

The Impact of Intergenerational Co-living Models on Community Active Aging under the Perspective of Sharing Economy

Pengbo Fu

Guangxi Arts University, Nanning, China

Abstract: *With the pressing issue of urban aging, there is a growing awareness of the impact that living environments and housing models have on the aging process. The breakdown of traditional family structures and agricultural economies has led to an increasing number of elderly individuals living alone in cities, which has prompted the emergence of intergenerational co-living models. These models involve young and old people living together, sharing resources and building a sense of community. From this perspective, this paper explores how these new intergenerational co-living models, viewed through the lens of the sharing economy, can positively affect active aging by promoting effective resource allocation, lifestyle integration, and value alignment between generations. Furthermore, this paper discusses how these models can be used to further promote active aging in both international and domestic contexts.*

Keywords: *Sharing Economy; Intergenerational Co-living Models; Active Aging*

1. Introduction

As the global economy continues to grow rapidly, population aging has emerged as a critical social issue and a primary obstacle to sustainable economic development in many cities. According to the seventh national census data, as of 2020, people aged 60 and above accounted for 18.7% of China's total population. Furthermore, projections by the China Development Research Foundation suggest that by 2050, the proportion of people aged 60 and over will exceed one-third of China's total population. As a result, actively exploring innovative ways to promote active aging among urban elderly populations has become an indispensable component of the urbanization process.

2. Concept and characteristics of the sharing economy

2.1. Concept and application scenarios of the sharing economy

With the rise of internet technology at the turn of the 21st century, the business model of the sharing economy gradually emerged from the logic of peer production, ultimately coalescing into its current definition. This economic framework centralizes idle resources and demand onto digital platforms, enabling efficient transactions that compensate suppliers and provide paid usage rights to those in need. By leveraging technological innovations, the sharing economy represents a paradigm shift towards more efficient utilization of idle resources, with the potential to enhance social services and improve overall efficiency. Academia generally defines the sharing economy as an economic model that promotes collaboration and division of labour towards common development goals, enabled through resource sharing. At the foundation of the sharing economy is the effective separation of use rights and ownership for goods or services, enabled by the liberation of information.^[1] Although the sharing economy has only been in development for a relatively short period, its applications have already covered major aspects of daily life. These include transportation, internet finance, lifestyle services, knowledge and skills sharing, medical care sharing, housing accommodation, and production services.^[2]

2.2. Characteristics of the sharing economy

One important characteristic of the sharing economy is openness, which is not only a feature but also a prerequisite for successful development. If a sharing platform lacks an inclusive and open attitude to attract both suppliers and demanders, the likelihood of the platform effectively achieving resource

conservation and demand matching will be greatly reduced. Openness allows sharing platforms to attract more suppliers and demanders, and the function of the bilateral matching platform is increasingly strengthened to become a hub for element aggregation.^[2] The sharing economy has a diverse range of ways in which resources can be shared, regardless of industry, age, or gender. This larger scope of openness enables the sharing economy to form a self-improving ecosystem and become a multi-sided marketplace platform that empowers individuals to make an impact on the world in their unique way.^[2]

Platformization is also a key characteristic of the sharing economy, whereby modern communication and internet technologies create a large online and offline platform for suppliers and demanders to exchange goods and services within a vast pool of supply. This allows for efficient resource consolidation and demand matching to occur on the platform.

Efficiency is another crucial feature of the sharing economy, enabled by scientific operational models and modern technology that break down constraints of time and space for both parties involved in the sharing process. By capitalizing on the aggregation effect of long-tail customers and economies of scale, the sharing economy promotes more efficient business models that are sustainable and cost-effective over time.^[2]

Socialization is a significant feature of the sharing economy, as it enables individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds to find common ground and reach a consensus through the act of sharing. The concept of "sharing" in the sharing economy is not limited to the sharing of physical resources such as unused goods or housing but also encompasses the sharing of time, knowledge, skills, and even values. This is reflected in the unique user-generated content that carries a strong social dimension, where users share their values, knowledge, experiences, and more with others through their idle resources. As a result, the sharing economy's value system is enriched and strengthened.

3. The current situation and problems faced by elderly residents in aging communities

3.1. The family structure of elderly residents in aging communities

The high proportion of elderly residents aged 60 and above in aging communities exceeding 10% is primarily due to the trend towards smaller family structures in these communities. Multigenerational living arrangements in the past have gradually disintegrated, resulting in an average household size of only 2.58 and 2.92, respectively.^[3] Additionally, influenced by strict national family planning policies in the past, the trend towards single-child families has become more prevalent, leading to the breakdown of traditional family structures during the urbanization process. These changes in family structures in aging communities inevitably lead to an increasing prevalence of "empty-nest syndrome" among elderly residents, which brings a series of issues such as income sources, physical and mental health, and social role transition pressure, severely hindering the positive aging process in aging communities.

3.2. The pension income situation of elderly residents in aging communities

Due to limited job opportunities for older adults, their effective retirement income is mostly reliant on retirement pensions and national low-income support policies. However, the high aging population ratio in these communities makes it challenging for elderly residents to rely extensively and equitably on "policy-pension" schemes, especially for a particular group of older adults - widowed people living alone. According to relevant data, 61.3% of widowed senior citizens rely on family members for economic support, while the proportion of pension funds is less than 20%, which is much lower than divorced or widowed seniors. This indicates that widowed seniors primarily rely on their families. The single and unequal distribution of retirement income sources among most elderly residents in aging communities cannot meet the requirement of "being taken care of in old age."

3.3. Spatial behaviour status of elderly residents in aging communities

The formation of each aging community has various factors, but most aging communities are inseparable from urban social production and transformation, leading to the current spatial behaviour status of elderly residents. Taking Shijiazhuang as an example, the modern industrial structure of Shijiazhuang was not ultimately established until the mid-1920s. Prosperous railway transportation and manufacturing industries, pharmaceutical industries, and other businesses fostered a massive civilian class, forming densely populated unit-type communities with concentrated production resources.

As time passed and the 21st century arrived, the hundred-year-old unit system reform did not overturn the changes in the original outdated unit community space, which still exists as the basic social spatial unit of micro-life organization. The Unit-type communities still follow principles such as "production first and then life" and "the shortest commuting distance," so streets are narrow, public spaces have poor openness, and there is a lack of barrier-free environments. Large commercial facilities gradually encroach upon community public spaces, resulting in limited community public green spaces and activity areas, severely affecting the normal life of elderly residents.^[4] This type of community living pattern that separates work and production from life also inevitably leads to uniformity in the behaviour composition of the elderly, greatly reducing their sense of participation in community activities.

3.4. Summary of the current situation and existing problems in aging communities

Due to the diversification of modern commodity housing products and the support of national policies for purchasing affordable housing, more and more young people are unable to adapt to the living patterns of aging communities and have moved away from the original aging communities. This has led to an increasing number of "empty nesters" and even some elderly people who live alone after losing their spouse. Although they live under the protection of relevant national pension policies, their limited sources of income inevitably lead to a lack of social participation and low levels of behavioural activity, among other potential social issues. The sense of community participation for the elderly is precisely an important indicator of measuring active aging in the community.

The original spatial layout and behaviour composition in aging communities are no longer coordinated with the rapid development of urbanization processes, such as the diverse public interactive spaces, community entertainment spaces under network influence, and elderly care community units under smart technology development. This urgently requires us to develop a new path to help the elderly achieve active aging faster and better.

4. Exploring a new path for active aging in the community - intergenerational mixed living mode

4.1. The manifestation of "active aging" in the intergenerational mixed living mode

The intergenerational mixed living mode is a new mixed living mode based on the theory of intergenerational fusion, which is more beneficial for intergenerational residents (young and elderly) in aging communities. It can not only meet their daily life needs but also promote organic and diversified development within the community. Why is the intergenerational mixed living mode considered a new path to help aging communities achieve active aging?

Because this living mode is precisely an innovative approach centred around the "three elements" of "active aging." The three important reference elements of "active aging" include health, security, and "participation."^[5]

"Health" is a prerequisite for active aging, which covers four dimensions: physical health, mental health, and social health. The intergenerational mixed living mode takes the physical and mental health of the elderly as a premise and provides them with the possibility to interact with young people in the community. It also expands multidimensional social relationships, realizes self-affirmation of social role abilities, and helps the elderly achieve higher levels of social and moral health based on achieving physical and mental health.

As a condition for active aging, "security" refers to the security system adopted to help the elderly in aging communities achieve active aging. The intergenerational mixed living mode is a new attempt at modern elderly care that uses network services as a platform, home intelligence as a support, and government support as a prerequisite. It enables self-operation and management within the community, better realizes "deinstitutionalization", and greatly reduces the cumbersome processes and steps in traditional elderly care through an open living model and intelligent platform supervision. It further realizes a modern elderly care service system based on family, supported by the community and carried by elderly care services.

As the key point to achieve active aging, "participation" actually originated from the early American concept of "productive aging," emphasizing the participation of the elderly in economic activities and contributions to society. In aging communities, there are quite a few elderly people who can engage in other social labour while being able to live independently. Intergenerational mixed living mode helps this group blend and cooperate with young people in social and economic activities, emphasizing that the

elderly should also gain satisfaction and a sense of achievement from individual and social aspects. Similarly, some traits of the elderly such as passionate care and meticulous attention also provide comfortable and homely living environments for young people in the community.

The starting point of intergenerational mixed living mode in solving aging problems is similar to that of active retirement communities (AARC) and continuing care retirement communities (CCRC) in the United States, but it emphasizes cross-generational communication and mutual assistance to promote active aging within the community.^[6] The biggest difference lies in the abolition of restrictions on elderly people's contact with young people, making the intergenerational mutual assistance mode a community self-operating mechanism that affirms the important social role of the elderly in the community. It has transformed the "incremental" solution using facilities and caregivers into an "inventory" solution that incorporates new forces.

4.2. The advantages of applying "sharing economy" in an intergenerational mixed living mode

4.2.1. Economic advantages

The application of the concept of "sharing economy" in the intergenerational mixed living mode emphasizes the use of rights of community space and resources, weakening ownership. The openness of the sharing economy and its co-construction and sharing philosophy is conducive to the "intensive" allocation of elderly care resources in aging communities. The "platformization" operation not only improves efficiency but also greatly reduces the "marginal cost" of elderly care services for the elderly, realizing the "deinstitutionalization" of elderly care mode and perfecting the mechanism of economic self-regulation and operation within the community. The mutual assistance between young and elderly people also expands the channels for elderly care income, which is also a manifestation of the "efficiency" of the sharing economy.

4.2.2. Spatial advantages

The openness of the sharing economy requires that community space in the intergenerational mixed living mode maintain a high degree of openness. For example, public activity spaces are equipped on the first floor or lower floors, providing places for daily interaction and communication between young and elderly people, greatly enriching the daily lives of the elderly. The use of shared canteens, shared libraries, and other facilities is also determined based on the daily habits and needs of both elderly and young people, truly realizing the design concept of community space being constructed and shared by both age groups.

At the same time, the platformization characteristic of the sharing economy strengthens the possibility and convenience of daily online mutual assistance between young and elderly people, and this online "platformization" operation mechanism has been transformed into efficient use of offline space that corresponds to it. For example, in these intergenerational apartments, the middle and lower floors and south-facing housing are generally left for the elderly to use, while elderly rooms are interspersed in the middle and upper floors. This ensures the clustering of the elderly population and provides relatively convenient daily care services for young people living on higher floors, balancing the "comfort" and "convenience" of living space and fully tapping the group advantages of both young and elderly people, truly achieving effective allocation of community resources.

4.2.3. Emotional advantages

The platformization of the sharing economy provides the elderly with an online platform to express their needs and daily communication, transforming the passive monitoring in the original elderly care mode into active seeking, providing them with more emotional communication channels, strengthening social recognition of the social role of both young and elderly groups, and improving their self-identity and community sense of belonging.

The openness of the sharing economy provides both young and elderly people inside and outside the community with an opportunity for communication and mutual assistance, affirming their "individual differences". This openness is based on the principle of "aging in place" for the elderly, which also preserves the emotional identity and historical memory of the elderly group to the original community environment. At the same time, the "socialization" feature in the sharing economy makes daily communication and interaction among young and elderly people in the intergenerational mixed living mode more frequent. Sharing is no longer limited to certain aspects but extends to emotions, values, and lifestyle attitudes, catering to the theme of building a society where everyone shares regardless of age.^[7]

5. Conclusions

Whether it is the attempt to implement intergenerational mixed living mode or the call to integrate the sharing economy into living spaces, they are all aimed at actively solving the increasingly serious social problem of aging. Based on the three pillars of active aging (health, security, and participation), this exploration and practice of shared space and living mode aim to create a good community atmosphere that is both open and efficient, emotionally expressive, and helpful. It breaks through the single elderly care model of the original community and increases the possibility of "aging in place" for the elderly. The ways of sharing are diverse, and regardless of industry, age, or gender, everyone can use their way to influence the world, which is in line with the concept of active aging. Today, instead of treating aging as a problem, it is better to provide the elderly with a new opportunity to participate in co-creation and sharing in the era of development.

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