



Who We Are and How We Talk About Volunteering:
Older Adult Volunteers' Perspective



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Focus

- Older Adult Volunteers as A Unique Subtype of Older Adults
- Negotiate Identities and Communicate About Volunteering
- Aging Experiences



Rationale:
Older Adults as
Volunteers

	Formal Volunteering Rate	Informal Helping Rate
16 to 17	28.2%	33.1%
18 to 24	17.8%	33.8%
25 to 44	23.3%	48.9%
45 to 54	27.0%	55.4%
55 to 59	24.4%	57.2%
60 to 69	23.2%	58.9%
70 to 79	24.1%	58.8%
80 to 84	17.7%	51.9%
85 and over	11.8%	43.1%
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Younger Adults (16 to 54)	23.5%	47.1%
Older Adults (55 and over)	22.7%	57.2%

**VOLUNTEERS
NEEDED**

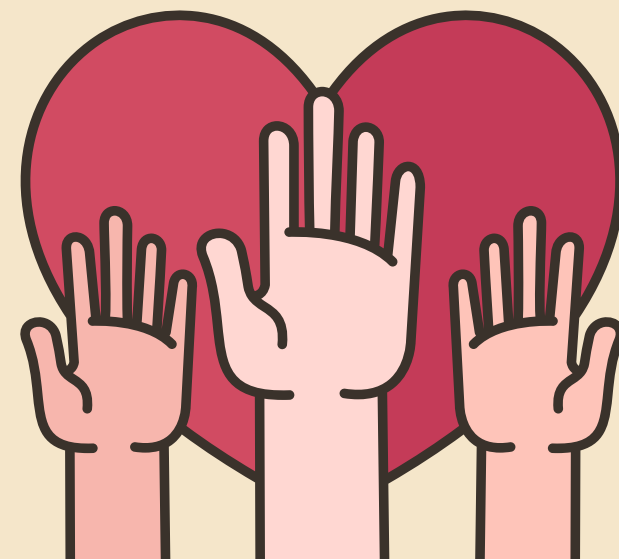
Percentage of population volunteering in the U.S. 2021, by age (AmeriCorps, 2021)

Rationale: The Benefits of Volunteering

Benefits

- Improving health, happiness, life satisfaction
- Coping with loss of certain identities
- Maintaining & expanding social networks
- Altering negative age stereotypes

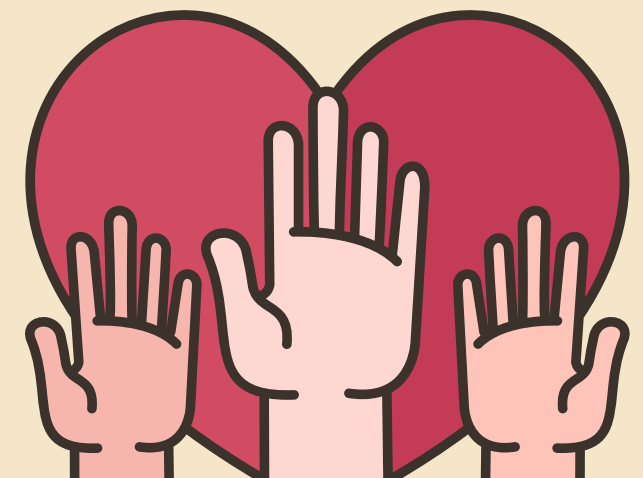
Bowen & Skirbekk, 2013; Morrow-Howell, 2010



Research Gap



Less research studies investigate volunteering in older adults from a communication perspective; whereas individuals can shape their aging experiences as (un)successful through communication.



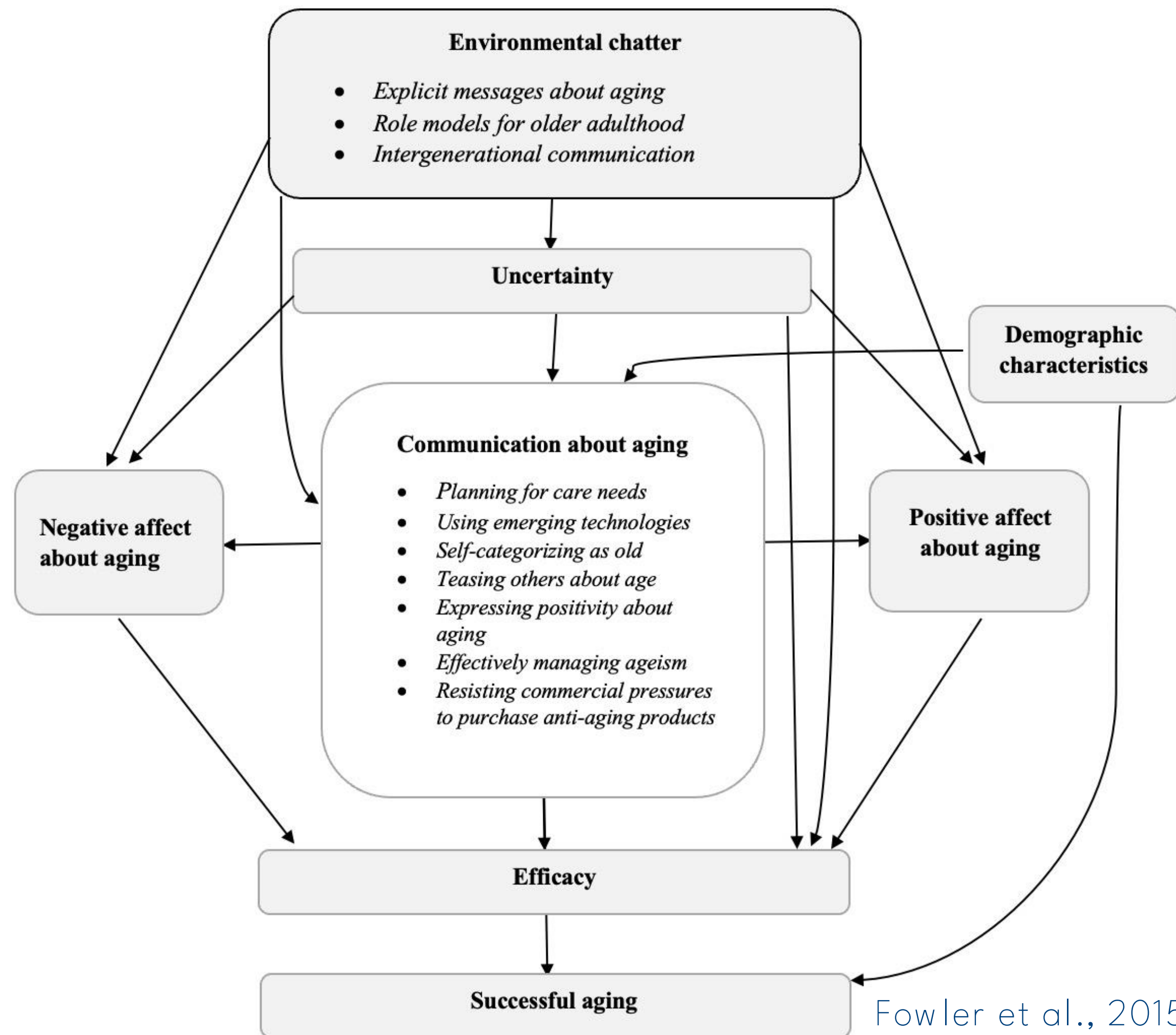
Statement of Purpose

Drawing on the Communicative Ecology Model of Successful Aging (CEMSA), the current research conducts a qualitative study to focus on two communication related to volunteering:

- (a) how older adult volunteers recount their self-categorization processes and volunteering experience;
- (b) how they communicatively present their management of volunteering during aging.



Theoretical
Framework:
The CEMSA



Communication about aging

- *Planning for care needs*
- *Using emerging technologies*
- *Self-categorizing as old*
- *Teasing others about age*
- *Expressing positivity about aging*
- *Effectively managing ageism*
- *Resisting commercial pressures to purchase anti-aging products*

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- Age is fluid and dynamics; older adults possess multiple identities.
- How older adult volunteers discursively negotiate age boundaries and interpret preferred identities enacted through volunteering

Giles and Reid (2005);
Crisp and Hewstone (2007)

Theoretical
Framework:
Incorporating
SOC into
CEM SA

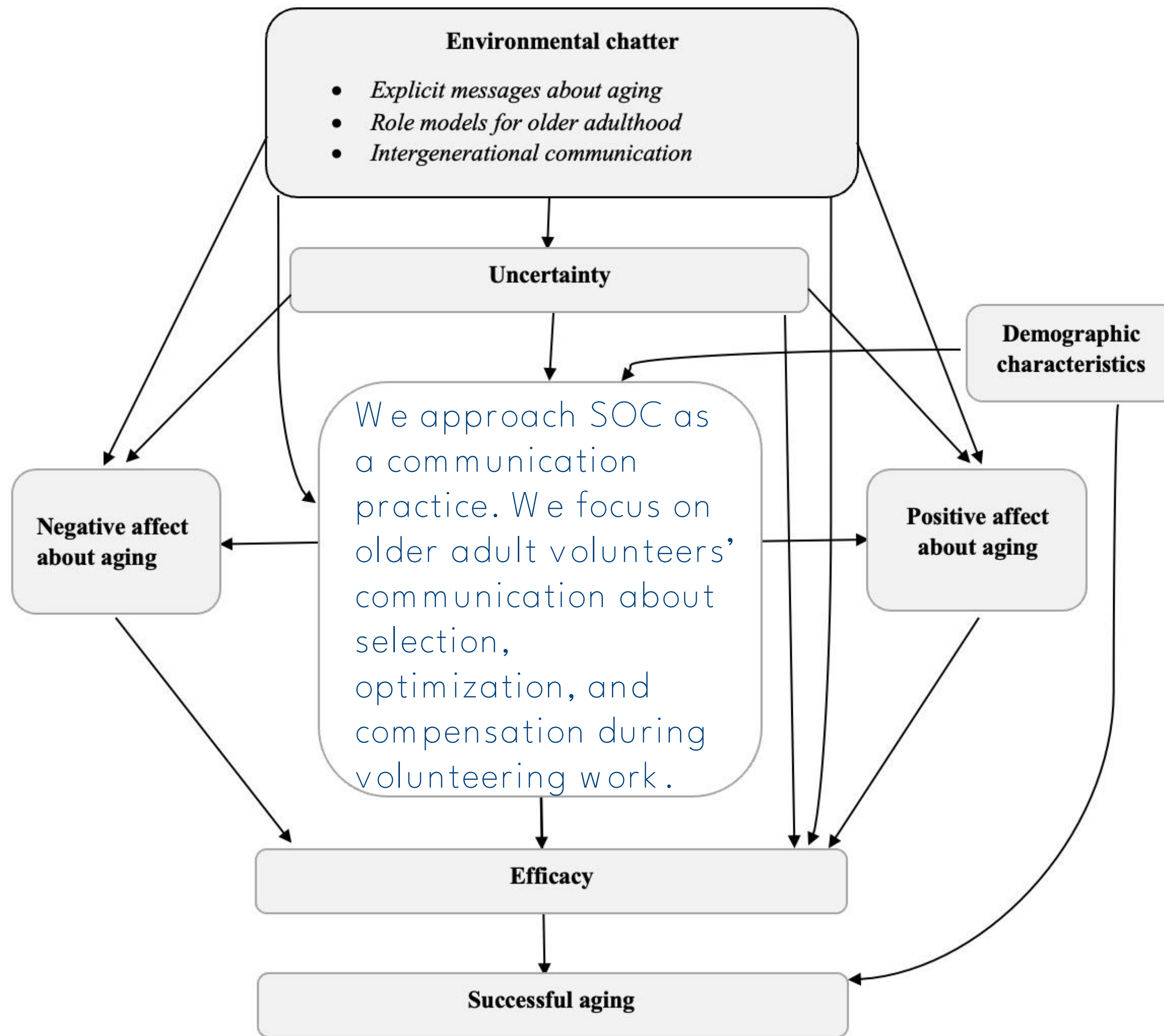
The Selection, Optimization, and Compensation (SOC) Model

Balance Gains & Losses for Desired Outcomes
and Well-Being during Aging

Selection-Optimization-Compensation

Volunteering is a process of selecting goals and
optimizing and compensating on resources to fit
the needs of older adults

Baltes & Baltes, 1990



RQs

RQ 1: How do older adult volunteers talk about themselves with respect to their identities and volunteering experience?

RQ 2: How do older adult volunteers communicate about SOC in managing their volunteering work?

Method

- 25 Older Adult Volunteers (M = 71.8 years old, range= 66-82)
- Semi-structured interview
- Interviews ranged from 32 minutes to 59 minutes (M = 52 mins).
- Single-spaced transcripts: 304 pages.
- Six-step thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2012): initial code, patterns, themes, review themes and enhance precision, defining, final analysis.

Findings

RQ1: How do older adult volunteers talk about themselves with respect to their identities and volunteering experience

Theme 1:

Profiling Positive Self-
Representations of Older Adult
Volunteers

Theme 2:

Differentiating Between Us versus
Them: Transcending Negative
Perceptions of Old Age

Findings

RQ1: How do older adult volunteers talk about themselves with respect to their identities and volunteering experience

Theme 1:

Profiling Positive
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Golden Agers: Healthy, Active, and Competent ▶

Dedicated Volunteers and Generative Individuals ▶

Golden Agers: Healthy, Active, and Competent



Older adult participants considered their health condition and physical strength as fundamental for maintaining a functioning life and volunteering.

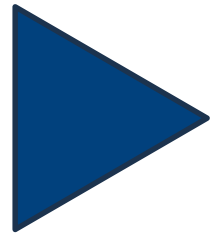


Most participants described themselves as active in their lives through seeking opportunities for volunteering or engaging in volunteering.



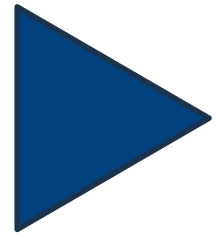
Participants characterized themselves as knowledgeable and skillful individuals, underscoring their competence as older adults.





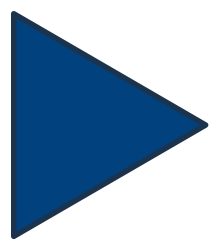
Henry, who volunteered at a hospital, stated that he had the physical strength to do volunteer work, as he was physically capable of helping patients use rehabilitation equipment.

Diane, a nutrition kitchen volunteer, who continued volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasized her healthy condition as an older adult, “I personally have a very good immune system, maybe because I’ve worked with so many sick people, and I’ve built up a certain immunity, so I don’t get sick very easy.”



Betty, who served as a volunteer at a performance center, shared that connecting with others motivated her to volunteer, “I have a tendency that I would be by myself ... I have spent more time alone, and I know I really should be getting out ... it (volunteering) gets me out to meet with people.”

Similarly, Diane explained she remained active in her social life as an older person through volunteering after relocating.



Ned, a former literature professor and hospital volunteer, skillfully engaged in conversations about literature with clients undergoing chemotherapy.

Graham, who worked as a claim manager, described himself as “very organized” with a skillset honed from his career. The skillset, characterized by “knowing what to do and when to do it” and “multitasking,” enabled Graham to competently perform his volunteer duties.

Dedicated Volunteers and Generative Individuals



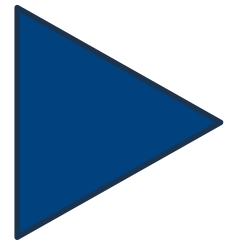
Participants identified positive qualities in themselves such as dedication as essential aspects of their volunteerism. Volunteers' dedication was evident in their descriptions of themselves as committed.



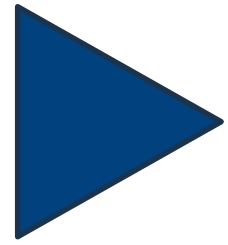
Participants demonstrated generativity in their self-representations of

- 1) being altruistic and benefiting others,
- 2) supporting and contributing to community, and
- 3) nurturing the next generation.





Edith shared, “We have one friend (a volunteer) who is very involved and committed ... she gets up in the morning early and she spends her entire day, doing different volunteer jobs. She volunteers, I mean, everywhere you can imagine.”



- Being altruistic and benefiting others - Matthew, a hospital volunteer, shared, “...when (a) person needed somebody there, I was that person.”
- Engaging in volunteering can provide support to others and contribute to the community - Larry also shared that volunteering through nonprofits can help build their local community.
- Participants were generative and engaged in nurturing the next generation - Sydney, who volunteered at a nonprofit addressing issues of justice, perceived her engagement as important to “make children socially aware of injustice and economics.”

Findings

RQ1: How do older adult volunteers talk about themselves with respect to their identities and volunteering experience

Theme 2:
Differentiating
Between Us versus
Them: Transcending
Negative
Perceptions of Old
Age

▶ Other older adults were physically impaired and cognitively declined

▶ Other older adults experienced communication decline

▶ Other older adults engaged in unproductive aging activities

▶ Volunteers engaged in self-enhancement to distance themselves from

Differentiating Between Us versus Them: Transcending Negative Perceptions of Old Age

- Physically impaired older adults were described as suffering from immobility and loss of functioning.
- People who were cognitively declining also faced challenges.

Eleanor, a volunteer in a music band, witnessed other volunteers withdrawing from the band due to Alzheimer's, sadly shared, "...so they can't play (music) anymore."



Differentiating Between Us versus Them: Transcending Negative Perceptions of Old Age

Unproductive aging activities among the “others” include “sedentary lifestyle,” “excessive leisure,” and “socially isolated activities.”

Kaitlyn shared, “Some people ... just sitting back and saying, ‘Well, I did my part, I’m done. I’m retired.’ I didn’t want to end up sitting home, turning on the TV and doing nothing.”

John elaborated, “I’ve seen people who just engage in recreation, they play golf every day. They play bridge every day ... that didn’t sound like an attractive way to spend time.”

Harris mentioned activities such as gardening or woodworking, which may socially isolate older adults.

▶ Differentiating Between Us versus Them: Transcending Negative Perceptions of Old Age

Participants also observed “others” experiencing communication decline characterized by “responding grumpily,” “unresponsiveness,” and “deprivation of verbal communication.”

I’ll give you an example. I went in to visit a woman veteran. I always knock on the door... I said I am here to deliver a certificate (to recognize) your service, and she turned and looked at me, just said, “get out, get out, get out”....

Differentiating Between Us versus Them: Transcending Negative Perceptions of Old Age

Ben, a retired physician, sought to volunteer to fight against coronavirus. However, he was turned down because of his age, “That was a specific reason I was told.” Ben was aware that older adults were vulnerable to COVID-19. Nevertheless, he emphasized that he was well-equipped to practice as a physician. In this case, Ben was more willing to categorize himself based on his occupational identity, which carries positive traits.

Henry acknowledged, “You realize how easy it is that you, yourself could be, one day, end up in that situation (loss of functioning).” Despite being aware that age-related changes may potentially influence him, Henry emphasized that “unlike his friends,” he chose to volunteer to “prolong the decline as long as possible.”

ne prototypical characteristics of age.

those of the others.

Findings

RQ 2: How do older adult volunteers communicate about SOC in managing their volunteering work?

Theme 3:

Communication about SOC in managing volunteering

Older adult volunteers proactively selected volunteering and specific volunteering work based on available resources and desired goals

Older adult volunteers positively talked about optimizing resources and investing effort to achieve their goals

Older adult volunteers in the current study rarely talked about compensation during

volunteering

Selection Talk in Volunteering



- Giving back, “Giving back when you have retired,” “I have had a good life...”
- Maintaining a sense of autonomy and control - Volunteering offered flexibility, allowing people to “pick their calendar.”
- Maintaining social interaction without interfering with personal life

Participants volunteered to pursue these goals while being aware of decreased resources during aging, particularly their physical strength.

- Paula explained she chose volunteer work because she would “have the energy to really put into it.”
- Ned viewed his volunteer work “not beyond our capacity, our skills and knowledge.”

Optimization Talk in Volunteering

Participants recognized a series of resources they could mobilize, such as time, skills, commitment, and responsibility. Participants confirmed they optimized by

- “investing time,”
- “applying skills,”
- “maintaining commitment and adhering to responsibility.”

Eric proudly shared that he has accumulatively volunteered

Edith explained how she was unique and valuable to her nonprofit because she could apply her special education skills and put together an

Tanya shared that she meticulously fulfilled her duties as a hospital volunteer, explaining, “...(I) clean the machines...make sure the equipment was cleaned in that treatment... And as I got to know more about the department, just doing little things to refill things.”

Compensation Talk in Volunteering



- Compensation involves drawing on alternative resources to fulfill goals. However, when they exhausted important resources such as physical strength, older adult volunteers often stopped volunteering instead of relying on alternative resources to continue volunteering.
- Although they willingly discontinued volunteering or temporarily exited volunteer work to recuperate, in the interviews they emphasized their efforts in volunteering whenever they were able to participate.

Implications

Enhancing Understanding of Self-Categorization as Old within the CEM SA

- Our study shows self-categorization processes extended beyond a dichotomy of being simply old or not. Participants proactively negotiated age by identifying with positive age attributes and avoiding negative prototypical age characteristics.
- Participants also self-categorized based on multiple identities. These identities may serve as buffers against negative aspects of aging. Communication about positive age attributes and multiple identities construct an ecology of aging.

Implications

Expanding the CEM SA

- Our study expands the CEM SA by demonstrating that older adults can exercise autonomy through a positive communication ecology in which they can proactively select, optimize, and compensate to manage volunteering and shape their aging paths, thereby enhancing their aging efficacy.

Identifying Communication Profiles within the CEM SA

- Our study shows participants engaged in a combination of communication actions (e.g., identifying as old, engaging in optimization in volunteering), helping identify communication profiles within the CEM SA (Gasiorek et al., 2015).

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Thank you for listening!

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