

A Different type of Influencer? Examining Senior Instagram Influencers Communication

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Abstract: The aging of the population, the advance of ICT, and the opening of social networks have allowed the reception of massive phenomena led by the so-called digital immigrants. Indeed, despite the digital divide and a lesser predisposition of older people to deal with technology, it turns out that the market for senior digital influencers begins, gradually, to be marked by its growth, revealing specificities, and differentiating elements. This means that in addition to the traditional role of content receivers, older people are now active content creators, occupying a space that for a long time was restricted to younger generations, contributing to the building up of a vast audience and a wide range of interested, engaged and interactive followers. Using an exploratory approach, this research aims to study the Instagram profile of the top ten most popular elderly influencers and compare the posts of the top two digital influencers (man and women, each). For this purpose, a qualitative methodology was carried out, we examined and compared the posts of @Baddie Winkle, @Iris Apfel, @ George Takei and @dinneranddance, using several dimensions of analysis such as the topics covered, the tone of communication, and the audiovisual and multimedia resources used to create interaction and engagement with followers. The results show that fashion is one of the central themes, punctuated by a communication full of humor, fun, and eccentricity, challenging the paradigm and negative stereotype related to aging and breaking with the traditional image of decline, frailty, and disability associated with old age.

Keywords: Elderly, Senior Digital influencers (SDI), Social Media, Instagram

1. Introduction

It is undeniable the demographic aging that we are experiencing throughout Europe, resulting in a growing percentage of elderly people (65 years and over, in developed countries) and a decreasing number of people of working age in the total population. Systematically low birth rates and increasing life expectancy have been responsible for the change in the European Union (EU) age pyramid (Eurostat, 2022). Added to this is the progressive aging of the elderly population itself, as the relative importance of the very old is growing at a faster rate than in any other age segment of the EU population.

This large-scale aging process, while being considered a great achievement of humanity, is also one of its greatest challenges, as it implies consequences and an increase in economic, political, and social responses. It is in this context that the perspective of active aging emerges and, therefore, within its social and cultural context, requiring an effort that considers the life course as a whole (Elder & Shanahan, 2006) and not just looking for the elderly as a group of people with specific ages. Thus, any analysis related to old age must overcome the chronological or biological question, commonly used to define a generation. Arithmetic divisions construct nominal but not social categories (Guimarães, 2021).

Rooted in activity theory, the active aging discourse focuses on breaking negative expectations and stereotypes about old age and encouraging the continued participation of older people in society. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2002) presented the concept of active aging as a process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation, and security with the aim of improving the quality of life of people as they age and to combat age-based discrimination (Fernandez-Ballesteros et al., 2011). The objective is to make people realize their potential for physical, social, and mental well-being at all stages of life and to participate in society according to their needs, desires and abilities, providing protection, security and adequate care, when they are needed (WHO, 2002). It should be noted that what the WHO advocates are guiding actions that offer more than paternalistic practices, which, as a rule, infantilize and alienate, but dignified procedures that transform the subject into part of the solution (Guimarães, 2021).

Indeed, it is precisely in the context of the proliferation of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the network society (Castells, 2009) that one of the most accentuated strategies in terms of active aging can be seen, through the multiplication of public policies and actions that have contributed to achieving this “macro impacts and place emphasis on participation in a single digital market” (Coelho, 2019: 311). The purpose is to promote literacy, inclusion, and digital skills of the so-called digital immigrants (Prensky, 2001), making aging develop with quality in all areas and that this stage of life is also an asset for society.

The adhesion of seniors to the new ICTs has been growing. The most recent data from Eurostat show that, in 2020, despite continuing to stand out for the lowest usage rate compared to the rest of the population, the proportion of individuals aged between 65 and 74 years old who used the internet were 61%. Like the international scenario, in which a progressive digitization of the new older generation can be identified (Colombo, Aroldi and Carlo, 2014), the trend is towards an increase and the existence of a relationship increasingly close between seniors and ICT (Coelho, 2019), intensified by the recent world pandemic Covid 19. The same is true for social media, Miranda et al. (2021) collected not only a growth in the number of users, but also an increase in the number of daily hours spent on these digital platforms, mainly Facebook and WhatsApp. Regarding the reasons for joining and staying in social networks, interviews with focus groups made up of seniors revealed that adherence is very dependent on the encouragement and support of the closest family members (intergenerational co-education), as in the finding that it is a space that enhances the strengthening and multiplication of social bonds, providing older people with the possibility of developing new sociability and new interests, online and offline, making seniority a period of discoveries with increased well-being and quality of life.

From a consumer behavior point of view, a study called *Brands and Aged*, carried out by MindMiners (2019), through 533 interviews carried out with Brazilian seniors between the ages of 60 and 80+, draws attention to the increasingly digital behavior of the older ones, warning that it is essential that brands, marketing and advertising devote more attention to them, as many of them thrive at work, are active consumers, lead productive lives, consume content on Netflix (70%), have Spotify accounts (58%) follow and some of them become Senior Digital Influencers (SDI).

This investigation aims to study the specifics of SDI. For this purpose, based on the analysis of four SDI profiles on Instagram, we will understand how the process of influence and engagement with followers develops, using several dimensions of analysis such as the topics covered, the tone of communication, and the audiovisual and multimedia resources.

2. Literature review

2.1 Brave New World – Senior Digital Influencers (SDI)

The advance of ICT and the explosion of social media has allowed the reception of massive phenomena carried out by the so-called digital immigrants. In fact, despite the difficulties portrayed by the famous digital divide (Prensky, 2001) and a lower predisposition on the part of the elderly to deal with technology, it appears that the SDI is gradually beginning to be marked by its growth, revealing specificities and differentiating elements. This means that in addition to the role of recipients of content, the elders are now active and creative 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 and a wide range of engaged and interactive followers (Miranda, Antunes & Gama, 2021a; Miranda, Antunes & Gama, 2021b).

It is important, first, to review what a digital influencer is and what its main characteristics are. A digital influencer is a person who attracts an online audience – which goes beyond their friends and family – and for those who communicate through the digital content they produce, thus exerting an influence on the behaviors, opinions, and values of others (Lampeitl and Åberg, 2017). According to Gashi (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.

Despite the immense space for progression that this matter entails, scientific investigations and market studies are beginning to emerge that give us an account of the particularities of this phenomenon. McFarlane and

Samsioe (2020) when analyzing the posts that SDI published on Instagram, found that they provide unique contributions to the construction of social and cultural contexts through their image, content creation and personality. In the same sense, Picázo-Sanchez and García-Marín (2021) stated that SDI use social media as a space for the empowerment of their generational cohort, a place for free expression, breaking down prejudices and barriers towards the elderly.

Miranda, Antunes & Gama (2021a and 2021b), through a content analysis of dozens of posts from the two SDI with the most followers on Instagram worldwide, 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 lived 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 its sensuality, but also to build social and cultural contexts adjusted to this mindset. By being protagonists of their lives, living their life projects with freedom, they project contemporary aging in a positive, dynamic, and freeway, in this brave new world!

In this regard, Guimarães (2021) adds, the misperception that youth is a priority for SDI reveals how the dominant symbols related to old age are absolutely prejudiced. What SDI wants is to look their best and take life in a lighter way, they intend to remain functional and with a purpose, envisioning a more promising horizon than death. Through a phenomenological observation of 63 SDI who work on Instagram in Brazil, it showed that the most striking common discursive characteristics of these influencers relate to the strong personality of their speeches, establishing with the followers a relationship of projection, strong empathy, affection, and bonding. 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 it were a “friend” who was present at different times, offering a good experience. chat, a friendly shoulder or a tug of the ear, but who somehow made themselves available” (Guimarães, 2021: 111) To this mix the socially and politically (in)correct opinions, where the tone of the communication is humorous and fun is a prominent element, defending the freedom to experiment without fear of judgment and prejudice from others (Miranda, Antunes & Gama, 2021b).

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 and b). In the same sense, Farinosi and Fortunati (2020) 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.

3. Research Method

In this exploratory study, we selected four of the top ten senior influencers on Instagram. The two criteria employed for their selection were 1) having both female and male influencers, in an equal number and 2) having a higher number of followers in this social networking site (SNS). The Instagram elderly influencers under analysis, as well as several of their main characteristics, are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: The 4 elderly influencers analyzed, their age, the country where they live in, their number of followers and of those they follow, and their Instagram links

Influencer	Age	Country	Number of followers	Number of people following	Instagram link
Helen Ruth Elam Van Winkle (baddiewinkle)	93	USA	3.4m	47	https://www.instagram.com/baddiewinkle/
Iris Apfel	100	USA	2.1m	175	https://www.instagram.com/iris.apfel/
George Takei	84	USA	1.4m	430	https://www.instagram.com/georgetakei/
Lance Walsh	60	UK	47.6k	80	https://www.instagram.com/dinneranddance/?hl=en

We examined these four senior influencers’ Instagram strategies and practices, considering a period of four months (from April to July 2021) at both discursive, visual, and interactive levels (e.g., Ball and Smith 1992; Farinosi and Fortunati, 2020). For data collection, an analysis grid was constructed, comprising the following

dimensions: Theme/subject publication; Audiovisual resources (sound, music); Multimedia resources (video, photography); Communication tone (humor, irony/funny, informative, emotional); Brand promotion; Signs (hashtags, icons, emojis, memes); 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.

4. Results

Between April and July, the four influencers posted a total of 286 posts, of which 217 were posted by George Takei, 47 by Iris Apfel, 12 by Baddie Winkle and 10 by Lance Walsh. George Takei has a higher posting frequency. Concerning the themes posted, and from the data in table 1, it is possible to evidence that the most-posted theme was politics and human rights.

When we analyze the case of the four influencers there are differences between them. George Takei focuses the posts on eleven themes, Iris Apfel on six, Baddie Winkle, and Lance Walsh 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 three influencers, in the first are Baddie Winkle, Iris Apfel, and Lance Walsh, in the second are Baddie Winkle, George Takei, and Lance Walsh. Iris Apfel and George Takei are the only influencers who have three common themes– art, commemorative days and memories. It is also possible to see that Baddie Winkle and Iris Apfel have the food theme in common and in the case of George Takei and Lance Walsh this also happens with the health theme.

Table 2: Themes posted

Subjects	Frequency				Total
	Baddie Winkle	Iris Apfel	George Takei	Lance Walsh	
Commemorative Days		6	3		9
Art		15	2		17
Fashion	8	12		7	27
Food	2	1			3
Friends		6			6
Birthday	2		1	1	4
Health			22	2	24
Human Rights			55		55
Politics			81		81
History			4		4
Justice			18		18
Environment			1		1
Religion			1		1
Memories		2	1		1

In the posts, the four influencers mobilize audiovisual and multimedia resources to communicate, being they photography, video, and music integrated into the videos. Of these, photography is the most used resource. However, the behavior is different between the influencers. While Lance Walsh uses only photographs but George Takei, Iris Apfel, and Baddie Winkle use photography and video. George Takei posts 214 photographs, Iris Apfel posts 45 photographs, Lance Walsh 10, and Baddie Winkle posts 5 photographs. Baddie Winkle is the influencer that posts more videos with music (Cf. Table 2).

Table 3: Audiovisual and Multimedia Resources

Audiovisual and Multimedia resources	Frequency				
	Baddie Winkle	Iris Apfel	George Takei	Lance Walsh	Total
Photography	5	45	214	10	274
Video	7	2	3		12
Sound/music	6	1	2		9

When we analyze the data in table 3, the tone of communication that stands out is social and political activism. George Takei is the only influencer that posts these tones, but he has posts humor, funny and emotional tone. Baddie Winkle's posts are only funny and humorous. In the case of Iris Apfel, the funny tone is the one that is evident in most of the posts, but she also has emotional, humor and poetic posts. In the case of Lance Walsh, he doesn't have a communication tone.

Table 4: Communication tone

Communication tone	Frequency				
	Baddie Winkle	Iris Apfel	George Takei	Lance Walsh	Total
Humor	4	2	39		45
Funny	5	22	13		40
Emotional		6	1		7
Social and political activism			81		81
Poetic		1			1

In the analysis of the posts, it was also possible to identify that some resulted from paid partnerships with brands. Baddie Winkle published two posts promoting the brand Tillamook, a brand of ice cream, and Iris Apfel published six posts, 3 promoting the brand Zenni Optical (glasses) and 3 the brand Lowes Home Improvement (decoration). Lance Walsh published seven posts promoting brands sportswear, six the Supreme and one the Nike. In the case of Iris Apfel in all posts, it is clear that glasses are part of her identity like Lance Walsh with sportswear. In the case of George Takei, he doesn't promote any brand.

After the publication of the posts, there was an interaction and engagement with the influencers through likes/views and comments. In the total of the 286 posts, there were more than 10 million likes/views. In the case of comments, 145 thousand were made. When we analyze the data of each one of the influencers, it is George Takei who has more, both in likes/views and comments (Cf. Table 4).

Table 5: Interaction/engagement

Interaction/ engagement	Frequency				
	Baddie Winkle	Iris Apfel	George Takei	Lance Walsh	Total
Likes/visualizations	2 713 028	1 521 889	5 802 062	24 329	10 061 308
Comments	15 343	13 691	116 021	171	• 6

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Social networking sites (SNS) increased use and popularity has been accompanied by the rise of social media influencers, usually depicted as individuals from younger age cohorts which are, as Duffy (2020) so eloquently stated, “undoubtedly a product of the digital zeitgeist” (p. 1). Yet, in the last years, the SNS and particularly Instagram have been witnessing a new phenomenon: the appearance of older adults as digital influencers, in some cases with a high number of followers. Traditionally associated with the role of content receivers, older people are progressively becoming active content creators and even, in some cases, building up a vast audience and a wide range of interested, involved, and engaged followers. Considering there is scarce evidence regarding these elderly digital content creators and their personal brand subjectivities, communicative styles, and social media practices, this exploratory study contributes to addressing this gap.

Heterogeneity seems to be the keyword when examining our results. Indeed, the findings of this preliminary study, based on the analysis of four of the top ten profiles of elderly Instagram influencers, suggest marked differences in what concerns their communicative styles, posting themes, and interests. Each of these influencers seems to have a very distinct approach as digital content creators, an unrepeatable charisma, and genuine communication that attracts an increasing number of followers. They are, each one in its manner, unique communicators with a crafted and distinctive personal brand.

With diversity as their common feature, there are a few aspects that connect these influencers, more visible in the case of both female influencers under scrutiny, Baddie Winkle and Iris Apfel. These female SDI are united in their focus on fashion and lifestyle, and both reveal a funny and humorous communication tone, with a visual communication marked by a touch of extravagance and exuberance coupled with a provoking discourse that clearly shows a defying stance toward age representations of the elderly. Despite these common aspects, they also present differences in their communication tone and style, as already suggested in Miranda et al. (2021a, 2021b) study, and also revealed in the present research. The picture gets even more diverse when considering the two male influencers, George Takei and Lance Walsh. Even if both influencers share a common interest in health and Lance Walsh shares the female older influencers' love for fashion, this is not so for George Takei, that reveals a multitude of interests and an evident political and social activist stance. Except for Lance Walsh, these SDI communication tone revolves around humor and funny. In the case of George Takei is also noticeable an activist tone and for Iris Apfel a poetic and sometimes emotional tone. These findings suggest that the discussion

around these four SDI and their social media communicative practices must surpass gender issues and primarily attend to their specificities: they present a distinct digital persona and personal brand, different social media strategies, and their communicative styles and posting themes in Instagram also differ.

These results are quite interesting since they detach these SDI from what seems to be the stereotypical gender roles of younger digital influencers. As Duffy (2020) indicates for younger social media influencers, categories seem to adhere to normative gender scripts, with female content creators dominating fashion, beauty, and parenting, while the genres of comedy, technology, and gaming are populated by male creators, revealing a marked gender division that is not observable in these SDI.

What is also common between these digital influencers is the adoption of a posture far from the notion of frailty, loss, or quietness sometimes associated with later life; instead, they take the best that life still must give them. Each one, in its own way, communicates that aging brings along significant changes in the way of life but, even so, still means being active, interventive, free, and even nonconformist, interested and attentive to what goes on in their life, around it or even in society. And they have the will, the ways, and the power to clearly express their opinions, values, and personal interests, and with it, they introduce some traits of what positive and active aging is. This evidence is somehow like the findings of Picázo-Sanchez and García-Marín (2021), who identified, in the 3 Instagram senior profiles examined, contents characterized by humour and tenderness, disrupting the frailty and weaknesses images that are frequently associated with senior citizens. Also, like what Guimarães (2021) had already observed in female SDI in Brazil, these four popular SDI search for visibility and the possibility to express themselves to larger audiences. Instagram empowers them and provides them with a social space to express themselves, as Picázo-Sanchez & García-Marín (2021) claim. Additionally, this digital platform by giving them a window to talk to society and break aging stereotypes and prejudice, a balcony from where they can have a global reach and change mindsets, and the social discourse on what it means to be elderly in contemporary societies, gives them the power to change social and cultural contexts.

Our findings suggest that diversity is not exclusive to their communication tone and posting themes and subjects; also, the number of posts, the posting frequency, and the interaction and engagement generated among their followers are different. George Takei is the most prolific, which is not surprising given his clear purpose and focus on social and political activism, while Lance Walsh was the least digitally active during the period considered. This asymmetry is also noted when examining interaction and engagement since George Takei and Lance Walsh generate, respectively, the highest and lowest number of interactions and level of engagement. George Takei followers' high level of interaction and engagement can derive from the engaged behavior of this SDI: he posts, with a high frequency, on political and social themes of a controversial nature. This type of non-neutral publication, by its own nature, leads the followers to develop an opinion or take a position, in favor or against it, and express it on Instagram. This factor, along with George Takei's high frequency of posting, can generate more feedback from the audience than the funny/humorous communication, marked by eccentricity and by the exaggeration of the bright colors, the bold props, and the unorthodox poses of Baddie Winkle and Iris Apfel.

Moreover, the analysis of these four SDI Instagram publications reveals the presence of content without major audiovisual resources (eg video). Photographs, own or borrowed (the latter is sometimes noticeable in George Takei's account) are dominant. This is mixed with socially and even politically (in)correct opinions, where the tone of humorous and fun communication is a prominent element, laughing at themselves or the world around them.

In conclusion, previous research on older digital influencers has already documented that SDI deconstruct and even subvert the stereotyped discourse of what "old" looks, talks, and feels like, 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 on the world (e.g., Farinosi & Fortunati, 2020; Guimarães, 2021; Miranda et al., 2021a, 2021b; Picázo-Sanchez & García-Marín, 2021). Our research supports that notion but goes one step further, by examining both very popular male and female SDI and not specifically related to fashion. Indeed, one of the major setbacks regarding scholarly work in this area 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 SDI and their strategies and communication practices in a particular SNS, Instagram.

Finally, this research has important limitations that must be addressed and can be overcome in future studies. One of these limitations concerns the sample of SDI; whose limited number and selection do not enable us to

generalize our results to the remaining elderly digital influencers. Also, these SDI were studied in a specific social networking site (SNS) – Instagram. Since each digital platform presents specific affordances and appeals to different communication strategies and practices, future research can examine a wider social media ecosystem and how these and other SDI project their branded personae in each SNS or even across the different social media platforms. Future research can also aim to understand SDI motivations, as well as which are the factors that increase their ability to influence and foster their involvement and engagement with their followers.

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