Communication officers in local authorities meeting social media: On the production of social media photos of older adults

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ABSTRACT

European local authorities increasingly use social media to present services and activities organized for citizens living in the particular area. Previous studies found that authority-managed social media visually depicted older adults as being active, sociable, happy, and physically capable, reflecting the normative “third age” representation. Yet few studies to date have examined how local authorities produce the photos of older adults for social media posting. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with communication officers in a Swedish municipality, the purpose of this study is to investigate the production process for social media photos of older adults within local authorities from an institutional logics perspective. The analysis illustrates that communication officers strive to create a good image of the municipality and its services, follow municipal policy and EU law on data protection, seek photos through particular sources, adjust to and develop photographic standards of good photos, and endeavor to promote social media engagement in the photos. These motives and work practices of communication officers contribute to the visual representations of older adults as engaging in municipal services, being socially active, and staying physically capable. The analysis also indicates that both social media and bureaucratic logics encourage officers to produce photos of older adults that highlight the bright side of later life. The findings contribute to previous studies on online representations of older adults generated by local authorities, by showing how the third age representation may come about in practice, and which logics may influence officers to generate such representation. Furthermore, the knowledge provided could be used as a basis for assessment and improvement on authorities’ production for social media photos of older adults, which in turn contributes to more diverse and thoughtful representations of older adults and later life in authority-managed social media.

Introduction

Media is seen as one of the institutions that both shapes the image of older adults and maintains sociocultural constructions of older adults and old age (Mosberg Iversen & Wilinska, 2019). Social media content about older adults seems to be an influential source of information about older adults in contemporary society, yet this trend has not been sufficiently studied. Levy, Chung, Bedford, and Navrazhina (2014) found that a majority of Facebook group descriptions about older adults reflect negative old-age stereotypes, such as infirmity. In a social media analysis of dominant topics and discourses on Twitter, Makita, Mas-Bleda, Stuart, and Thelwall (2019) found that older adults are represented as a disempowered, vulnerable, and homogeneous group, which maintains negative stereotypical views of older adults. On the other hand, it is highlighted that social media can publicize individualized experiences of aging (Lazar, Diaz, Brewer, Kim, & Piper, 2017; Levy et al., 2014; Orús-Piqueras & Marques, 2017), and it thereby potentially destabilizes the stereotypes of older adults. Much of the research up until now has examined social media content about older adults posted by individuals, but has overlooked the content produced by the organizations using social media platforms. Furthermore, the majority of the studies have focused on written texts about older adults or old age, while little attention has been paid to visual images of older adults. This is despite the omnipresence of the visual being seen as one of the features of postmodernity or late modernity, and as having replaced the dominance of the word to some extent due to technological advances, the
development of modern media, and consumer culture (Martin, 2015). Visual representations are a significant force shaping and reshaping how later lives are experienced, valued, and understood (Twigg & Martin, 2015). Thus, it can be of interest to examine social media photos of older adults posted by the organizations using social media platforms.

European local authorities have increasingly used social media for municipal communication to increase transparency and e-participation in contemporary society (Bonsón, Royo, & Ratkai, 2017; Bonson, Torres, Roys, & Flores, 2012). Representations of older adults in authority-managed social media might affect how social media users perceive and treat older adults, as well as their views on the aging process and later life, especially since the content published by authorities is an important source of information at the local level. Yet, few studies to date have investigated how social media content about older adults is produced by local authorities, how communication officers go about their practical work, what guides them, and what their intentions are when producing content about older adults. Sweden is one of the front runners in digitalization and digital public services (Randall & Berlina, 2019). Municipal authorities in Sweden are at a relatively advanced stage of digital communication. Larsson (2013) reported that Swedish municipalities adopt social media at a steady pace, and widely use Facebook as a tool in digital communication. Additionally, Bergquist, Ljunghberg, Remneland, and Rolandsson (2017) found that Swedish authorities make use of social media tools to make services more efficient, create transparency, and build legitimacy. Such municipalities and joint authorities are expected to substantially produce and share online information about their services, products, and activities. Thus, Sweden is a suitable setting for researching the production of photos of older adults in authority-managed social media.

The present study aims to investigate the production process for social media photos of older adults within local authorities from an institutional logics perspective. That is, to explore the work and motives social media photos of older adults, which in turn, can promote more diverse and thoughtful representations of older adults. This study seeks to contribute to previous studies on online visual representations of older adults, which in turn, can promote more diverse and thoughtful representations of older adults and later life in authority-managed social media.

Previous studies: Online visual representations of older adults generated by local authorities

Previous studies have analyzed the visual images of older adults published on the websites of local authorities. It is found that some authorities employed visual images to generate a representation of heterogeneous older adults. For example, Sourabati and Loos (2019) found that diverse older adults are represented in the images published on the homepages of the names of local authority websites, especially in terms of ethnicity, fitness, ability and vitality statuses. This distinction might be a result of social media policy formulated by local councils, which aims to promote an online media presence of a diversity of social groups.

As mentioned by Xu (2019), local authorities in a Swedish municipality are required to adopt the social media and image policies that recommend communication officers visually present a multiplicity of citizens with respect to age, gender, ethnicity, and physical ability statuses. The visual images published on authority websites could be expected to challenge the stereotypical representation of older adults as a homogeneous group.

Old age has been re-framed into two distinct yet interconnected concepts: the third age and fourth age (Higgs & Gilleard, 2020; Laslett, 1991). The third age is seen as a life phase where engagement and independence are sustained, while the fourth age is associated with negative characteristics (e.g., infirmity, decline, and death) (Kydd, Fleming, Gardner, & Hafford-Letchfield, 2018). From the perspective of cultural gerontology, the fourth age is characterized by an unfavorable “cultural imaginary,” given the concentration of infirmity within long-term care (Gilleard & Higgs, 2014). The third age is often considered to define post-retirement life (Gilleard & Higgs, 2005). Online representations of older adults generated by local authorities identified in the majority of previous studies reinforce a normative representation of the “third agers” and maintain distance from the conceptions of the “fourth age” (Laslett, 1991). For example, Carlstedt (2019) found that nursing homes in Sweden mainly depict older adults living with an active, socially engaged, and fun life on their Instagram profiles. This online representation of the “third agers” appears to be an unrealistic image, as it conflicts with the reality of the people depicted who need care from the authorities. For example, those living in care homes in Sweden have extensive care needs and a high proportion die (41% of men; 29% of women) within only one year after moving in (National Board of Health and Welfare, 2019). In an earlier study, we found that older adults (including those in nursing homes) are predominantly portrayed as remaining socially engaged and moderately physically capable on authority-managed Facebook pages, which do not fully reflect the conditions of older adults in the care settings in question (Xu, 2020). This led to a research interest in exploring why and how social media photos of older adults were chosen. The present study is a follow-up study that draws attention to the production process of social media photos by local authorities and attempts to analyze how social media representations of older adults come about.

Communication officers meeting social media from the institutional logics perspective

According to the institutional logics perspective in organization studies, local authorities are bound by institutional logics that not only serve to socially construct institutional practices, but in turn are also shaped by individual actors. Drawing upon the work of Scott (2003, 2014), Pallas, Fredriksson, and Wedlin (2016) consider an institutional logic to comprise four elements (i.e., artifacts, routines, symbolical systems, and relational systems), which “provide the routes whereby a particular logic enters organizational contexts and processes, forming the platform for the translation of this logic in relation to ongoing work activities, actors and motives” (p. 1664). A body of institutional analyses suggest that multiple institutional logics may co-exist in an institutional context and that an institutional logics perspective can be taken into account to distinguish the appropriate rules, beliefs, and behavioral norms associated with different institutional logics in that context (Kvik & Stensaker, 2016; Petersen, 2017). Thornton and Ocasio (2008) argue that the institutional logics perspective helps us comprehend individual practices in a social context, which legalizes behavior and offers the agency opportunities. Previous institutional analysis on authorities from this perspective illustrates that authorities could be characterized and directed by multiple institutional logics that represent the distinctive mechanisms of societal institutions; for example, managerialism (Pallas et al., 2016), bureaucracy (Devereil, Olsson, Wagnsson, Hellman, & Johnson, 2015; Oben, 2008), politics (Thorbjørnsrud, 2015), mass media (Lusma-aho & Canel, 2020), and social media (Olsson & Eriksson, 2016). In theorizing how the institutional logics perspective could be put into practice, Pallas et al. (2016) examines how different types of professionals in a Swedish authority embed a media-related institutional logic into work practices, routines, and values.
Van Dijck and Poell (2013) argue that social media has gradually affected peoples’ daily interactions, professions, and institutional structures - it also has demonstrated the capability to emerge as an independent institution to which other institutions adapt. They define social media logic as “the process, principles, and practices through which these platforms process information, news, and communication” (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013, p. 5). Empirical evidence shows that different kinds of authorities adopt social media logic. For instance, Olsson and Eriksson (2015) found that the Swedish authorities adjust organizational practices to accommodate social media, specifically, they segment the audience into various target groups, modify established organizational practices, gain an increased image-building power, and engage in more personalized communication (e.g., making their professionals more visible and creating a casual and humorous tone of voice). Similarly, Garland, Tambini, and Couldry (2018) found that social media enables British authorities to shift towards more direct communication with citizens, especially in a crisis. These meso-level organizational changes might have tangible imprints at the micro-level where their officers perform media activities of institutional communication (Schillemans, Karlsen, & Kolltveit, 2019). Djerf-Pierre and Pierre (2016) found that Swedish authority officers appear as active users, especially when their institution becomes the target of social media scrutiny. The present study adopts the institutional logics perspective to analyze the production process for social media photos of older adults within contemporary local authorities, where multiple institutional logics, including social media logic, could be possibly used by communication officers.

In summary, even though online photos of older adults posted by local authorities across Europe today could be expected to challenge stereotypical representations of older adults as a vulnerable and homogeneous group, they instead seem to primarily reflect the typical “third age” representation. Yet few studies, if any, have investigated the ways in which the photos of older adults in question were produced or paid particular attention to photos showing the bright side of later life. From the institutional logics perspective, various institutional logics can co-exist in local authorities and affect the production process for social media content. Thus, the present study explores the ways in which communication officers produce social media photos of older adults (especially those showing the bright side of later life), and which institutional logics are embedded in the production process.

Materials and method

Since the municipalities of Sweden are responsible for providing municipal services and making autonomous and specific decisions, the municipal councils formulate policies on social media use, and decide the ways in which the municipality and joint authorities communicate with their residents. An earlier study found that the first municipal guidelines for social media use were introduced in April 2010 in Sweden, and at least 26 municipalities produced such guidelines that year (Klang & Nolin, 2011). Social media policies from different municipalities can be differentiated from each other, considering that these policies were autonomously formulated by local politicians having different perceptions towards the role and function of social media in municipal communication.

The present study focuses on one Swedish municipality. This municipality is one of the largest municipalities in Sweden with a population of about 150,000 and around 20% of inhabitants aged 65 years and over. Similar to other municipalities, the largest local sector of this municipality is health and social care; most of the largest employers are local authorities. This municipality (as an administrative body) has the responsibility of providing health and social care for older adults. In municipal nursing homes, most people have multiple illnesses and disabilities, as well as extensive care needs. The municipality is at the forefront of social media use and media policy development amongst municipalities in Sweden, compared to many other municipalities newly starting to use social media and locally developing social media policy or guidelines. Thus, this municipality serves as a suitable context for a study on how local authorities generate online visual images of older adults. Additionally, the knowledge generated within this municipal context can provide a valuable basis for assessment and improvement on authorities’ production for social media photos of older adults, which in turn can promote more diverse and thoughtful representations of older adults and later life in authority-managed social media.

The data collection was accomplished through interviews with communication officers working at local authorities of the Swedish municipality. One of the deciding factors for the sample size in qualitative research is to achieve a diversity of the sample required to address research questions from a variety of angles (Mason, 2002). The authorities affiliated with the municipality use social media platforms and post photos of older adults in different degrees. To gain insights from a diversity of authorities that actively use social media in the municipality, interview invitations were sent to 13 communication officers who actively use social media platforms for municipal communication. Eight communication officers accepted the invitation and five were unavailable. Over one-third of communication officers did not accept the interview invitation, which may potentially exclude some valuable insights into the research subject. Still, the ambition to include a variety of authority perspectives was reasonably achieved, as the involved study participants represent a wide range of local authorities in the municipality.

The small sample size in interview-based studies, sometimes seen as a study limitation, can be seen to threaten the validity of research findings (Vasileiou, Barnett, Thorpe, & Young, 2018). One of the methodological strategies that qualitative researchers adopt to ensure the credibility of the findings is to establish a sample of study participants who best represent or have knowledge of the research topic (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002). This strategy can account for a wide swath of the phenomenon being examined. This study preserves an internal validity of findings, even though a larger sample might be more informative. The study participants involved in this research worked in representative areas of municipal work (i.e., public information, education, social care, culture, and leisure), ensuring that different perspectives are captured. Additionally, data collection resulted in a great amount of useful information obtained from participants, which was sufficient to discuss variations across experiences. Given that the production process for social media photos of older adults within authorities has not been studied even in a small sample, this study may generate new knowledge of how communication officers produce social media photos of older adults to build upon in future research.

The first author of this paper performed semi-structured in-depth interviews with these officers over the period from June to October 2019, using an interview guide with questions focusing on the production process for social media photos. Table 1 outlines the study participants in detail. These participants were responsible for and experienced in developing social media content at the time at which the interviews took place.

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Note: This study includes study participants working at a youth recreation center and a high school. Both organizations have older employees, co-workers, and visitors that might be presented in social media photos.
took place at their workplace. At the beginning of each interview, all participants were informed of the basic information for this research, such as the purpose of the interview and the ways in which interview data would be collected, used, and stored. Consent was also obtained for the researcher to process the data. During the semi-structured interviews, the researcher asked a set of questions following an interview guide; participants were encouraged to elaborate on their work experiences and reflections. The interviewer asked probing questions to elicit further discussion or clarify statements made by participants. The overarching focus of the conversation was on the production of social media photos of people of different ages, with a particular focus on older adults. Audio recordings were made of the interviews, which lasted between 40 and 70 min. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim into 36-page narrative data using WORD documents.

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was employed to analyze the transcribed interview data. The analysis was performed using an abductive approach (Blakie, 2000). This abductive approach adopts an interpretivist ontology and addresses the aspect of researchers’ sufficient engagement in the interpretivist reality of the situation (Chamberlain, 2006). In this sense, this approach allows researchers with pre-existing personal involvement on the topic not only to establish understandings together with study participants, but also to maintain contact with prior research and established concepts. The analysis of this study initially started analyzing work practices and motives of study participants at key stages of the production process for social media photos of older adults (i.e., obtaining, selecting, and publishing photos). The analysis was then informed by previous literature on institutional logics. The data was analyzed using the perspective of translating institutional logics (Pallas et al., 2016), which can help understand the local embeddedness of field-level institutional logics. As Scott (2003, 2014) argued, the elements of institutional logics, include symbolic systems, routines, artifacts, and relational systems. In the analysis process, these elements guided us to identify institutional logics embedded in the production process for social media photos of older adults in local authorities.

ATLAS.ti was used to systematically code and analyze the data across the entire data set. Firstly, interview transcriptions were imported into the software, read, and re-read. Initial reflections were written down based on the explicit and surface meanings of what was said by participants concerning the production of social media photos in general, and of photos of older adults in particular. Then, the conceptual framework of institutional logics was chosen for further analysis, as it was deemed relevant in order to deepen understandings of what and in which institutional logics are embedded in the production process for social media photos of older adults. Data extraction consolidated and integrated data related to the research questions (i.e., How do communication officers working for local authorities produce social media photos of older adults? Which institutional logics are embedded in the production process?). Codes were noted down that describe the content of data extracts, and collated codes into conceptual notions pertinent to elements of institutional logics (i.e., symbolic systems, routines, artifacts, and relational systems) in an iterative process. In the coding process, each data extract was given equal attention; additionally, the established conceptual notions (candidate themes) were examined if they reflected the extracts and fit the entire data set. Candidate themes were refined, which led to the formation of themes. Reports of themes produced by the software serve as the basis for the in-depth analysis of the data extracts by theme. The authors agreed on the selection of particular extracts illustrating the essence of the arguments made in this article.

Findings

A number of prior studies, including an earlier analysis on photos of older adults posted on Facebook pages of local authorities in the Swedish municipality that provides the context for the present study (Xu, 2020), found that online representations of older adults generated by local authorities reflect the typical third-age representation. The present study identified four dominant themes in the data, illustrating how and with which intentions communication officers obtain, select, and publish social media photos – particularly those showing the bright side of later life. The themes include: (1) striving to adhere to the municipal social media policy and the EU law on data protection; (2) accessing the photos of older adults through internal and external sources; (3) adjusting to and developing photographic standards for posting in authority-managed social media; (4) aiming to promote social media engagement in the photos of older adults. The identified themes give prominence to communication officers’ work practices, activities, and motives. Additionally, the analysis presented in this section highlights the ways in which institutional logics are adopted with respect to each element: symbolic systems (e.g., rules or laws), routines (e.g., procedures associated with organizational processes), artifacts (e.g., standards for products), and relational systems (e.g., power and authority) (Pallas et al., 2016; Scott, 2014).

Striving to adhere to the municipal social media policy and EU law on data protection

Most study participants (1, 2, 3, 5, 8) reported that, as communication officers working for the municipality, they are expected to conduct practical work in compliance with the image policy and social media policy for this municipality. For example, they are expected to make decisions on producing “appropriate” photos of older adults for social media in compliance with these policies. Some respondents (1, 2, 5) mentioned that the municipality aims to communicate with the public in cohesive and unitive manners across local authorities when producing social media photos of older adults. The data extracts within this theme suggest that the cohesive visual representation of older adults in social media is facilitated and achieved through the coordination of the municipality’s central administration, such as the introductory package provided to newly recruited communication officers, in-time, and particular guidance disseminated by the municipality central administration, and professional training sessions organized during working hours. Another policy mentioned in the interviews is EU law on data protection and privacy, namely the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). This EU directive came into effect in May 2018 in Sweden, and stipulates that the exercise of authorities is expected to be laid down in the legislation (Heigis, 2019). Most study participants (2–8) reported an improved awareness of protecting the personal data of older adults and mounting paperwork on informed consent amongst older individuals. Most participants claimed that they adjust their way of working with the photos of older adults. They explained that photographers usually ask for permission from people before the on-site photoshoot sessions; additionally, they gather, archive, and update signed informed consent forms. This indicates their endorsement of carefulness and lawfulness (as bureaucratic values, Kruse, Lijtenberg, Oerlemans, Groenewoud, & Jeurissen, 2020) in making and publishing the photos of older adults. Thus, the municipal policy and the EU law can be seen as symbolic systems that comprise guiding principles for work practices of communication officers in terms of representing older adults in authority-managed social media. In this regard, various kinds of symbolic systems and policy values seem to manifest in the production process for social media photos, which might contribute to a strong presence of active older adults and invisibility of “fourth agers” in authority-managed social media.

For example, as expressed by study participants, the municipal policy is still not sufficiently clear or specific regarding the visual presentation of people which requires officers to work together to develop practical solutions. Thus, as indicated in the following comment by Participant 2, these work practices may serve to preserve the organizational control of the municipality over visual representations of older adults in social media.
The guidelines were established by those politicians. They have decided this is how we communicate as a municipality. These are the official guidelines for the municipality, and it states how we communicate. I think the hard thing, is if this is just the document, but when we are talking about it, it could be something else. … I think everyone here working as a communication officer, knows about this and we have a lot of discussions about this on a daily basis, around the pictures.

As one of the key principles in social media policy, the municipality aims to achieve an online presence of people of diverse backgrounds with regard to age, race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, physical functioning, and socioeconomic status. These media representations of citizens are also expected to reflect the demographics of the present municipal area to a larger extent. This suggests that municipal guidelines do not explicitly direct communication officers to produce photos showing the bright side of later life, or of older adults being physically capable in social media. Pursuant to municipal social media policy, most participants (2, 3, 4, 7, 8) stated that they would like to shed light on the intersectionality in media representations of citizens. Two study participants (2 and 4) explained that in their practical work, they adopt an intersectionality approach to visually presenting older adults, to ensure the inclusion of various backgrounds in social media photos. However, to this point, the study participants seem to have limited insight into intersectionality and the municipality does not clearly specify how officers could implement the policy on intersectionality in practice. Given that intersectionality refers to “the complex, irreducible, varied, and variable effects which ensue when multiple axes of differentiation—economic, political cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential—intersect in historically specific contexts” (Brah & Phoenix, 2004, p. 76), communication officers might consequently miss the opportunity to feature intersectional experiences of older adults with multiple social characteristics (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, class) and various forms of discrimination that are simultaneously experienced by older adults.

Study participants also expressed different understandings on the extent to which this EU law influences the production process for social media photos. Two study participants (3 and 4) stated that it is not necessary to obtain consent from each person photographed. Yet, the majority of study participants (2, 5, 6, 7, 8) rigorously comply with the Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and feel obliged to obtain formal informed consent from the individuals captured in the photos. The following excerpts illustrate that the study participants have different understandings of the use of social media photos with regard to the GDPR; additionally, they indicate that communication officers acknowledge and address the issue of ensuring public accountability in terms of different legal bases for visually representing citizens in social media (i.e., consent or public interest).

On the website - which does not represent just us - the whole province was allowed to use the pictures, as we are joint interests. So, we are interests for everybody, and then we are almost like a magazine or a newspaper. So, we are allowed to have them since we are informing about our activities, which should be for the benefit of everybody. Then, we are allowed to use more or less anybody in the photo. (Participant 3)

We need to make sure everything follows the protocols, because we cannot publish photos that we are only 50 percent sure about. We need to be 100 percent sure, in order for this photo to be on our Facebook page, or our newsletter, or in this … or whatever. (Participant 2)

With a particular focus on the accessibility of informed consent from older adults (a practical issue related to the GDPR), Participant 4 argued that the communication officers can easily get older adults’ consent to use their photos in authority-managed social media, as citizens generally trust in the municipal administration and the purposes for which the municipality would use their photos. Yet, older adults’ trust and consent might not necessarily lead to their full control over how they are represented, especially when they are not asked to confirm accurate representations.

I think it is easier with older adults, because you can ask them right away. Here, most people are positive about giving consent. Our museum is a positive place. We [citizens of this municipality] trust the organization, we are not the free market, as we are not doing something for money. In that way, it is easier to work with older adults. (Participant 4)

As illustrated in the following excerpt, Participant 7 reported the difficulty in keeping up to date with the validity of older adults’ consent, revealing that the officers consider the ethical aspect of media publications as well as preserve respectful and empathy towards the people who lost a loved one within the community. The excerpt indicates that there could be risks of instability and unpredictability in using the photos of older adults; additionally, it suggests that communication officers aim to reduce the risk of personal privacy violation and enhance accountability in terms of the GDPR-compliant photo consent.

We used a picture of an older man. After around one year, this man passed away. His family members contacted us to ask us to take the picture off our social media page. In that case, we deleted the picture and didn’t have it anymore. As for us [communication officers], it is a very difficult situation when it comes to keeping track of consent and saving consent obtained from older adults. (Participant 7)

The instability and unpredictability reported here might lead communication officers to maintain distance from photos of older adults who are critically ill or in very old age, as this can prevent dissatisfaction amongst citizens with the presence of the photos of deceased family members. In this respect, the accessibility and validity of older adults’ consent perhaps results in a greater number of photos that show older adults as healthy and sociable.

Considering that bureaucratic logic encompasses the characteristics of routines, stability, efficiency, predictability, and transparency (Fred, 2018; Poulsen, 2009), the findings presented in the present theme demonstrate that bureaucratic logic is dominant in the efforts of communication officers on adhering to municipal policy and national legislation (e.g., by striving to reflect a diversity of citizens and the real demographics of the current municipal area in the photos). The findings also suggest communication officers’ efforts in achieving organizational control over how to communicate with the public, indicating their pursuit of stability and predictability for municipal communication with citizens. Given communication officers’ endeavors to follow municipal policy and national legislation, the bureaucratic logic seems to ask them to produce photos of a heterogeneous group of older adults on one hand, while on the other hand, it has the potential to direct them to avoid photos of very old or frail older adults, perhaps contributing to invisibility of “fourth agers” in authority-managed social media. Although the policy and the EU law are closely related to social media use by authorities, social media logic is not identified in this case.

**Accessing photos of older adults through internal and external sources**

Study participants stated that they mainly obtain photos of older adults from three sources: communication officers at the municipality, field professionals, and stock photography websites. They also stated their preferences in sourcing photos given different work circumstances. According to the interviews, the reason that study participants receive and access photos from particular sources is affected by their work assignments and schedules. This theme illustrates the inscription of bureaucratic logic into the routines of accessing photos of older adults, given that communication officers need to fulfill the demands for
improving efficiency and increasing productivity.

The data extracts within this theme illustrate that one photo source is pictures taken by communication officers at the municipality. Three study participants (1, 4, 7) claimed they could take photos of older adults on their own. This happens when they have time or work responsibility for taking photos of scheduled events. The following excerpt indicates that Participant 1 could have material resources, autonomy, and control in taking photos of older adults, given that each individual makes of her/his own subjective appraisals on the visual content when taking photos, in terms of to what extent the photos may fit in the authority programs or services. So, the photos of older adults produced by communication officers are more likely to be posted on social media. Due to communication officers’ busy work schedules, the photo-shooting assignments are not aimed, as an organizational process, at accessing photos of older adults.

If I know something is going on, I can take my camera and go out and take photos. Then, I can choose more, and who to take the photos of.

… If I go out myself, I can make more decisions on my own, like if I want a group or one person to be shown in the picture. But it does not happen very often because I am kept busy.

Study participants also stated that they can source photos of older adults from field professionals, especially nursing-home professionals. Informed consent for media publications of these photos is needed before social media postings. Any of the posted photos can be removed from authority-managed social media if requested by older adults or their relatives. According to two study participants (1 and 6), they often ask field professionals to provide photos of older adults to whom they provide services. Since most photos of older adults from field professionals are taken by nursing home staff, these photos present older adults receiving different kinds of care services. According to Participant 1, the photos from nursing home staff are mostly taken by smartphone; additionally, the photos look genuine, despite not being well designed. The following excerpt illustrates that Participant 1 requests nursing home staff to send and photos of older adults, as she intends to show what happens on site, and which services are provided to senior residents. In this respect, representing older adults can be seen as consisting of municipal procedures of accessing photos from field professionals, whereby communication officers facilitate a number of contacts and information exchanges thought to be beneficial to depicting nursing-home life in social media.

I get photos [of older adults] by email from people working at nursing homes. They would let me know if they had a barbeque, and there are some photos available to post. I usually do not get that many emails, so I send emails to their boss, and say ‘I want more photos for social media [of the municipality].’ The photos could be someone’s birthday, could be a barbeque, or anything else. Let them [nursing home staff] know I want some photos.’ Because of this, I usually get a few photos in my inbox.

The third and last source is stock photography websites, from which communication officers can search for photos of older adults, especially when they have limited time to prepare ready-to-post photos, and when they have few photos available from other sources. Accessing photos from stock photography websites does not require the presence of study participants in field services, which has the potential to ensure work efficiency and timeliness in social media management of authorities. Some study participants (3, 4, 8) are opposed to taking advantage of photos on stock photography websites, as these photos mostly show perfect-looking models. As Participant 3 indicated, the photos of older adults on stock photography websites appear artificially delightful and homogenous, failing to reflect social characteristics of older adults living in the local community. As the photos on stock photography websites depict perfect, youthful models, the practice of communication officers accessing stock photos potentially contributes to generating a representation of younger-old adults in authority-managed social media.

I think it is the common media representation of older adults, that they are always looking good. I think this is a problem with the stock photos, because older adults are always looking so ‘American.’ They are white, have bright teeth, looking shiny. It is too perfect.

The findings reported in this theme as a whole suggest that bureaucratic logic dominates in accessing the photos of older adults. Specifically, the pursuit of authority transparency and openness (as a principle of bureaucratic logic) directs communication officers to ask nursing-home professionals to send photos of care recipients, as those photos present genuine scenes of nursing homes and perhaps support local people to participate in shaping municipal services. Additionally, the demands of improving efficiency and increasing productivity (as a principle of bureaucratic logic) guide officers to obtain the photos of older adults in a fast and convenient way. According to the analysis of the interviews, social media logic is not adopted in sourcing photos of older adults. Instead, we suggest that the logic of bureaucracy plays a dominant role in directing communication officers in deciding the ways in which they routinely access or obtain photos of older adults, which can be seen as a way of maintaining or improving the rational functioning of local authorities.

Adjusting to and developing photographic standards for posting in authority-managed social media

Study participants stated that they adjust to and develop photographic standards for photos of older adults that are “appropriate” for posting in authority-managed social media. This theme highlights that such standards seem to be conditioned by the participants’ perceptions of which photos of older adults attract and engage social media users, while simultaneously building up a good image of the municipality and municipal services. As expressed by study participants, they mostly choose photos that present older adults as being authentic, service-related, active, and physically capable. Social media photos of older adults can be seen as artifacts, which are generated and disseminated to support the agency in accomplishing its tasks and responsibilities (Pallas et al., 2016). This theme indicates the embedment of social media logic and bureaucratic logic in the process of developing standards of artifacts.

The majority of study participants (1–4, 7–8) favorably select service-related photos of older adults to address the relevance of older adults with municipal services. These photos can reflect the authentic image of municipal services and older adults living in the community, as well as reinforce the link between municipal services and potential recipients. This link might suggest that municipal services are universally accessible and available for senior citizens, indicating that the municipality confirms the value of accessibility. As informed by Participants 2 and 3, these photos can promote social media user engagement through likes, shares, and comments. In this sense, these photos are expected to foster an online corporate dialogue between citizens and authorities. Using good examples of service-related photos of older adults, Participant 1 noted photos of older adults living with dementia to demonstrate how they are looked after by the municipality. The following excerpt indicates the communication officers’ attempt to ensure informational transparency of authorities and quality of dementia care services.

If we have some photos of dementia or another specific illness, we want to show how well we take care of people with dementia. We cannot do everything for someone living with dementia. If we have some photos of dementia or another specific illness, we want to show how well we take care of people with dementia. We cannot do everything for someone living with dementia, we cannot cure this person, but we will do as much as possible to take care of them. But if someone has a dementia life, she/he cannot be a fantastic, nice grandparent.

Most study participants (1–4, 7–8) favor using the photos representing older adults as active participants in municipal life. A few examples of
activities showing older adults being active were mentioned in different ways in the interviews, such as dancing, eating cake, going for a walk, interacting with artwork in a museum, participating in city tours, and reading books. As shown in the following excerpt, Participant 2 noted that photos showing older care receivers engaged in various activities are aimed at acknowledging and appreciating the care for older adults provided by care workers, but also of the older recipients of care themselves. This excerpt also indicates that communication officers may have a social motive to treat coworkers more fairly when care and other services are delivered to the agreed standards.

We are trying to cheer for older adults taking initiative. We show these photos to our coworkers. We not only need to highlight our coworkers, but also need to highlight these older adults who had a great trip.

Concerning the physical functions of older adults depicted in the photos, two study participants (1 and 2) are in favor of those photos showing physically capable older adults. As noted by Participant 2 below, this photo preference applies to the selection of photos of older adults receiving social care. Study participants avoid using photos showing older adults as fragile or using walking assistance; hence they use social media photos of older individuals with higher physical capability. For instance, Participant 2 expressed that he refrains from using photos representing older adults as being weak, as he intends to highlight “good things,” particularly on social media platforms. Furthermore, Participant 1 argued that the representation of older adults is associated with the public image of local authorities in social media, so the photos of fragile older adults do not have a positive impact on raising the profile of the municipality. Such work practices can result in more photos being used of older adults as physically healthy or undertaking physical exercises, despite communication officers being told to endeavor to follow municipal policy so as to depict diversity and intersectionality in terms of age and physical functioning. However, two study participants stated that the photos depicting older adults as physically capable might have adverse impacts on how different social media audiences perceive and treat older adults in nursing homes. As Participant 2 noted, many older individuals in nursing homes have mental or physical health problems and need extensive institutional care, which is not represented in the available social media photos. As Participant 1 stated in the following excerpt, these photos may cause misunderstanding of the actual situation for senior care recipients, and the care work amongst job applicants within the caring profession. In response to the interviewer inquiring about the possibility of posting photos showing fragile older adults on social media, Participant 1’s quote below highlights that such photos would not be shown in municipal social media, even although she is concerned about the adverse impact of their absence. Instead, study participants use the photos of physically capable older adults to construct a positive image of the municipality and their everyday work, indicating that the embedment of social media logic and bureaucratic logic in adjusting to and developing photographic standards (cf. Olsson & Eriksson, 2016: 195).

Those photos [of frail older adults] will not be posted on our social media. When we present our organization, we promote the things we are doing well, we show the staff that are doing well. Our social media is the display window for the municipality. We want to show a positive image.

There seems to be tension in terms of the officers implementing the intersectionality policy when it comes to visually presenting older adults with disabilities in authority-managed social media. The unfavorable social imaginary of the fourth age, often associated with decline and frailty, seems to prevent the officers from presenting older adult’s intersectional experiences of aging and disability. The worries from the officers about possible ramifications of visually presenting older adults with disabilities are mostly from the perspective of how those images would be received, including how citizens would react to the images and how citizens would perceive and evaluate the municipal care for older adults. Study participants expressed few concerns about how older adults living in nursing homes would like to be represented in authority-managed social media, though older adults have the right to have a say in choosing the photos of their municipal life.

The present findings suggest that social media logic and bureaucratic logic are more intertwined and less contested when communication officers are adjusting to, and developing, the photographic standards. Specifically, the officers select photos of older adults depicted as authentic, active, and physically capable, as these photos potentially attract social media users to like, share, and comment (a principle of social media logic). On the other hand, the findings suggest that the selection of photos showing older adults engaging in municipal services requires communication officers to improve the openness and transparency of municipal services (a principle of bureaucratic logic). As a specific manifestation of the alliance of these co-existing institutional logics in the selection of appropriate photos, officers choose so-called “positive” photos of older adults, as these photos are likable on social media platforms and important for communication officers to build a good image of the municipality. Thus, social media logic and bureaucratic logic work in tandem to develop the standards of social media photos of older adults. The photographic standards identified may guide communication officers to select the photos that show older adults maintaining active engagement and independence, generating the typical third-age representation.

Aiming to promote social media engagement in photos of older adults

As reported by study participants, they tend to perform social media activities for the purpose of promoting the engagement of social media users in these posts, which significantly accommodate the functions of social media platforms. Technologies and tools used for organizing the agency’s media activities with external interest groups can be seen as part of relational systems (Pallas et al., 2016). This theme suggests the adoption of social media logic by communication officers in taking advantage of the technological opportunities that social media platforms offer.

With regard to the aspect of designing social media posts, study participants explained their experiences with making the posts informative, connective, and of topical relevance. Some of them (1, 7, 8) set the close-up photos of older adults as the first picture for social media posts, which fit well with the abovementioned photographic standards. Additionally, most participants (1–3, 7–8) use hashtags or reference trending topics for the ready-to-post photos, as well as write-ups for events and insert hyperlinks to other platforms and users, which might enable connections amongst individuals and allow the formation of an online community focusing on the same topic. Given that social media mediates users’ activities and determines how connections form (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013), the designing practices of communication officers are potentially shaped by connectivity (a principle of social media logic) in the system of social media. Since the practices are in line with the photographic standards resonating with the third age representation, the connective photos could become more prominent in the social media information flow, which contributes to greater visibility of the photos showing the bright side of later life.

With regard to the publishing of social media photos, many participants manage to draw up a posting schedule and identify the best times to post and sponsor particular posts. According to Participant 1, communication officers working for the municipal central administration jointly create a schedule of topics and prepare ready-to-post photos for each topic, in order to achieve well-organized municipal communication. Additionally, they tend to publish social media content at certain points in time - for instance, Participant 1 often publishes one post every week and outside work hours (e.g., early morning or lunchtime), assuming that a well-timed post may possibly lead to more likes, shares,
comments, and click-throughs. Moreover, many study participants (1, 4, 7, 8) sponsor particular Facebook posts and use Facebook ads algorithms in advertising campaigns to establish a relational system with external interest groups (cf., the following excerpt). In this sense, communication officers can manipulate the social media content of older adults and the flow of scheduled content, indicating their agency in steering programmability (a principle of social media logic) activated by social media platforms. The work practices reported here suggest communication officers’ intentions to influence the audience’s viewing experience, which may serve to ensure wide dissemination and a lasting impact of the social media photos showing the bright side of later life.

Last year, we had quite a lot of campaigns with the 65+ demographic. We have quite a few apartments for those aged 65+ during this year, and the campaigns are still going on. ... For that campaign, we have two different target groups: the 65+ and their kids who are helping them find an apartment. (Participant 7)

This theme suggests that communication officers adapt to the norms and strategies of social media platforms with regard to how information is processed and communicated. Specifically, the officers’ work practices (e.g., identifying the most popular photos, lifting the visibility of particular photos of older adults, and popularizing those photos) are inspired by popularity (a principle of social media logic), which can help the authority-managed webpages to generate a higher amount of data traffic. These work practices contribute to generating a dominant representation of “youthful” older adults, despite the fact that communication officers try to adhere to municipal social media policy that guides the facilitation of an online presence of citizens from different backgrounds. Communication officers’ greater adaption to social media logic can maintain and reinforce this representation of older adults in authority-managed social media.

To summarize, the themes identified in the interview data illustrate the specific ways in which communication officers produce photos of older adults for authority-managed social media, as well as their stated intentions for pursuing particular photos of older adults. One focus of the study is on how their work practices can contribute to generating a dominant media representation of older adults having a bright and joyful later life, as shown in the previous study (Xu, 2020). Regarding which institutional logics are embedded in the production process, this study indicates that social media and bureaucratic logics are at work in the manner of guiding communication officers to carry out everyday work practices with regard to symbolic systems, routines, artifacts, and relational systems. The findings also suggest that the embedment of institutional logics (especially social media logic) within the production of social media photos of older adults significantly helps to generate and reinforce the typical third-age representation. Specifically, the findings show that social media logic works in alliance with bureaucratic logic in the development of standards of social media photos of older adults; additionally, they appear not to compete with each other in regard to the four elements of institutional logics forming the platform on which institutional logics are inscribed into and embedded in content production. Apart from the logic of bureaucracy, social media logic seems to play a significant role in shaping the representations of older adults in the local authorities in question, indicating its power to expand the social media discourse outside the institutional boundaries of social media.

Discussion

Previous studies show that local authorities tend to visually depict older adults (or nursing home residents) as “third agers” and highlight the bright side of later life in social media (e.g., Carlstedt, 2019; Xu, 2020). This representation can be an idealistic image of older adults from the public sector perspective (see e.g., Carlstedt, 2019). It is perhaps in conflict with the physical conditions of older individuals depicted in social media photos (Xu, 2020). The third age visual representation also reflects and reinforces homogenous definitions and criteria of “aging well” or “successful aging.” Much of the research to date has not investigated the “back-stage” production process for social media photos of older adults within local authorities, despite that an increasing number of authorities are using social media tools in contemporary society. Against this backdrop, the present study examines the production process for social media photos of older adults within local authorities from the institutional logics perspective, with a particular emphasis on the photos showing a bright side of later life or reflecting the typical third-age representation.

The findings of this study suggest that two institutional logics interact in the production of social media photos of older adults within local authorities. A logic of bureaucracy, especially in terms of routines, is found to direct communication officers to obtain and select particular photos of older adults. For instance, communication officers endeavor to follow a set of policies and instructions, go through formal procedures to obtain formal informed consent from individuals, and perform a photo-taking or photo-searching task with efficiency considerations. According to Hope and Hill (2007), public administrative accountability covers the legal, political, and new public managerial forms of accountability within the context of liberal democracy and the rule of law. These forms of accountability seem embedded within the production process for social media photos of older adults (e.g., sticking to policy and legislation, improving work efficiency). As found in the present study, communication officers not only introduce municipal services and older adults to the public, but also demonstrate an intention to construct a good image for the municipality. This finding is consistent with that of Thorbjørnsrud (2015) who found that local officers create and maintain the reputation of authorities in the media, governed by administrative loyalty. In this respect, bureaucratic logic plays a role in shaping and legitimizing the actions of communication officers on the representation of older individuals enjoying local environments and engaging in municipal services.

Moreover, social media logic is found to direct communication officers in the selection and publication of photos of older adults. Specifically, communication officers make use of the capability of social media platforms to facilitate user contributions and foster citizen participation in the photos of older adults. Additionally, they design social media posts to establish the network of content, faculties, field professionals, locations, and digital media platforms and take advantage of platform techniques (e.g., creating slideshows, sponsoring posts, and using digital visual codes) to increase the prominence of particular photos of older adults. Social media logic plays a positive role in generating the representation of older adults maintaining engagement and independence. It is noteworthy that an algorithmic logic is associated with social media platforms, as social media algorithms may influence the attitudes and beliefs of users towards older adults by enhancing what they see based on similar “liked” content coming to the top of their newsfeed, thereby creating a self-reinforcing echo-chambers of information. As suggested by the previous studies exploring the role of social media platforms on information consumption in particular data sets, social media platforms (e.g., Facebook and Twitter) implementing news feed algorithms present echo chambers (e.g., Cinelli, De Francisci, Ginamarco, Quattrociocchi, & Starnini, 2020; Quattrociocchi, Antonio, & Cass, 2016). A study illustrates that ageism is part of digital platforms where discriminatory practices are embedded in the development and running processes of algorithms, possibly leading to the exclusion of older adults (Rosales & Fernández-Ardiavol, 2020). Therefore, “younger” older adults (as content producers) should be aware of social media platforms’ implementation of algorithms and the effects on visual representations of older adults, as algorithms might boost certain social media photos.

The typical third-age representation seems prominent in the media and often linked to very specific intentions of producers. For instance, a Canadian magazine for older adults puts forth an aspirational identity for the “third agers” as being fit, fashionable, functional, and flexible, constructed to foster a particular perspective on successful aging.
The magazine representations of older adults’ consumer lifestyles are driven by the commercial purpose of facilitating an image of being “youthful,” active, and successful (Christensen, 2019). Another study focusing on visual representations of older adults argues that using the “third age” concept enables authorities to disseminate a positive image of aging (living longer and being healthier), while stressing a sense of self-responsibility for remaining active and coping with losses of resource in later life, serving to keep the myth of “eternal youth alive” (Loos, 2013). The present study indicates that the communication officers in Swedish local authorities tend to construct a good image of the municipality by representing older adults as the “third agers” in social media, while they pay insufficient attention to the actual preferences of the older adults presented in the photos. From a critical perspective on the third age, the cultural discourse of third age fosters the ideals of privileged older adults (e.g., be healthy and affluent), obliquely establishes a foundation for the “new ageism” against those who fail to fulfill the expectations, and sidelines the social justice agenda for improving social conditions of the marginalized (Holstein, 2011). The third age representations in the media do not limit the likelihood and severity of harm, as they contribute to forming a new norm of aging and creating a model for what defines an older person, leading to “visual ageism” (Loos & Ivan, 2018). These representations may also have the result of homogenizing older adults as being a wholly active and healthy group, regardless of heterogeneous lifestyles, living situations, and personal pursuits (van Dyk, Lesenich, Denninger, & Richter, 2013). Representing older adults as “third agers” in the media risks marginalizing older adults by showing limited functions and neglecting to highlight the various ways in which older adults contribute to society and communities.

As found in the present study, the work practices of communication officers tended to result in a social media representation of sociable, active, and healthy older adults who receive social care services from the municipality. Such practices re-present an idealistic municipal life possessed by older adults in care settings, which resonates not only with conceptions of the third age, but also with the notion of “successful aging” referring to “the avoidance of disease and disability, the maintenance of high physical and cognitive function, and sustained engagement in social and productive activities” (Rowe & Kahn, 1997: 433). Although the notion of successful aging attempts to put forward a more positive approach to later life, it is associated with critical concerns over its consonance with neoliberalism. For instance, Minkler and Holstein (2008) see the vision of active, engaged, healthy older adults in its complicity with the neoliberal emphasis on individual responsibility for health and well-being. Similarly, Rubinstein and de Medeiros (2015) argue that the notion of successful aging has a similar approach with neoliberalism to characteristically emphasize individual actions applied to aging experiences, which is perhaps not an optimal means of addressing the needs of all older adults (e.g., those who do not age “successfully”). Dominant depictions of successful aging also by design disqualify (and blame) those having conditions such as dementia (Beard, Fetterman, Wu, & Bryant, 2009), which is a large and growing proportion of the older population in the West. The notion of successful aging has also been criticized as failing to acknowledge class, race, and gender concerns that possibly lead to further marginalize the already marginalized (Holstein & Minkler, 2003). The visual representations of “third agers” in the Swedish authority-managed social media can be questionable, as they might generate a representation of “successful agers” in case of how well and whether the neoliberal emphasis on individual responsibility in the welfare state context.

Seemingly, there has been a tendency of “positive” representations of older adults being increasingly conspicuous in various media. In Western advertising and television programs, a shift towards more “positive” representations of older adults (as being active, enjoying life, and maintaining a healthy lifestyle) can be seen over the last decade of the twentieth century (Loos & Ivan, 2018). A literature review of the studies researching media representations of older adults, shows that older adults in entertainment media appear dominantly “positive” and associate with “a denial of old age” (Center for Ageing Better, 2020). This tendency poses a dilemma for authorities in choosing only images of older adults who are socially active and healthy for challenging age stereotypes and ageism. This dilemma might be partially created by the “inability to overcome its historical patterns of dichotomous thinking in which there is a “good” and “bad” old age (Holstein, 2011, citing Cole, p. 235). Considering the tensions between positive and negative representations of older adults, Swift and Steedon (2020) noted that there is a deficiency of balanced representation of older adults that mirrors the life experiences of the heterogeneous older population.

This study is expected to draw our attention to the “positive” photos of older adults that mainly represent the bright side of later life in authority-managed social media, as well as how the images of older adults were produced within those authorities. Based on the findings of this study, this article suggests local authorities ensuring accountability when generating social media photos of older adults, and proposes the following recommendations for how communication officers working for the municipality of inquiry adjust work practices related to social media and visual images. Firstly, more social media photos that accurately reflect the conditions of older adults in different municipal contexts are needed. We encourage the authorities to give voice to the marginalized older adults (e.g., the oldest-old members of society, those with dementia, and those who may not meet the narrow definitions of “aging well”) and produce social media photos of older adults which can hopefully serve to improve their social conditions. Secondly, we call for local authorities to pursue a more democratic administration where senior citizens have the opportunities to deeply engage in the production process for social media photos used to represent them. For example, communication officers and nursing home staff can offer cameras or smartphones to older adults to capture their life experiences, ask older adults to participate in locally developing social media policy and photography standards, as well as constructing a more complex assessment of the posted photos of older adults. This resonates with Ivan, Loos, and Tudorie’s (2020) call for enhancing visual communication rights for older adults and collaborative ways to create digital visual content together with older adults. Finally, we call on the authorities to draw attention to not only the way in which they portray the interconnectedness of social divisions in lived experience, but also their media practices in shaping the intersecting power relations and social inequalities. As noted by Collins (2015), “intersectionality is not simply a field of study to be mastered or an analytical strategy for understanding; rather, intersectionality as critical praxis sheds light on the doing of social justice work” (p. 16). The critical praxis perspective of intersectionality may be valuable for municipalities starting to use social media to critically reflect upon organizational practices in terms of fostering social justice and a fair image of older adults of various backgrounds.

Conclusion

The purpose of the present study is to investigate the production process for social media photos of older adults within local authorities from the institutional logics perspective. This study identifies specific work practices and motives of communication officers that are related to the production of social media photos of older adults that cast light predominantly on the positive side of later life. The study also shows that bureaucratic logic mostly blends with a social media logic in the process of producing social media photos of older adults where certain core values of bureaucracy and principles of social media are manifest in work activities, actors, and motives in the local authorities of inquiry. These findings open space for studying how the third-age representation comes about in authority-managed social media. The insights gained from this study of media production may be of assistance to assess and improve social media representations of older adults generated by local authorities, which in turn promotes more diverse and thoughtful visual
images of older adults and later life. As shown in this study, the municipal policy has a role in shaping online representations of older adults, thus further research needs to examine more closely both municipal policy efforts and policy processes related to the representation of older adults in authority-managed social media.

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