The (not so) secret life of senior social media influencers: An analysis of the top five 'granfluencers', on Instagram

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Abstract

The changing media landscape and consumption along with the decreased efficacy of traditional advertising have confronted brands with the challenge to unravel different and innovative ways to effectively communicate with their targets. Influencer marketing is one of the strategies that is thriving and proved valuable for marketeers in this pursuit of new ways of reaching out to their audiences. Despite the relevance that digital influencer communication has recently gained for brands, academic research has been slow to catch up and some of the aspects related to digital influencers remain understudied. Within this context little is known about this exercise of influence by senior digital influencers and how they communicate with their followers. Traditionally associated with a more passive role of content receivers, some of the older citizens have been developing their digital knowledge and skills and are now active content creators on social networking sites and even, in some cases, building up a vast audience and a wide range of interested, involved, and engaged followers. Yet, there is scarce evidence regarding these elderly digital content creators. To help fill this gap, this exploratory study aims to study the Instagram profile of the top five older influencers and examine their personal brand subjectivities, communicative styles, and social media practices. A qualitative methodology was adopted, involving a set of dimension analyses such as the tone of communication, posting frequency, themes/subjects of interest, audiovisual and multimedia resources, as well as their interaction and engagement with followers. The results challenge the negative stereotype associated with old age and suggest that senior influencers already take part in the influencer economy. Academic and business implications of the study are examined for influencer marketing.

Keywords: social networking sites, Instagram, senior digital influencers, influencer marketing

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1. INTRODUCTION

Today, consumers are not only more critical and skeptical about traditional advertising; they also are empowered to bypass it and have turned to other means and channels to connect with brands and gather information about products and services. Social media is one of these channels. To deal with these consumers' changes, companies are shifting their marketing budgets away from traditional marketing channels and pursuing relationships with social media influencers, generating a market that more than doubled between 2019 and 2021 and is expected to expand in 2022 to a $16.4 billion (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2022).

Therefore, it is not surprising that social media influencers (SMI) and influencer marketing are gaining *momentum* in scholarly environments. Yet, although research on these subjects has grown explosively in the last years, it still has been slow to catch up with the evolution within these fields and many issues remain understudied (e.g., Wielki, 2020). One of these issues is related to senior SMI. A part of the elderly population is no longer apart from Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and social media (Eurostat, 2021). Far from the former idea that the elderly are, at their best, merely passive receivers of information, they now reveal an active role as content creators and some of these silver-haired individuals have turned out to be digital influencers on social media. In the last years, some of them have even been gaining a huge number of followers on several social networking sites (SNS), such as Instagram and Tik Tok, where they are crafting distinctive personal brands (Miranda, Antunes, & Gama, 2022).

So far, this trend has failed to attract research endeavors, and SDI activities and communicative practices have been scantly examined (e.g, Farinosi & Fortunati, 2020; Picázo-Sanchez & García-Marín, 2021). Thus, this paper aims at contributing to expanding the current knowledge on older influencers' strategies and practices on Instagram, as well as investigate their activity in the context of influencer marketing.

The remainder of this paper will proceed as follows: The next section provides an overview of our study methodology and Section 3 presents a literature review on these subjects. Section 4 describes and examines the results and Section 5 discusses the findings. The paper closes with the concluding remarks included in Section 6 and suggestions for future research directions.

2. METHODOLOGY

Given the exploratory nature of this study, the authors adopted a methodological approach that allowed us to examine older digital influencers' communicative strategies and their social media practices. The focus was put on a particular social networking site (SNS), Instagram, since this visually-oriented platform facilitates social media influencers' displays of their daily lives, both visually and textually (Abidin, 2015) and has been gaining popularity and rising adherence by individuals of all age cohorts (Statista, 2022). Another relevant criterion for its selection is that Instagram lends itself particularly well to influencer marketing (Duffy, 2020), and is even considered the most relevant social media channel for influencer marketing due to its photo and video-sharing services (Evans et al., 2017).

After selecting Instagram as the core SNS for analysis, the authors selected the top five more popular (attending to the number of followers) older influencers on this digital platform. The senior Instagrammers under analysis, as well as several of their main characteristics, are presented in Table 1. The majority are American except for Lili Hayes, whose place of birth is Yugoslavia (she moved to Israel when she was a child and currently lives in the USA) and their ages range varies from 68 years old to 100 years old. Their popularity, expressed by the number of followers, varies from 650k to 3.3 million.

Table 1: The top 5 elderly influencers analyzed, their age, country of origin, number of followers, and Instagram links

Influencer	Age	Country of origin	Number of followers	Instagram link
Helen Ruth Elam Van Winkle -baddiewinkle	93	USA	3.3 million	https://www.instagram.com/baddiewinkle/
Iris Apfel	100	USA	2.2 million	https://www.instagram.com/iris.apfel/
George Takei	85	USA	1.4 million	https://www.instagram.com/georgehtakei/
Lyn Slater -Accidental Icon	68	USA	759 k	https://www.instagram.com/ iconaccidental/
Lily Hayes	75	Yugoslavia	650 k	https://www.instagram.com/lili_hayes/

A total of 337 posts, uploaded from April to July 2021 by these top five elderly Instagrammers, including captions, photos, videos, time of posting, number of likes, and number of comments, were collected. This was the dataset to examine these five elderly social media influencers' strategies and practices on Instagram, at both discursive, visual, and interactive levels (e.g., Ball & Smith 1992; Farinosi & Fortunati, 2020). For data analysis, an analysis grid was constructed, considering the following dimensions: Theme/subject of publication; Audiovisual resources used (sound, music); Multimedia resources used (video, photography); Communication tone (humor, irony/funny, informative, emotional); Brand promotion and Interaction/engagement (likes, comments, site/blog link, repost, site/blog link). To overcome any potential ethical questions that arise in social media research, all the accounts are public.

3. INFLUENCER MARKETING AND SENIOR DIGITAL INFLUENCERS (SDI)

It is undeniable that the competitiveness of the markets, along with the massification of communication channels, has led brands to find alternative formulas to communicate effectively with consumers – increasingly empowered and judicious in the way they search and consume content (Acar & Puntoni, 2016). One of the strategies concerns influencer marketing, seeking to find advertising channels to leverage visibility, sales, and quality in the delivery of relevant content to the consumer. According to Sproud Social (2020) currently 74% of consumers depend on their social networks to guide their consumer journey, namely their purchase decisions. For Liu and Shrum (2015), the ease of production and the excess of information that proliferates on SNS, from different sources, made consumers start to look for useful information from qualified and credible sources, which have a high status in the social networks, such as digital influencers. According to Lampeitl and Aberg (2017), the reach and resources available to digital influencers are mainly based on the following factors: content (perceived as favorable, trustworthy, and personalized); the degree of specialization and attractiveness (positive associations attributed to people, which are conveyed from physical characteristics as well as personality, ideologies, and opinions.), and the influencer's ability to build a relationship of trust.

Although there is already prolix literature on digital influencers (more oriented by and for younger generations), recently there has been an increase of a specific type of influencers – Senior Digital Influencers (SDI) also called 'granfluencers'- with specificities that are important to understand. What is certain is that this proliferation is not immune to the generalized aging process of the population that is being experienced throughout Europe (Eurostat, 2022); a growing adherence of the elderly to ICT (Coelho, 2019; Eurostat, 2021); and the growing concern of older people to seek digital media and tools not only as relationship channels but also as means of affirmation and expression (Miranda, Antunes, & Gama, 2022).

Thus, we are observing that, in addition to the traditional role of recipients of content, the elders are now active agents in the creation of content, occupying a space, for a long time restricted to the younger generations, contributing to the construction of a vast audience of engaged and interactive followers (Miranda, Antunes & Gama, 2021a, 2021b, 2022).

Several studies from Miranda, Antunes, and Gama (2021a, 2021b, 2022)– all involving content analysis of hundreds of posts from the most popular SDI worldwide on Instagram (as is the case of Baddie Winkle, Iris Apfel, or George Takei), concluded that these influencers are challenging the paradigm and negative stereotype related to aging, breaking with the status quo and with the traditional image of decline, frailty, and disability associated with old age. Somehow, the belief that old age can only be experienced and faced through losses and limitations is subverted by these SDI who, through the digital content they post, open paths, not only to sustain their desires, their choices, and their sensuality, but also to build social and cultural contexts adjusted to their mindset. By being protagonists of their lives and living their life projects with freedom, they project contemporary aging in a positive, dynamic, and freeway. They deconstruct and even subvert the stereotyped discourse, offering an alternative vision of successful aging where older people are not invisible within society but lead characters of their own life, full citizens with an active digital voice in the world (Farinosi & Fortunati, 2020; Miranda et al., 2021a, 2021b). In the same vein, Picázo-Sanchez and García-Marín (2021) stated that SDI use social media as a space for free expression and for the empowerment of their generational cohort, breaking down prejudices and barriers towards the elderly.

Guimarães (2021), through a phenomenological investigation of 63 Brazilian SDI (all women) on Instagram, emphasizes that what makes these influencers move is not the search for eternal youth. Their core motives are to stay active, purposeful, and functional. With strong discursive characteristics and based on proximity to the followers, they establish a relationship of projection, strong empathy, affection, and bonding with them. Added to this is the ability to create environments that allow the exchange, especially of personal facts and experiences, opening doors for these closer relationships to be established: "it is as if you were a friend who was present at different times" (p. 113). This is sometimes mixed with socially and politically (in)correct opinions, where the humorous and funny tone of communication is a prominent element.

With similar conclusions, appears the recent study carried out by Silver Makers (2022), a consulting company specialized in the senior public. Based on the recent proliferation of SDI in the Brazilian market, they carried out a mapping to identify who they are, where they are, what subjects they address, and how they interact with their followers. Through a triangulated methodology that reconciled the perspective of influencers, the perspective of marketers, and advertisers (all, through interviews), the study highlighted the increase of this type of digital influencers, essentially mature women, who focus on issues related to fashion, lifestyle but, above all, longevity, and its challenges, as well as the freedom to fully experience aging. They are present on Instagram, Facebook, and Youtube. Regarding the motivations and purposes that led to the creation of a profile on SNS, the digital influencers refer that those arose, essentially, from the need to reinvent themselves after entering retirement, raising children, excess free time, or after experiencing traumatic events. All are unanimous in stating that they felt the need and legitimacy to, despite their advanced age, build a new life project.

The study also revealed the considerable effect of monetizing the profiles of these digital influencers, since many of them have established commercial partnerships with national and international brands and exert an important influence on the dissemination and consumption of brands and products, especially on product categories such as hygiene and beauty, clothing, and home appliances. Moreover, as mentioned by Guimarães (2021), the opinion of an SDI is only important because there is market potential. In addition to having gained

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followers of all ages, they are the baby boomers' favorites to look for information about products and services that improve their self-esteem.

Visually, the analysis of the publications of the SDI presents itself, in general, without great audiovisual resources, highlighting, on the contrary, the sovereignty of the photographs with an artistic nature, marked by the eccentricity and the exaggeration of the bright colors, the daring props and some unusual poses (Miranda, Antunes & Gama, 2021a, 2021b). In the same vein, Farinosi and Fortunati (2020) and Miranda, Antunes, and Gama (2022) conclude that elderly influencers tend to adopt more personal and authentic styles in their Instagram communication and are more textual and less visual than their younger counterparts.

4. EMPIRICAL COMPONENT

Between April and July, the five influencers posted a total of 337 posts, of which 217 were posted by George Takei, 47 by Iris Apfel, 38 by Accidental Icon, 23 by Lili Hayes, and 12 by Baddie Winkle. George Takei has a higher posting frequency. Concerning the themes, the most-posted themes, as Table 2 indicates, were politics, human rights, and fashion.

Table 2: Themes posted and frequency

Subjects	Frequency					Total
	Baddie Winkle	Iris Apfel	George Takei	Accidental Icon	Lili Hayes	
Politics			81			81
Human Rights			55		1	56
Fashion	8	12		32	1	53
Health			22	1		23
Justice			18			18
Art		15	2		1	18
Commemorative Days		6	3	1	1	11
Food	2	1			3	6
Friends		6				6
Films					6	6
Representation of everyday situations					6	6
Memories		2	1		2	5
Birthday	2		1	1	1	5
History			4			4
Environment			1	1		2
Religion			1			1
Total	12	42	189	36	22	301

When we analyze the case of the five influencers there are differences between them. George Takei focuses the posts on eleven themes, Lili Hayes on nine, Iris Apfel on six, Accidental Icon on five, and Baddie Winkle on three themes. George Takei has a more diversified approach, being politics the theme of choice.

Fashion and birthday are two themes that cross the posts of four influencers, in the first are Baddie Winkle, Iris Apfel, Accidental Icon, and Lili Hayes, in the second are Baddie Winkle, George Takei, Accidental Icon, and Lili Hayes. The fashion theme is common to all women influencers, being more frequent in Accidental Icon posts.

George Takei is the influencer who has more common themes with the other influencers. He and Lili Hayes are the only influencers that have five common themes – art, human rights, commemorative days, memories, and birthdays.

The five influencers mobilize different audiovisual and multimedia resources to communicate, being they photography, video, and also music integrated into the videos. Of these, photography is the most used resource. However, the behavior is different between the influencers. Iris Apfel, George Takei, and Accidental Icon are the influencers that post more photographs. George Takei posts 214 photographs, Iris Apfel posts 45 photographs, and Accidental Icon posts 35 photographs. Lili Hayes and Baddie Winkle are the influencers that post more videos. Lili Hayes posts 21 videos, all with sound/music, and Baddie Winkle posts 7 videos. Lili Hayes is the only influencer that usually communicates through videos imported from Tik Tok (Cf. Table 3).

Table 3 – Audiovisual and multimedia resources – Types and frequency

Audiovisual and multimedia resources	Frequency					
	Baddie Winkle	**Iris Apfel**	**George Takei**	**Accidental Icon**	**Lili Hayes**	**Total**
Photography	5	45	214	35	2	301
Video	7	2	3	3	21	36
Sound/music	6	1	2	3	21	33

Table 4 – Communication tone – Types and frequency

Communication tone	Frequency					
	Baddie Winkle	**Iris Apfel**	**George Takei**	**Accidental Icon**	**Lili Hayes**	**Total**
Social and political activism			81	1		82
Humor	4	2	39	16	20	81
Funny	5	22	13	6	1	47
Emotional		6	1	4		11
Poetic		1				1

When we analyze the data in Table 4, the communication tones that stand out are social and political activism and humor. George Takei and Accidental Icon are the only influencers that post these tones. All the influencers use humor and funny in their communication, but Lili Hayes is the influencer the only use these tones to communicate on Instagram. Iris Apfel, George Takei, and Accidental Icon use emotional tones.

Posts analysis suggests that some resulted from paid partnerships with brands. Iris Apfel and Accidental Icon are the influencers with more posts promoting brands. Iris Apfel published six posts, 3 promoting the brand Zennioptical (glasses) and 3 the brand Loweshomeimprovement (decoration). Accidental Icon published six posts too. 2 promoting the brand Narsissist (beauty), 1 promoting Guccibeauty (beauty), 1 promoting

Mytheresa and 1 promoting the brand Rothys (shoes). This influencer also promotes Britbox (television channel), but this was unpaid. Baddie Winkle published two posts promoting Tillamook, an ice cream brand. In the case of George Takei and Lili Hayes they don't promote any brand (Cf. Table 5).
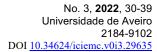
Table 5 – Brand promotion

Brand Promotion	Frequency				
	Baddie Winkle	**Iris Apfel**	**George Takei**	**Accidental Icon**	**Lili Hayes**
Tillamook	2				
Loweshomeimprovement		3			
Narsissist				2	
Guccibeauty				1	
Mytheresa				1	
Rothys				1	
Zennioptical		3			
Britbox (unpaid)				1	
Total	2	6		6	

After the publication of the posts, there is a high interaction and engagement with these influencers through likes/views, and comments. For the 337 posts, there were more than 13,8 million likes/views and approximately 172 thousand comments. George Takei is the influencer with the most likes/views (41.8%), followed by Lili Hayes with 24.6% and Baddie Winkle with 19.5%. Accidental Icon has the lower number of likes/views. George Takei continues to lead with 67.2% of the total comments, while the percentage of comments from posts of other influencers are less expressive, ranging between 9.8% and 6.3%. This data is understandable, as George Takei is the influencer who posted the most posts (217 out of 337). However, when we analyze the number of posts attending to the frequency of likes/visualizations the results are different. Lili Hayes with 6.8% of the total number of posts has 24.6% likes/visualizations (more than 3 million) – fewer posts but more views. The results are similar when considering the ratio given by the frequency of comments/total number of posts (Cf. Table 6).

Table 6 – Interaction

	Baddie Winkle	**Iris Apfel**	**George Takei**	**Accidental Icon**	**Lili Hayes**	**Total**
Posts	47	12	217	38	23	337
% attending the total number of posts	(13.9%)	(3.6%)	(64.4%)	(11.3%)	(6.8%)	
Likes/visualizations	2 713 028	1 521 889	5 802 062	435 510	3 414 604	13 887 093
% of the total number of likes/ visualizations	(19.5%)	(11%)	(41.8%)	(3.1%)	(24.6%)	
Comments	15 343	13 691	116 021	10 842	16 892	172 789
% of the total number of comments	(8.8%)	(7.9%)	(67.2%)	(6.3%)	(9.8%)	

5. DISCUSSION

While the influencer marketing literature has focused on younger influencers, our findings suggest that brands have also begun to recognize the added value of older influencers, which derives from their growing popularity, reach, and high engagement with their followers. Yet, our results also suggest that brands have a distinct and asymmetric involvement with them, with some of these 'granfluencers' as centerpieces of several of their influencer marketing campaigns while others reveal a more exclusive posture or even an absence from brand partnerships. During the time frame under consideration, one of these older influencers (Lyn Slater/Accidental Icon) posted sponsored content for five different brands, while Iris Apfel and Baddie Winkle seem to be much more selective in their brand choice, limiting their collaboration to one or two brands. The partnership with fewer brands does not necessarily mean lower gains for these influencers. Reconciling our results with the latest data from Influencer Marketing Hub, which examined the earning potential of the most popular SDI worldwide, these three influencers seem to have significant profits from their partnership with brands and are in the top five regarding their earning potential on Instagram, with Iris Apfel with the highest earning potential from sponsored posts (MediaBuzz, 2022).
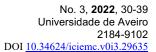
On the contrary, two out of five older SDIs (George Takei and Lili Hayes) did not promote or endorsed any brands' products or services on Instagram during this period, either by their own choice or by brands' choice. In the case of George Takei, he has already collaborated with brands, but some companies ended their 'paid promotion partnerships' with Takei after a claim of sexual assault (Walters, 2017). Regarding Lili Hayes, she is much more popular in another SNS, Tik Tok, where she has 5.1 million followers and where her partnership with brands is more visible. Indeed, according to Influencer Marketing Hub, Lily Hayes has the fifth-highest earning potential on TikTok but she is not at the top on Instagram (MediaBuzz, 2022).

In accordance with previous findings (Miranda, Antunes, & Gama, 2022) diversity seems to be the keyword to describe these older users generated content on Instagram. Therefore, the discussion around them and their social media communicative strategies and practices must primarily attend to their specificities and distinctive features, not only when compared with younger SMIs, but also among them.

These 'granfluencers', with larger-than-life personalities, are quintessentially unique communicators, with an unrepeatable charisma and a singularly crafted personal brand. Their social media communicative strategies are very different, with hints of a careful composition of their personal stories, conveyed through textual and/or visual narratives, to present a singular social media persona to their sizable audiences. As strategies translate into practices it is not surprising that their communicative styles, number of posts, posting frequency, and posting interest and themes on Instagram also present significant differences.

Instagram, with its specific features and affordances, provides a perfect platform where these senior influencers search for visibility, reach, and influence, and where their needs for self-expression and belonging are fulfilled. They have fully embraced this platform and, each one in their own way has taken full advantage of this SNS. Day after day, post after post, they show that age does not define people, depicting themselves in non-stereotypical and very diverse ways, that range from funny and excessive to bold, stylish, or eccentric.

One relevant issue worth further examination is their distancing from younger SMIs on what concerns their adherence to social and cultural norms. In an interesting analysis of what characterizes social media influencers, Duffy (2020) argues that they tend to conform to the norms and codes of a given culture. Yet, the SDI under analysis somehow deviate from aging stereotypes and from what is implicitly expected from older people. They not only deconstruct but subvert the stereotyped discourse of how "old" looks, talks, and feels, offering instead an alternative vision of what successful aging looks like. Through the glimpses and snapshots

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of their opinions, attitudes, behaviors, and even their life as exposed on Instagram, they show that being old does not mean being silent, dependent, fragile, or any other negative characteristics frequently associated with old people. Instead, their SNS communication portrays them as lead characters of their own life, people that are active, vibrant, young at heart, interventive, and nonconformist, full citizens with an active and free digital voice in the world (e.g., Farinosi & Fortunati, 2020; Miranda et al., 2021a, 2021b, 2022). As Ting (2021) points out, their active engagement with Instagram echoes Rowe and Kahn's (2015) claim that having an active engagement with life seems to be a key factor for aging successfully.

One final relevant finding concerns their levels of interaction and engagement with their followers. George Takei and Accidental Icon generate, respectively, the highest and lowest number of interactions and level of engagement. A potential reason for George Takei's followers' high level of interaction and engagement can derive from his engaged behavior on Instagram: he posts, with a high frequency, on political and social issues of a controversial nature. These are non-neutral publications that, by their own nature, can stimulate reactions in his followers', either in favor or against it, with these reactions being expressed on this digital platform. However, when attending to the number of posts, it is worth noticing that Lili Hayes generates the highest post engagement rate. Her well-known humorous and funny and at the same time angry or pissed tone turned her into a viral sensation that easily generates lower forms of engagement (e.g., likes).
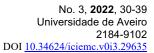
6. CONCLUSIONS

Influencer marketing is thriving and is increasingly used in the vast array of marketing strategies. With this exploratory study, we observe that influencer marketing is no longer restricted to collaborations with younger influencers. Some of the most popular SDI have also been forging alliances with brands, to promote them and their products. However, it is important to note that there is not a 'one size fits all' scenario when it comes to influencer marketing involving 'granfluencers'; indeed, their partnership with brands is quite heterogeneous, with a significant variation in the type and number of brands.

As already documented in previous research (e.g., Farinosi & Fortunati, 2020; Guimarães, 2021; Miranda et al., 2021a, 2021b, 2022; Picázo-Sanchez & García-Marín, 2021; Ting, 2021) older digital influencers have been challenging the negative stereotype related to aging, breaking up with the *status quo* and the traditional image of loss, decline, frailty, and disability that is frequently used to portray the elderly. Our research supports this notion but goes one step further, by examining the five more popular 'granfluencers' on Instagram and trying to overcome one of the major setbacks regarding scholarly work in this area, which is an almost exclusive focus on elderly fashion-related female digital influencers. With this exploratory study, we intend to contribute to a wider perspective on what it means to be an older digital influencer, their strategies and communication practices in social media, and how they are already integrating influencer marketing strategies.

Finally, this research has limitations that must be addressed in future studies. One of these limitations concerns the limited number and selection of older digital influencers, which do not allow generalizations. Also, we focus only on one SNS – Instagram. Therefore, future research can examine a wider social media ecosystem and the similarities and differences introduced by influencer marketing involving 'granfluencers', in the different platforms of social media.

This research shows that older digital influencers not only present signs of successful aging but have a huge ballast of influence and engagement with an age eclectic audience and are already integrating influencer marketing strategies. In doing so, we hope to call for more research on older influencers' social media communication and practices, and their involvement in the so-called influencer economy.

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