

When Singapore's Gen Z volunteers say 'anything but ageing', we have a problem

By Whitney Zhang

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The silver tsunami, or super-aged, framing was meant to prepare us. Instead, it's making the young dread it and the old feel like a burden.

Whitney Zhang

My 15-year-old daughter spearheaded a Values in Action (VIA) school project last year, co-developing a smart cane equipped with sensors to help the elderly navigate Singapore's busy walkways. It was a project defined by technical grit and social empathy.

But this year, when it came to selecting a theme for a national innovation competition, her stance was: "Anything but ageing."

I was surprised. This was not a lack of compassion; she is a devoted granddaughter to my 84-year-old mother who has dementia. Rather, as she explained, she was simply "tired". Tired of the "silver tsunami" headlines, tired of framing seniors as a burden about to swamp the rest of us, and tired of a school curriculum that consistently presents the elderly as a demographic to be "serviced" rather than lived with.

To my daughter and her peers, the topic of ageing has become a depressing "hassle" – an obligation they must fulfil to tick a box, rather than a learning opportunity to become a socially responsible citizen.

EMBRACING AGEING AS A VIBRANT LIFE STAGE

Singapore is racing towards "super-aged" status, yet there is a creeping sense of compassion fatigue among our youth amid the stereotyping of seniors as part of a depressing issue overhanging us all that has to be addressed somehow.

While our infrastructure and policies such as Active Ageing are world-class, the narrative remains rooted in a deficit model of ageing. Public discourse often focuses on the fiscal burden of a super-aged society.

This concern is understandable. By 2030, one in four Singaporeans will be aged 65 and above, with seniors already using significantly more healthcare resources than younger populations.

Singapore's healthcare expenditure has also risen rapidly over the past decade and is projected to approach \$30 billion annually by 2030 as demand for healthcare infrastructure, nursing homes and community care continues to grow alongside an ageing population.

However, focusing only on the financials and deficit aspect overshadows the remarkable human journey of growing old. Daniel Fung, former chief executive of the Institute of Mental Health, notes that the brain is capable of learning and rewiring well into later life.

Building on the fact that age need not mean decline and seniors can continue to thrive, society must shift from a "service-provider" mindset to a "collaborative ecosystem" approach.

Rather than treating ageing as a looming "silver tsunami", we should embrace old age as a vibrant and aspirational stage of life – one that contributes meaningfully to Singapore's social and economic fabric.

THE DATA OF DISCONNECTION

My daughter's avoidance of the topic is backed by sobering data. A 2024 Prudential study revealed that 68 per cent of Singapore's Gen Zs lack confidence in their ability to stay healthy as they age, largely because they view growing old through a singular lens of vulnerability.

The co-founders of Fireplace Group – a consultancy specialising in intergenerational programmes – observed this cognitive bias first-hand when leading a team of youth to prototype a portable ballet barre for a senior dancer. Expecting a frail patient needing a walking aid, the youth met an active



As Singapore races towards "super-aged" status, rather than treating ageing as a looming "silver tsunami", we should embrace old age as a vibrant and aspirational stage of life, one that contributes meaningfully to the country's social and economic fabric, says the writer. ST PHOTO: GIN TAY

senior practising ballet instead.

Conditioning the younger generation to see the elderly exclusively through this lens of vulnerability severely warps their perspective.

Concerns over a growing "caretaker load" were explicitly shared during a national youth dialogue on May 16, where participants openly voiced anxieties over career trade-offs and the financial weight of the "sandwich generation", questioning how the nation can fund a super-aged society without passing the fiscal burden directly to the young.

As long as policy and media discussions constantly frame a super-aged society as an economic weight, young people will continue to internalise it as a constraint on their own success. They aren't avoiding the elderly; they are avoiding a future that looks like a dead end.

This narrative doesn't just affect the young – it poisons the experience of the old. When society views ageing exclusively as a period of decline, older adults often internalise these stereotypes – a phenomenon known as stereotype embodiment.

Decades of psychological research confirm that seniors

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exposed to these negative images can actually experience "cognitive false positives", for example, scoring lower on memory tests simply because they believe they are supposed to show decline.

As a member of the sandwich generation, balancing the needs of two daughters and my elderly mother, I see how taxing this "burden narrative" is.

We treat this responsibility as something to be shouldered, which reinforces seniors' sense of being a weight for others to bear, rather than people with their own rights and capabilities.

AGEING AS LIFESTYLE

Our Active Ageing policies, while robust, often focus on the "hardware" of care rather than the "software" of lifestyle. Contrast this with the silver economy emerging in China. There, the industry isn't just about nursing beds – the elderly are seen as their own vast market for fashion, global travel and digital creation.

It is common to see seniors using technology with ease, live-streaming their daily lives or mastering e-commerce. They are viewed as a "new middle class" with purchasing power – genuine contributors to the economic growth engine.

In China, square dancing isn't just a government-sanctioned exercise programme. It is a vibrant, organic social ecosystem that has exported its culture globally. These seniors aren't just ageing; they are living loudly.

A similar cultural revolution is unfolding in South Korea through the Opal Generation (Old People with Active Lives). Sociological research highlights how these seniors are rejecting passive retirement to build vibrant, digitally savvy subcultures. This is vividly captured in the sophisticated online coordination of senior fandoms, such as the massive Hero Generation dedicated to pop-trot singer Lim Young-woong.

Instead of relying on family care, they have emerged as a cornerstone of South Korea's domestic market. Their immense purchasing power extends far beyond healthcare, actively driving premium sectors from smart consumer tech and fashion to a booming "silver tourism" industry characterised by high-end global travel.

Ultimately, their lifestyle spending accounts for a significant share of total national consumption. Far from being tech-illiterate, they navigate digital platforms with ease to claim their autonomy and build social solidarity on their own terms.

Like their peers in China, the Opal Generation represents an aspirational version of ageing that can be more pronounced in the Singaporean imagination. They prove that a super-aged society can instead be a playground of vibrant social and economic energy.

MOVING AWAY FROM A SERVICE APPROACH

True, Singapore already has extensive Active Ageing programmes and its neighbourhood community clubs provide exactly the vibrancy I am advocating. However, there is a fundamental difference between a prescribed activity and organic agency.

The current risk in our ecosystem is the "stigma of service". When we organise a project where students "serve" the elderly, we often maintain a power imbalance. This is why even well-funded programmes can feel clinical to a Gen Z observer.

Indeed, a 16-year-old letter writer to The Straits Times' Forum page recently lamented that teenagers "should appreciate the opportunities schools give them and conduct their VIA activities with genuine interest to make a difference".

This is where the work of local pioneers like learning consultancy Fireplace Group and employment platform The Courage Chapter is so disruptive. Fireplace Group uses a framework where students don't just visit seniors; they engage in deep empathy interviews to co-create real-world solutions.

The senior isn't a "patient" but a subject-matter expert whose feedback determines the project's success.

The Courage Chapter, meanwhile, shifts the workplace software by proving that "overqualified" is actually "indispensable". Their "retership" model allows experienced professionals to re-enter the workforce in fractional, project-based roles,

turning retirement into a pivot of identity rather than an exit from society.

Similarly, groups like the non-profit GenLab Collective, and RSVP Singapore, for senior volunteers, are moving beyond transactional volunteering towards skill-based contribution, where a retiree's decades of professional expertise are treated as a strategic asset rather than a hobby.

Such organisations address the identity void that traditional Bingo nights or exercise classes cannot reach, tackling the psychological barrier that prevents a senior from saying "I am a contributor".

If we rely solely on transactional programmes, we risk maintaining a world where seniors are always the passive beneficiary. True collaboration requires us to move from doing things for seniors to designing solutions with them.

IT TAKES AN ECOSYSTEM

The goal is to move from service to collaboration. This requires a shift towards an integrated ecosystem involving schools, businesses and society.

Schools should transform VIA projects from a perception of "helping the needy" to "innovating with experts". For businesses, they need to stop viewing the "silver market" through a clinical lens.

And as a society, we need to retire the framing of old age as a burden, and see it instead as a repository of wisdom capital. We also need to foster organic intergenerational third spaces – from community libraries to co-working hubs – where interaction is based on shared interests rather than age-based programming.

If Singapore changes the way it presents ageing to children today, they won't grow up wanting to avoid the topic. They will see ageing not as a burden to be borne, but as a vibrant chapter of life to look forward to.

My daughter doesn't need to be taught more empathy – she needs to be shown that ageing is an adventure she actually wants to be a part of.

Whitney Zhang is a senior lecturer at the Lee Kong Chian School of Business, Singapore Management University.