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The Grand Style. Encountering elderly influencers

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Abstract. The number of elderly influencers on Instagram is increasing. When analyzing a sample of corresponding posts, it is noticeable that fashion, especially fancy or vintage fashion, plays a central role. By choosing extraordinary looks, elderly influencers, whose age is by no means concealed, communicate self-determination and independence from the opinions of others – both also in connection with life experience. Their followers consider them as *cool* and empowering: this way, they can positively influence society's perception of elderly people, take away younger recipients' fear of aging, and act as role models. However, a noticeable divide emerges, as the elderly influencers are apparently well-educated and presumably also wealthy and enjoy good health. In social comparison, many of those of the same age would probably perform poorly. Therefore, it can be concluded that elderly influencer may be beneficial to their recipients and to society as a whole, but that addressing the social conditions that enable old people to live a fulfilled life is largely ignored.

Keywords: granfluencer, influencer, social media, aging, old people.

INTRODUCTION

The internet is not just a place for young folks, but also «older adults use the Internet for a broad range of purposes including interpersonal communication, errands, and leisure» (Leukel et al. [2020]: 255) and it has been assumed that the percentage of older users will significantly increase in the near future (United Nations [2017]).

However, especially social media such as Instagram are still primarily used by young people: only 14% of Instagram's users are above 45 (Statista [2021a]) and only 2.2% are above 65. Thus, when talking about elderly people on social media, it still refers to a small, but growing group: elderly people are picking up on social media (Statista [2021b]) – not only as recipients, but also as producers of media content: «Selfie is gaining popularity among the senior citizen» (Zhang et al. [2020]: 146) and «elderly influencers have seen

a significant rise in popularity on Instagram» (Mediakix [2020]). Nevertheless, they have hardly been dealt with in social science.

This article addresses the research question of how elderly influencers appropriate the medium *Instagram* and how they build a positive social identity in a medium that focuses heavily on external aspects and youth (Bell [2016]: 30). For this purpose, a sample of different posts will be analyzed.

KEY TERMS

The following section will lay the foundation for the study by identifying key terms for the present context.

ELDERLY INFLUENCERS

To approach “elderly influencers” the term “influencer” has to be considered first. By its literal meaning, an influencer is someone who does or wants to exert some kind of influence on others by changing respectively reinforcing their perceptions, opinions, behaviors etc. Influencers are defined as persons who show «some combination of desirable attributes» (Bakshy et al. [2011]: 65), or, more in detail, as «everyday, ordinary Internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles, engage with their following in “digital” and “physical” spaces» (Abidin [2016]). The aspect of monetizing the social media engagement that is also mentioned by Crystal Abidin may not be of greater importance in this context, as stated by several interviewees and apparent in very few cooperation partners.

When considering the difference between usual stars and influencers, the concept of «microcelebrity», coined by Theresa Senft in 2008 fits very well (Senft [2008]): unlike other celebrities, «popularity depends upon a connection to one’s audience, rather than an enforced separation from them» (Ibid.: 26). Microcelebrities are «famous to

a niche group of people» (Marwick [2008]: 114), a status reached «by consciously arranging the self to achieve recognition or by being ascribed fame by others due to one’s accomplishments» (Ibid.: 114). In order to build affective relationships with the recipients, conveying authenticity is of particular importance (Marwick [2013]) – even if it is ultimately a matter of «staged authenticity», which is authentic again insofar as it does not conceal its stagedness (Jerrentrup [2020]).

Specifying a certain number of followers that would turn a user into a microcelebrity is difficult, especially since in order to increase the number, followers can also be purchased. In addition, the practices underlying the phenomenon may be similar no matter if the person in question is reaching or influencing a certain number of followers or not (Marwick [2019]: 162; for the problem of identifying influential users see Segev et al. [2018]). Accordingly, it is useful to choose the criterion of a public, i.e. unrestrictedly visible accounts, and the use of hashtags to attract new followers, instead of a certain number of followers.

As for the term «elderly», the exact age range is also difficult to define. Some statistics or publications use 65 as the age at which one is considered a «senior», while others refer to 70 or older (for a discussion, see Orimo et al. [2006]). Most elderly influencers do not communicate their exact age but eventually use hashtags like #over70. In any case, it is clear that the influencers considered in the sample do not want to disguise their age, but use it as a means to build and maintain their followership.

In journalistic sources, the phenomenon of elderly influencers has been named «gran(d)fluencers», (more often without “d”) and refers to «folks 70 years old and up that have amassed substantial followings on social media with the help of decades-younger fans» (AP [2021]). However, the term “gran(d)fluencer”, even though many use it themselves as hashtag #granfluencer/#grandfluencer, is controversial from an emic perspective: the composition of «grandmother or -father» and «influencer» suggests that the people in question are «grandpar-

ents» and thus has certain familial connotations and defines the elderly influencers through other people, through their descendants. Therefore, the well-known influencer «iconaccidental» wrote to me when I asked her about her life as a «gran(d)fluencer»: «Not all of us are grandmothers and we are not all the same simply because we have grey hair», just as «saramaijewels», another famous influencer, told me «we aren't all grandparents». Both of them were featured in a popular article by Harvey (2019) titled «the rise of the grandfluencer». However, in the context of wording, it is also important to consider the particular linguistic and cultural background: my mother tongue is German and the term “grand” in German does not suggest a family sequence, but rather, based on the French “grand,” something very elite as in “grand hotel” or in “grande dame,” a woman who sets standards and is seen in connection with elegance and wealth.

Yet, the segregative aspect of the term “gran(d)fluencer” can be viewed critically: people are separated according to age groups. Of course, it is not the purpose of this article to draw clear lines, to sort people into categories, and to reinforce stereotypes. Nevertheless, aging is a fact and «the study of older adults and the aging process has become a socially significant topic in the [...] communication sciences across cultures» (Giles et al. [2010]). One can, of course, appreciate elderly influencers simply for their sense of style or for their likeable self-presentation. Yet, many comments, as well as numerous journalistic articles show that their age plays a significant role in the perception of elderly influencers.

SOCIAL MEDIA

The term “Instagram” has come up several times already, but still, a few characteristics of the medium should be briefly mentioned to illustrate the background against which influencers are active: Instagram is one of the most important social media nowadays. Following a classic definition, social media are seen as «highly interactive

platforms via which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content» (Kietzmann et al. [2011]: 241). According to Kietzmann et al., social media a.o. help to show presence, to share content, build and keep relationships, form groups, and communicate identity (Ibid.: 243). Social media users interact with each other through their photographs, usernames, and other information that they provide about themselves (Zhao et al. [2008]), but also through their likes and comments. Harry Dyer, in a chapter titled «Defining social media...it's complicated», describes how pervasive social media are, especially in the lives of many younger people, and the importance they play in identity formation (Dyer [2020]: 28). Contemporary work often focuses precisely on this connection between social media and identity (e.g. Gündüz [2017]; Vincent [2021]), which is also described as a discursive process (Jakaza [2020]: 3).

However, not all social media function the same way. Different from other platforms like Facebook or Twitter, Instagram is based on pictures: it is a space for aesthetic visual communication (Leaver et al. [2020]: 40). Text has to be laid out if one wants to upload it. Furthermore, as Instagram is mostly used on cell phones, one has to consider the spatial dimensions that are possible for pictures. The maximum size Instagram offers for a cell phone held upright is slightly squarer than the 2x3 format typical for cameras, which content creators have to take into account. In addition, Instagram offers infinite scrolling, so that a large number of different inputs is presented to the user in the shortest possible time. For the person posting, it means that his or her content has to stand out in order to be noticed. When it comes to identity, Instagram does not emphasize that accounts should be based on real identities, as Facebook does, for example (Leaver et al. [2020]: 16).

As already mentioned, only 2.2% of Instagram's users are above 65 (Statista [2021]). So, Instagram seems to be catching on with younger target groups in particular, even though the situation may be changing especially due to its competitor TikTok.

SOCIAL IDENTITY

Identity is needed to situate an individual in the social world and includes diachronic and synchronic aspects. Individuals strive for positive self-views and want to be seen positively by others (Gecas [1982]). By choice or determined by biology or descent, each individual belongs to a range of different social categories like age group, class, gender, subculture(s), religious groups etc.

A very influential theory in the context of identity is the Social Identity Theory that was formulated by Tajfel and Turner (1979). Based on the assumption that individuals strive for positive self-evaluation and that part of this is social identity, this theory deals with social comparison. In the case of negative comparison results, various strategies take hold such as individual mobility – i.e. leaving the group, which is impossible for an age group, for example –, social competition, or social creativity, i.e. modifying or changing the comparison dimension or the interpretation of the result. Sabine Trepte and Nicole Krämer (2007) have shown that the Social Identity Theory can successfully be expanded for research in media effects.

However, other approaches have been highlighted as well and increasingly received attention, among them Social Categorization Theory (Turner [1999]) that simplifies cognition creating categories. In our context, the concept of narrative identity is particularly interesting: it analyzes «the stories people construct and tell about themselves to define who they are for themselves and for others» (Mc Adams et al. [2006]: 4). This can be linked to «grassroots fashion storytelling» (Farinosi and Fortunati [2020]: 43), which has become a new, powerful voice in the realm of fashion. Especially its democratizing potential has been highlighted (Tomova [2017]: 2ff.; Farinosi and Fortunati [2020]: 43; Duffy [2013]) because bloggers and influencers do not have to conform to the stereotypical model measurements and, in addition to presenting their looks, their own opinions, experiences, and life stories often come into play. Of course, this democratizing potential can also be critically questioned, since presumably the

majority of bloggers and influencers, especially in the fashion sector, look more attractive than average and the use of makeup, filters, etc. plays a major role – and thus the orientation towards beauty conventions. This is consistent with the fact that «the more physically attractive an individual is, the more positive the person is perceived, the more favorably the person is responded to» (Patzner [1985]: 1), a fact explained by attribution theory, learning theory, and consistency theory. When it comes to beauty, youthfulness is a particularly important factor (Goldman and Waymer [2014]: 5), which is also conditioned and promoted by the industry: «The inattention to this consumer segment has resulted not only in lost revenues for business and lost consumption and service opportunities for the elderly but also a lack of narratives regarding body and beauty at a certain age, covering women of this age with a veil of invisibility» (Farinosi and Fortunati [2020]: 46).

Looking at photographs of Influencers posted on Instagram, positive identity is conveyed in a rhetorical way primarily through visual attributes and activities with which they present themselves (Kuhlhüser [2018]). These attributes and activities ultimately stand for values that are regarded as more or less positive and important depending on the cultural context, the social group, and the individual perception. In addition to the aspect of youthfulness, these can include, for example, coolness, modernity, cleverness, sociability, nonconformity, and so on. It should be noted, of course, that only what can be communicated primarily visually will make for an effective presentation on Instagram. Although there are also hashtags and captions, the picture is ultimately the focus on Instagram and thus the main means of communication.

However, the situation arises for elderly people that they are often perceived as physically, i.e. visually less attractive (Goldman and Waymer [2014]: 5), and furthermore, their living circumstances as rather negative: «In mainstream discourse [...] an interpretive framework has emerged that effectively rules out the possibility of people living positively and well in old age. With regard to both individual (personal) and collec-



Figure 1. Saramaijewels shows an extraordinary clothing style, uploaded on 13.12.2021 on Instagram. © Advancedstyle.

tive (societal) spheres, negative images of old age dominate public debate» (Grebe [2014]: 22). This can be seen as the «most prevalent type of ageism: prejudice against older persons» (Nelson [2016]: 337), which is institutionalized in America and other so-called “Western” societies (Ibid.). As addressed above, this article aims to address the question of how elderly people build a positive social identity in a medium that focuses heavily on physical aspects and youth (Bell [2016]: 30).

METHOD: SAMPLE AND CATEGORIZATION

The analysis is based on a sample of 200 photographs, the first 100 in each case proposed by Instagram under the hashtags #granfluencer and #over70 on Jan. 6th, 2022 – the prior inspired by Harvey’s article (2019) and the latter by the analysis on fashion influencers by Farinosi and Fortunati (2020). The sample includes pictures of more or less well-known people who have used

the hashtag, as well as, to a lesser extent, from accounts that collect and share related photos or posts, presumably with the consent of those depicted. The images suggested according to the algorithm are not all very recent, but date back to around mid-2020. Since the largest accounts, i.e. those with the most followers, were not selected as the basis here, the commercial aspect – what is the relationship between companies and influencers, what benefits arise for the latter – recedes into the background. Due to the design of the sample, some pictures originate from the same accounts, however, this affects less than one-fifth of the posts. Furthermore, it should be noted that the sample exclusively consists of publicly posted photos, so that no ethical dilemma arises with regard to the violation of privacy.

In order to achieve a sample that is as unaffected as possible by the previous preferences of an existing Instagram account, a new account was created. However, the location of the survey could have played a role: the sample was collected in Germany close to the metropolitan area of Cologne, Bonn, and Frankfurt. It is therefore possible that an algorithm has selected images that correspond to a so-called Western European taste.

With the help of an «ethnographic content analysis» (Altheide [1987]) following emergent instead of a priori coding (see Stemler [2000]: 2), the photographs were sorted into different categories so that «patterns of meaning» (Joffe [2011]: 209) could be identified based on their image content and design. In accordance with ethnological content analysis, the categories were not prefabricated, but emerged in reflexive work with the material (Altheide [1987]: 68). In the process, several categories, some of which overlap, were identified.

Several informal interviews were also conducted with elderly influencers. However, they offered less insight than hoped for: the standard answer to the question why they are active as influencers was, for example, «I want to inspire». A comprehensive participant observation of an influencer would probably be an informative method and option for further research. In order to give older

influencers a voice, however, I have supplemented the categories with exemplary captions or quotes from the interviews.

- With nearly 90%, a large category revolves around style (Fig. 1). Photos presenting strikingly styled individuals are tagged with hashtags like #fashiongrandma, #ageisjustanumber, and often, this category also shows skills in image composition and editing. Sophie Van de Vyver with her account Sophisticatedbox focuses mainly on clothing and accessories, sometimes giving detailed tips on styling and shooting, sometimes posting fashion photographs with more general statements such as «Be proud of who you are, wear your perfect MAY fit with pride! It's not because you are 50plus that you have to hide. Dare to wear colors, to feel perfect at any age» (11th of May 2022).

Some influencers use hashtags like #sorrynotsorry or #radical and communicate rebellion in their posts. The unusual and age-atypical stylings – clothes, jewelry and tattoos – communicate the independence of the elderly influencers from the opinion of others. This independence is considered desirable and «cool» (Lauer [2018]: 57). An example is the statement of the influencer Helen (baddiewinkle) known for her «rebel vibes» and «screw being age-appropriate-attitude» (Harvey [2019]): «I think [people] saw a great-grandmother that didn't care what anybody thought about her». On second glance, however, it is obvious that the medium Instagram is, of course, about what people think – perhaps not the majority, but an established circle of like-minded people and fans who celebrate that very attitude.

- In 31% of the photos, you can find either the elderly influencer with family members or friends, sometimes giving details about their successful life stories, e.g. the couple May and Burkhard in style_is_ageless (18.04.2022), or old photographs of the influencer and his or her family, as occasionally posted by Sandy Rutenberg (mammarock). Occasionally, pictures of only younger family members such as the grandchildren are uploaded. Among the

hashtags used there are #familytime, #grandparents or #youngandold. Although younger influencers also like to show themselves with friends or family, the intergenerational aspect is much rarer. With such photos, elderly individuals show that they are integrated and live on the pulse of time. Furthermore, followers may also play a role, who are apparently often rather young people (Harvey [2019]).

- Nostalgic charm is communicated in about 36% of the photos, usually in connection with fashion and props. Typical visual elements are the bow tie on the collar, old-fashioned blouses or cardigans, suspenders or similar. Ingemar Albertsson (Vintagemannen), for example, who started to use the hashtag #granfluencer intensively, shows a photo of himself with white and hat, suit and bow tie on old-fashioned park bench with two Dalmatians.

In this context, sustainability and the assumption of responsibility, as well as role model function may also come into play. In an interview, Ingemar Albertsson (Vintagemannen) states: «I want to inspire people to buy second hand instead of new junk clothes and fashion brands». Nostalgic or vintage themes may be presented by people of higher age with more authenticity – one tends to believe that they know the feeling of that time. However, this can actually refer to the 1950s, 60s and 70s at most, but they were not alive in the 1920s or even earlier. Nevertheless, the flair of different past eras is played with.

- The advantages of age, such as professional success, possibly accompanied by a self-determined life, and life experience may not be easy to represent on a pictorial level. The account style_is_ageless chose a headline to communicate this aspect: «Sharing ageless wisdom». A more visual option is shown by Saramaijewels (06.01.2022) with a picture of a camping trailer, accompanied by the text: «Missing camp life and all these beings», by which she means a self-determined life – the «missing» obviously refers to the season, which makes camping difficult. In the combination of photo and text, success, a self-determined life, and life experi-

ence is addressed in about 24%, such as in the form of advice, «life hacks» (AP [2021]) or instructive stories from their own lives. Sara-maijewels also wants to give an age-positive message using the hashtag #mywrinklesare-mystripes (Harvey [2019]). This can be used to illustrate the reframing of age as an asset or the light-footed, self-confident, and cool approach to age,

- In 14% of the images, the focus is on activities that are often related to creativity, such as sewing, crafts, gardening, but also reading. These activities are not age-related, but they implicate that elderly influencers are living fulfilling lives (van der Meer [2008]: 1), as Eva Wikner put it «I also want to show how fun WHOLE life is» (eva_wikner 01.05.2022). Sometimes, such activities also seem to be primarily to make fashion photos more authentic.
- Some individuals, about 5%, present themselves in the context of subcultures based on music styles or other activities that have existed for a longer time, using hashtags like #oldrocker or #punksnotdead. This primarily applies to hippie, punk, metal and rock music, for example. By the end of the seventies, Dick Hebdige has presented punk as a youth music (Hebdige [1979]: 87), however, even though there are still young fans, a considerable part has grown quite old by now. As analyzed by Bennett, their (sub)culture still plays an important role for older fans, but they may use more «subtle derivations» of the original, visually striking punk styles (Bennett [2006]: 225), as they have internalized being punk, «becoming in effect a “part” of the person, thus removing the need for the display of commitment to punk» (Ibid.: 233). Yet, on Instagram, a very visual medium, the individual's inclinations will be understood by his or her looks and are therefore carried to the outside.
- While wellness and sports, as well as nutrition, often play a central role for influencers (Sánchez Albert [2021]: 13) and one might expect that older people have to take care of their bodies all the more, this topic was

only found in 4% of the photos, two of them were rather wellness photos. In Swe's account (theurbanhippieswe) the headline says: «Photos about aging with energy and style [...] Vegetarian», however his photographs are rather about his clothing style than about sports or food. An exception is the well-known granfluencer Irvin Randle (irvinrandle), who says of himself, «I exercise five days of the week [...] I feel better now than I did at 27» (Harvey [2019]). Every now and then, he posts sport-related photographs such as himself on a skateboard (27.09.2021) or with a sports car (5.12.2020). Otherwise, the focus on sports, nutrition, maintaining or exercising the body does not seem to play a significant role.

- Some photos can also be categorized as humorous. The well-known influencer Kimiko Nishimoto (kimiko_nishimoto), for example, specializes in humorous self-portraits. The aforementioned Helen (baddiewinkle), whose account is titled «stealing your man since 1928», also repeatedly uploads funny-looking photos with extreme makeup and exhaled poses; in the text, a media-reflective attitude is sometimes evident, e.g., «Yup... Way Too Sexi For Mah Own Good» (01.10.2021) or «Love/Hate Relationship W Instagram» (29.03.2022), each to a photo with a chick-like pose. However, with many pictures in particularly bizarre fashion it is difficult to judge whether they should be understood as humorous or not, or whether humor is in the foreground or not. Therefore, it is particularly difficult to give a percentage here, but it tends to be in the lower single digits. The situation is different if you look at the captions, which contain a humorous component somewhat more frequently, e.g. «The serious business of getting ready to go out on Friday night» (ruth.yunker, 07/16/2021).

Overall, it is striking that noticeable digital rejuvenations have been observed rather rarely. This may also be due to the fact that apps for beautification of selfies are often not designed for elderly people (Zhan et al. [2020]) – but could

also have to do with a certain self-image of the elderly influencers.

In line with the analysis of Farinosi and Fortunati, elderly influencers appear particularly genuine and authentic, demonstrating «their courage to clear the third-age stereotypes with elegance, irony, and a touch of cheek [...] they seem to scream to the world that they exist. They do it with boldness, delicacy, and intelligence» (Farinosi and Fortunati [2020]: 52).

Based on the social identity theory, elderly influencers use different dimensions of comparison than younger ones. While very young people – both recipients and influencers – often focus on appearance respectively beauty (Djafarova and Matson [2021]: 131), and, in general, the topics *food, travel, fashion, fitness, technology, and entertainment* are most popular (Suhr [2018]), here, experience and family play a greater role. Elderly people can also present nostalgic or vintage themes in a particularly credible way and thus deal with their age in a (self-)ironic way, for example, when they wear outfits from eras that are long gone, such as the 1920s. Particularly often, unusual fashion is shown. Wearing these clothes communicates that the people concerned do not care about the opinion of others (Grüning [2017]) and could thus be understood as an epitome of *coolness*. In this sense, coolness as a desirable quality is also a socio-cultural resource (Grebe [2014]: 22). This also shows a parallel to younger influencers, for whom coolness in this sense is also significant. Yet, the attitude communicated – one does not care about the opinion of others – can also possibly be embodied particularly authentically by the higher age and the life experience associated with it. At the same time, wearing unusual fashions is probably considered even more unusual at an older age: in the case of subcultures, for example, Bennett (2006) observed that older members were usually less likely to wear a subculture's style, but rather internalized the subculture without particularly externalizing it.

In some respects, elderly influencers are reminiscent of influencers from the field of body positivity. Here, we find influencers who deviate from

the ideal of beauty in various respects, for example through excess weight, scars, strong body modifications, etc. and attempt to reframe beauty (Marcus [2016]). However, different from the social groups analyzed by Marcus, elderly influencers do not form a community intended to provide support and to compliment users' appearances, as most followers of elderly influencers do not belong to the same age-group.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

As demonstrated through this research, elderly influencers manage to overcome «the cultural limits that have characterized the fashion sphere in an era based on the myth of eternal youth» (Farinosi and Fortunati [2020]: 45). By doing so, they help old people to become visible for mainstream society (Agulló-Tomás, Zorilla Munoz [2020]: 163) and may also push the industry to be more inclusive of elderly target groups and move away from the typical, unrealistic ideal of beauty.

Elderly influencers appropriate the medium *Instagram* in a distinctive way and set particular emphases: although we are in an image-centric medium, the condition of one's own body apparently is not the focus for most elderly influencers. Instead, the main attention is paid to the embedding the body – in social situations, in special settings, but also in special clothing. This communicates the ability to lead a self-determined life, which is shaped independently of the opinion of others. The mere fact of presenting photos of oneself in a medium where youthful perfection is the order of the day can stand for this independence and self-confidence that comes with it. This is further enhanced by unusual fashions that the elderly influencers very often present. Thus, they fit the definition of *cool* given by Lauer (2018: 57): being a bit different from others and, paradoxically, not wanting to please, as well as not worrying about being cool is considered the epitome of cool. This also matches the criteria «originality» and «sub-cultural appeal» captured by Sundar et al. (2014) with regard to a measurable conceptualization of

«cool». So, one can conclude that the way they use Instagram leads not only to more visibility, but also to a cooler and thus more desirable, better image of elderly people.

The existence of elderly influencers may not only be positive in terms of psychological well-being for themselves and their peers, but younger Instagram users can also benefit from it by perceiving them as role models for self-confident and active aging (Farinosi and Fortunati [2020]: 46). Accordingly, the posts are often commented on by younger followers between 25 and 34 (Wolff [2019]) with terms such as «inspirational» or «empowering». Elderly influencers «are challenging negative ages stereotypes and propose both visually and rhetorically an image of older women capable of recovering freedom from outdated social roles» (Farinosi and Fortunati [2020]: 55). Wolff pointedly states that elderly influencers can be viewed «as a symbol of “anti-anti-aging”» (2019), that they have managed to constitute a positive social identity through stressing specific dimensions in the process of social comparison, e.g. through communicating the «complexity of their narratives» (AP [2021]) and their life experiences which ultimately made them «cool».

So, can we confirm that elderly influencers are «extremely positive and beneficial» for both older and younger recipients and, «also for society as a whole» (Farinosi and Fortunati [2020]: 55)? It is, however, noticeable that age-related problems, such as poorer health, limited mobility or the loss of partners and friends, but also discrimination, e.g. regarding job opportunities, are almost not dealt with at all. Possibly, the elderly influencers paint an unrealistic picture that only partially reflects the reality of life for old people or is only oriented toward a small and privileged group – both in terms of internet skills, but also health, money, educational background, and living arrangement (Leukel et al. [2020]: 255). So, there is a divide that goes beyond the pure digital divide. This is reminiscent of the accusation often levelled at younger influencers, namely that they present a whitewashed world (Becker [2021]), which ultimately leads to their recipients always

falling short in social comparison and possibly feeling inadequate about themselves and their own lives. Thus, there are two aspects at odds here: on the one hand, elderly influencers convey a positive image of age and can serve as encouraging role models for young and old recipients. On the other hand, their portrayal may also be – if not retouched in the strict sense – then at least quite selectively designed, which can lead to Instagram users of their own age group feeling relatively deprived, even though the influence that the elderly influencers actually exert on their audience would still have to be investigated. Yet, it is obvious that social disadvantages associated with older age are largely ignored. But if old people become more visible and society as a whole learns that old people can lead self-determined and fulfilling lives, it would be of great importance that society as a whole also learns what social conditions must be in place so that this can benefit many old people and not just a privileged group.

In addition, I would like to note, in accordance with the statements of the elderly influencers I interviewed, that they should not be defined by their age alone – their personal style and communicated personality, combined with different values they stand for, can also make them fascinating for their followers. Sometimes, age is just a number.

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