cognitive habits

X: Aging myth

Balanced State A: P accepts the persuasion and construction of x, fully changing to conform to x, resulting in a balanced attitudinal state. Balanced State B: P rejects the persuasion of x and resists acknowledging the existence of x, entirely refusing to adjust o, resulting in a balanced attitudinal state. Imbalanced State C: P attempts to reject the construction of x, but x has already profoundly altered o and P is fully aware of it, resulting in a contradictory and imbalanced attitudinal state.

To restore balance between attitudes and life rhythms, the following options are available. Based on the collection and in-depth analysis of interview data, this study identified two pathways of attitude transformation under the influence of the aging myth.

**Pathway 1: (C) → (A).** P gradually changes their cognitive attitude toward aging, passively initiating an identity transformation. This shift moves from opposition and rejection to compromise and acceptance, thereby realigning the individual's imbalanced cognitive attitudes.

*M01 (Male, 85): "After entering the nursing home, I discovered that I really love cats. Many animals recognize me, especially the cats—there are over 20 cats that I'm very familiar with. I feed them every day and buy them cat food. They are very friendly when they see me, and whenever I appear, they come over."*

*M02 (Male, 82): "Now that I'm older, it's inconvenient for me to travel long distances, but I still keep up with the outside world by watching my phone and TV. I stay informed by following both international and domestic news, covering all types of news, especially military news. Every day, I check headlines on Today's Headline, Sina, and watch the main news broadcast; I also enjoy occasionally listening to music on my phone."*

*M01 (Male, 85): "Old people should be self-disciplined. Even though no one is watching over you, you must do meaningful things. Don't engage in meaningless activities. At my age, I don't worry about how long I can live with illness; those concerns are pointless. My motto is to live each day well, maintain a regular daily*

*routine, and eat and drink normally. It's not about how much good food you eat, but about being in a good mood."*

After M01-Mr. Li partner passed away in the nursing home, he was deeply heartbroken. He felt disenchanted with social interactions and relationships, which led to a temporary imbalance in his attitude toward life. However, Mr. Li later adjusted his psychological expectations regarding interpersonal relationships and life goals. He moved from social withdrawal to forming an emotional bond with the cats, and he sought to reestablish purposeful actions towards the meaning of life. By adhering to self-discipline and engaging in hobbies, he achieved reconciliation with the symbols of aging, thus restoring balance in his attitude model.

Similarly, M02-Mr. Zhao's physical instability in old age prevented him from engaging in his preferred leisure activities, such as sightseeing. Initially, he resisted acknowledging his aging process, but eventually, he had to adjust his way of acquiring information. By changing his lifestyle and accepting the reality of aging, he actively sought to integrate into the changing social environment and society, successfully achieving a transformation towards a balanced attitude.

In this attitude transformation model, the elderly reconstruct new identity dependencies and interpersonal relationships, resolving conflicts between life goals and disagreements brought on by aging. Through this process, they eliminate the discord caused by conflicts between their previous lifestyle goals and their current circumstances, finding new ways to achieve harmony and balance in their lives.

**Pathway 2: (C) → (B).** In this pathway, individuals firmly resist the stereotypes associated with aging, ignore the identity transitions that have already taken place, and continuously adjust their personal cognition to maintain their existing social views. They refuse to engage with societal development or acknowledge changes in their identity.

*M03 (Male, 74): "As for my living situation, I can only say I just live day by day until that day comes (death)."*

*M04 (Female, 71): "I still find it quite difficult to use a smartphone, and I just feel I'm not willing to accept this thing."*

*M01 (Male, 85): "I try to be as self-disciplined as possible, to handle things on my own, and only ask for help when I absolutely have to. I've told them that I'll only seek their help when I can't manage something myself, otherwise, I'll try to do everything on my own."*

In Pathway 2, individuals demonstrate a resolute resistance to aging, refusing to acknowledge the reality of aging and ignoring the identity transitions that have occurred. They continuously adjust their cognition to uphold their original social perspectives and self-identity, rejecting any intersection with societal development or identity changes.

M03 Mr.Chen's attitude reflects a passive acceptance of aging. His statement, "I just live day by day until that day comes (death)," indicates a lack of proactive measures in facing aging and a passive waiting for the inevitable end. This suggests an avoidance of engaging with life changes or finding new meaning.

Simultaneously, M04, Mrs. hu, she finds using new technology, like smartphones, challenging and is reluctant to accept them. This reflects her resistance to modern technology and change, as well as a latent rejection of aging. She prefers to stick to her familiar lifestyle, avoiding integration with the new trends of societal development. Although M01 Mr. Li shows acceptance and adaptation to aging in Pathway 1, in the context of Pathway 2, he mentions striving to be self-disciplined and only seeking help when absolutely necessary. This indicates his desire to maintain independence and minimize interactions with society and others. This independence can be seen as a form of resistance to aging and societal dependence, as he seeks to uphold his original identity and lifestyle through self-discipline.

In this pathway, individuals decisively reject aging stereotypes and try to resist changes in social identity by maintaining their original cognition and lifestyle. They are unwilling to accept new social roles or adjust their attitudes and behaviors to adapt to changes. In doing so, they strive to maintain psychological stability, even if it means becoming disconnected from mainstream societal development.

In the attitude transformation model of Pathway 2, individuals insist on their cognitive and



behavioral patterns, refuse to engage with societal changes, and reject the life goals and identity transformations brought about by aging.

This study found that while Heider proposed a balanced model of interpersonal states, it does not have universal applicability across different population groups. Specifically, in this study, we observed a significant number of individuals, particularly among the elderly, who refuse to engage in attitude transformation to achieve balance. The emphasis on intrinsic values within this group (Angus, 2006) tends to make their refusal to undergo attitude transformation more pronounced. Moreover, the imbalance in interpersonal relationships becomes less of a concern when the physical condition of these individuals deteriorates sharply.

This finding suggests a need to expand the applicability of Heider's Balance Theory, as it may not fully account for the unique dynamics and value emphasis observed in aging populations.

### ***Behavioral Adjustments Following Changes in Attitude***

**Transformation of Family Roles.** Interviews reveal that as individuals age and familial circumstances evolve, the role of the elderly within the family diminishes progressively. Accompanying this decline in status is a sense of disorder and the growing belief that their contributions to family care are insignificant. Consequently, the elderly increasingly relinquish and compromise their familial authority.

*M04 (Female, 71): "I would discuss it with my son and daughter-in-law; if they prefer to educate the child (referring to their grandchild) differently, I would support that."*

*M011 (Male, 69): "It's not like we can help him. We just end up being a burden to him."*

*M08 (Female, 59): "I would like to live with the elderly, but we don't want to stay there, as it would only burden them. Besides, there's not much I can do. Look at my eyes—they don't work well. What can I do? I can't even cook."*

These statements illustrate the respondents' gradual concession of family authority to the younger generation. For them, their role has shifted to merely "offering suggestions" or

"participating in discussions," and in some cases, they view themselves as "burdens," no longer holding decisive power over the family or the younger generation.

**Adjustments in Perceptions of Relationships with Younger Generations and Behavioral Changes.** An individual's self-perception of their behavior or views may influence how they convey information. On one hand, some individuals may worry that the information they transmit could negatively impact the younger generation, reflecting their self-efficacy and negative transmission expectations. This implies an awareness that they might unintentionally convey negative messages during communication, leading to concern.

On the other hand, individuals may perceive the existence of a generational gap, where differences in cultural background, values, or life experiences hinder effective communication with the younger generation. This perception of a generational gap causes individuals to doubt the efficacy of communication, believing that these differences might lead to misunderstandings or conflicts. However, some individuals deny the existence of such a generational gap, asserting that there are no significant communication barriers with the younger generation. They believe their communication style is suitable for the current context, thus overlooking potential intergenerational differences.

Some elderly individuals feel guilty about the care they receive from the younger generation, leading them to believe that they are negatively impacting their descendants.

*M04 (Female, 71): "She says there are two people with poor mental health in the house, though she says it in jest. But I know she is under a lot of pressure. She worries I might suddenly have issues, so she suggested I move into a nursing home."*

*M07 (Female, 77): "Nowadays, children don't communicate with the elderly."*

*c.M08 (Female, 59): "It's still easier to get along with the elderly; we have a common language. You can't talk with young people."*

For elderly individuals with varying perceptions, interactions with the younger generation differ, falling into two categories: "attempting to integrate with the younger generation" and "gradually

distancing from the younger generation."

*M01 (Male, 85): "My grandson recently applied to a university and is awaiting a response. He often comes to see me and helps me with my book because I'm not good with computers. He is helping me put the book together; most of it is done, but we still need to finalize some of the contents."*

*M04 (Female, 71): "I don't understand technology. Sometimes I don't find it convenient. If my granddaughter is willing to teach me, that's fine, though I sometimes don't feel like learning."*

These elderly individuals integrate into the lives of the younger generation through shared activities, common interests, and learning new things, thereby fostering closer relationships.

**Perception of Social Change and Adaptation.** As individuals age, their perception and understanding of society and its changes undergo corresponding transformations. These changes manifest in the adjustment of cognitive alignment and information processing modes. When confronted with societal changes, elderly individuals tend to select ways to integrate with society based on their cognitive frameworks and expectations. This adaptation process involves the concepts of adaptive communication and cognitive biases.

Within this context, analysis of interview data from elderly participants has identified nine subcategories. These subcategories illustrate how elderly individuals form specific cognitive patterns and behavioural strategies during the processes of information reception, processing, and dissemination. These categories not only reveal how the elderly respond to societal changes but also reflect their strategies and cognitive adjustments in adapting to these changes.

For some elderly individuals, the responsibility of nurturing ends with their children and does not extend to their grandchildren.

*M04 (Female, 71): "I sometimes think about it and feel that taking care of children is exhausting. Although sometimes it feels nice, it's good to have something to do and someone to accompany me."*

Elderly individuals exhibit varying attitudes towards nostalgia.

*M11 (Male, 69): "The past is gone; why dwell on it? I try to think of happy times. Occasionally, we remember the hardships of the 1960s, but you can't keep thinking about it."*

The different social environments in which the younger and older generations grew up led to a lack of understanding of the younger generation, reflecting, to some extent, their inability to comprehend the society that shapes the younger generation.

*M05 (Male, 72): "I feel that many things in society today are not good. For example, these young people not getting married—I can't understand that. I think they will regret it later. You have to listen to the advice of elders."*

Despite the general perception of social change as positive, some elderly individuals feel uncomfortable with or even resist the rapid changes in modern life.

*M10 (Male, 80): "Society has changed so much—from those hard times to now. Back then, we lacked so much; sometimes, we couldn't even get a bite to eat. Now, there are too many changes—smartphones, computers, transportation. The other day, my granddaughter took me on the subway, but I couldn't figure it out. They wanted me to scan some code. And during the pandemic, you had to carry your phone to show your health code. That confused me."*

Many elderly individuals interviewed exhibit a diminishing sense of social responsibility, focusing more on personal life and maintaining their health.

*M09 (Female, 65): "In old age, any contribution to society is just a bonus. The most important thing is to enjoy life at that stage."*

*M08 (Female, 59): "People are more open-minded now, unlike the old days when mothers-in-law controlled everything. We don't interfere anymore."*

In their process of integrating with society, elderly individuals gradually accept temporal discipline, aligning their behaviours with the symbolic meanings associated with different age stages.

*M05 (Male, 72): "Each stage of life has its responsibilities."*

*M11 (Male, 69): "As an elderly person, the most important thing is to maintain a balanced mindset, not to compare yourself with others, and just enjoy each day. Of course, there's some fear, especially when you see acquaintances passing away. It's uncomfortable, but what can you do? It's natural. The best you can do is live happily and stay healthy, which is the best way to repay your children."*

As social circles shrink and opportunities for social interaction decrease, the elderly's desire for socialization gradually diminishes, reflecting their withdrawal from social interactions and an inclination toward self-preservation.

*M07 (Female, 77): "I get along well with my grandchildren and sometimes help take care of the kids. But nowadays, children are quite independent, and we, as the elderly, mainly focus on their daily care. We can't manage much else."*

*b.M09 (Female, 65): "I don't have many friends left, mostly because we rarely keep in touch anymore."*

### **Trustworthy**

When evaluating trust in grounded theory, four criteria are available: fit, relevance, workability, and modifiability. Glaser summarized these as follows: "Does the theory explain the relevant behavior in the substantive research area? Is it relevant to the people in that substantive area? Does the theory fit the substantive area? Can it be modified as new data emerges?"

In summary, Glaser's four trust evaluation criteria are applicable to our study in the following ways: The model of attitude transformation and behavior in cognitive aging created for older adults is applicable to relevant gerontology research. The theory is suitable for guiding

studies on the psychology and attitude analysis of the elderly, and it can be modified as new data becomes available.

### **Conclusions**

This study aimed to explore the evolving perceptions of aging among elderly individuals, focusing on the influence of mythological symbols of aging on their social cognition, identity, and interpersonal relationships. By examining the attitude transformation pathways under the aging myth's influence, the research addressed the core problem of how aging symbols impact the emotional and cognitive processes of the elderly. Using the Glaserian grounded theory methodology, the study identified two primary pathways of attitude transformation: acceptance and adaptation to aging symbols, and resistance to aging stereotypes while maintaining original identity and lifestyle.

The logical progression of the study involved collecting and analyzing in-depth interview data, allowing for the emergence of core and sub-processes directly from the participants' experiences. The use of open-ended interviews facilitated an understanding of the real-life experiences of elderly individuals, highlighting the complex dynamics between aging myths and personal identity. This research contributes to the field of aging studies by offering a nuanced view of how elderly individuals negotiate their identity in the face of aging stereotypes and societal expectations, providing a model for understanding attitude transformation in aging populations.

However, this study has certain limitations. Firstly, while the grounded theory approach allowed for the emergence of rich qualitative data, the findings may not be generalizable to all aging populations, particularly those outside the studied cultural context. Additionally, the emphasis on symbolic and attitudinal changes may overlook other critical factors such as socioeconomic status, health conditions, and personal history that also shape the aging experience. Future research should incorporate diverse demographic variables and employ mixed methods to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the aging process.

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