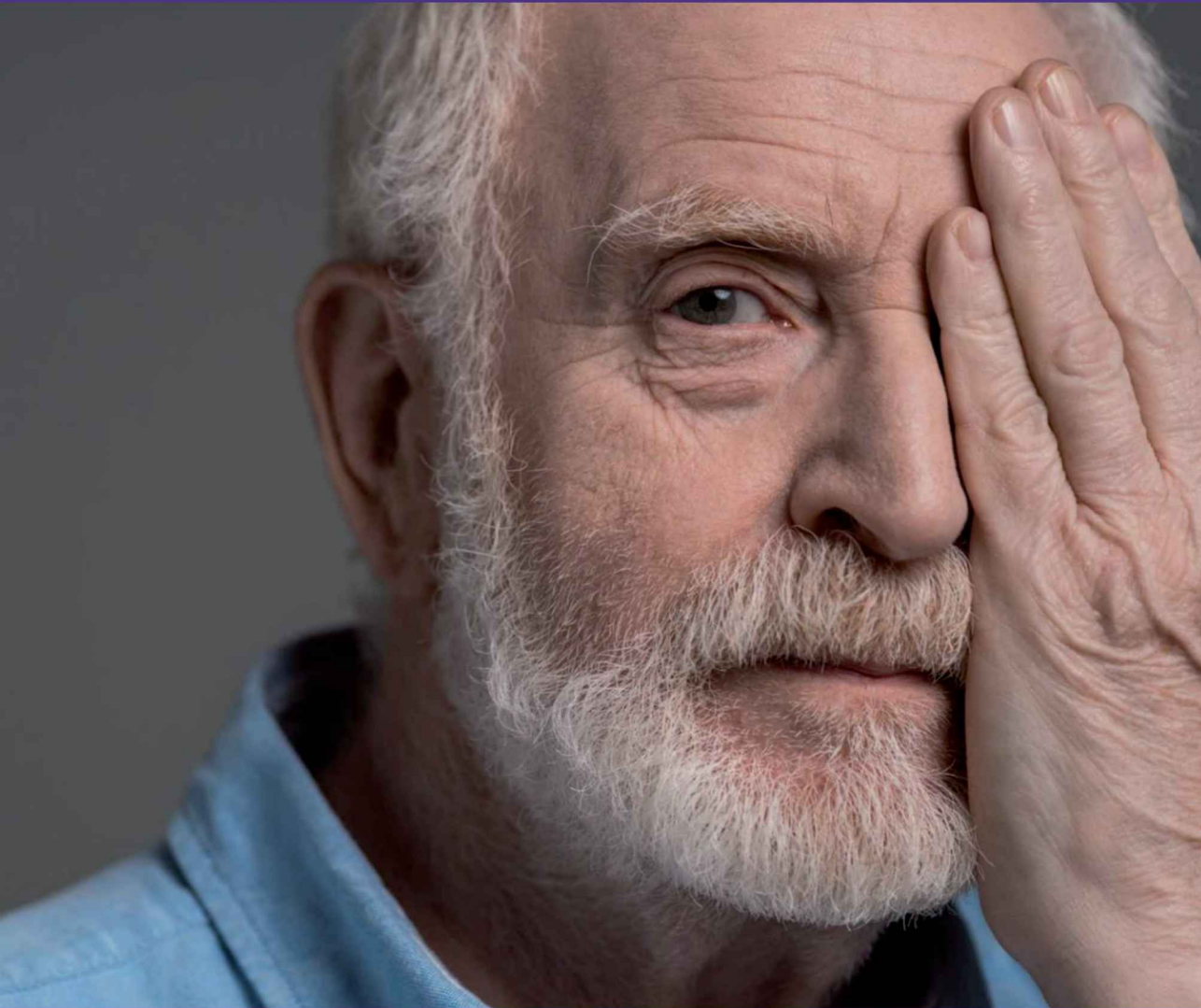


# NOVOS PARADIGMAS DO ENVELHECIMENTO



**a** | Associação  
Nacional de  
Gerontologia  
Social

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Obrigado a todos os autores por “Não quererem apenas acrescentar anos à vida mas, sim, acrescentarem vida aos anos.”

Os coordenadores

Ricardo Pocinho, Cristovão Margarido, Rui Santos,  
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## Challenging old paradigms about aging and social networks: Seniors as social influencers

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**Abstract:** The advances of the Network Society and the dissemination of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) are associated with potential phenomena of exclusion, such as a set of skills and predispositions less present among older generations – the so-called digital immigrants. Despite the difficulties widely portrayed in the literature, it appears that in addition to the growing adherence of seniors to ICT and the internet, older people are gradually appropriating social networks and digital tools to give voice to content channels starting to stand out as digital influencers. Using an exploratory approach, this research aims to study the Instagram profile and analyze the posts of the top two most popular elderly women digital influencers: @Baddie Winkle (4 million followers and considered, in 2020, by Forbes one of the most influential people on the network) and @Iris Apfel (2 million followers).

For this purpose, a qualitative methodology was carried out, where thought a content analysis of the posts, we examined several dimensions such as: the topics covered, the signs, the tone of communication and the audiovisual and multimedia resources used to create interaction and engagement with followers.

In total 47 posts were analyzed. The results show that fashion and arts are the central themes of Baddie and Iris posts, allied to the rupture of the image

of weakness and fragility of seniors, punctuated by a communication full of humor, fun, grace, and some emotional tone. Artistic photography is the dominant visual resource, some of them in a sponsorship format. In addition to the high (young) number of followers that senior influencers have, there is a high engagement with followers who interact mostly through likes, views, and comments. In relation to these last ones, it is verified the presence of an extremely positive and friendly feedback marked by respect and admiration.

**Keywords:** Elderly Influencers, Digital Influencers, Social Networks, Instagram.

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## 1. Introduction

Digital influencers are gaining momentum. Not only we are witnessing, as the years go by, to a rising number of social media influencers, but also to an increasing use of influencer marketing as one of the pillars of brands' marketing strategy. Indeed, brands have been collaborating with social media influencers across several channels to create awareness of their products and services, generating a market that more than doubled between 2019 and 2021, growing globally from 6.5 billion to 13.8 billion U.S. dollars (Statista, 2021).

In the last years, the social media influencing process as well as digital influencers themselves have experienced significant changes. Digital influencing has undergone a process of industrialization, as can be seen by the emergence and development of social media talent agencies along with management companies that serve as broker dealers between brands and influencers (Duffy, 2020). And in the digital arena there are now different types of social media influencers with very diverse characteristics, often operating on one or more social media platforms (Abidin, 2016; Hudders, De Jans & De Veirman, 2021) and constantly adapting to the changing platform environment. Many scholars and practitioners have proposed different typologies to classify and organize them, based on diverse factors, such as their status, practices or even their impact and presence in specific social media plat-

forms, although the most popular typologies are related to their audience size or number of followers (e.g., Antunes, 2020; Bullock, 2018; Ruiz-Gomez, 2019). Despite this diversity, there is usually one common feature in their social representation: a digital influencer is usually depicted as a member from younger generations, regardless of the social media platform we are considering. This stereotype reflects an age-based digital divide, translating the inequalities in the access and use of ICT and the internet between those that Prensky (2001) called digital natives and those considered as digital immigrants, such as individuals from older generations. Indeed, the network society in which we live demands the development and adequate use of a set of skills and competences, namely in the digital realm, which are less likely to be found among the elderly, especially among those that are less qualified.

Yet, this apparent divorce between senior citizens and ICT does not represent a faithful portrait of this relationship. In effect, this is based on a stereotyped homogenization of an age group that is, above and first of all, characterized by their heterogeneity. These age cohorts present a wide variety of needs, expectations, desires, competencies, digital literacy, wealth, etc. Indeed, the critical demographic aging process that characterizes contemporary societies has turned older generations into the fastest growing group in the population of developed societies, characterized by a high diversity in terms of their social, economic and cultural resources (Givskov & Deuze, 2018). Additionally, their adherence to the new ICTs has been increasing and they are the fastest growing segment of internet and social media users worldwide (e.g., Eurostat, 2019) although many of them still do not use ICT or the internet.

Coelho (2019) examined and highlighted the different forms and contours of the relationship between seniors, ICT and the internet, and her findings suggest that there are very diverse modes of appropriation of ICT among some seniors that reflect advanced, diversified, and even creative uses of these technologies. Some seniors seem to possess high levels of digital literacy and explore many features in the digital world, namely in social media platforms (e.g., Antunes, Gama & Miranda, 2021; Miranda et al., 2020), even as social media influencers.

In recent years, digital influence, a product of the digital zeitgeist (Duffy, 2020), has been gaining the interest of many scholars; yet scant research has shed light on the communication and engagement strategies used by older digital influencers and many questions remain unanswered: for example, which posts are more engaging? What characterizes the communication between older digital influencers and their followers? Are their communication and engagement strategies similar to those of younger social media influencers?

Therefore, the objectives of this article are twofold: (1) to study and understand Instagram posts in pages of three Senior Digital Influencers (2) to understand the contents and influence strategies present in their posts on Instagram.

This article is organized as follows: We begin with a literature review on social media influencers. Then, we proceed to a description of the method employed, followed by an analysis of the results. Finally, we discuss the contribution and the findings implications, and offer future research directions.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Social media influencers: definition and characteristics**

Social digital networks have been evolving over time as well as their users, who not only connect, communicate, and interact through these platforms but are also prosumers. Some users have even the ability and the power to create potentially engaging and influential contents and become digital opinion leaders or, as they are more usually known, social media influencers (it is important to note, however, that it still remains, as Ruiz-Gomez [2019] points out, a lack of consensus regarding the terminology used to refer to fame and influence on social media and many different designations are still employed, such as micro-celebrity or digital influencer).

A popular definition proposed by Freberg et al. (2011) presents social media influencers (SMI) as a type of third-party endorser who shapes audience attitudes, as well as their opinions, behaviors and even the consumer journey

of their followers, through content production, content distribution and interaction on the social web (e.g., Lutkenhaus et al., 2018). Duffy (2020) adds that they are a subset of digital content creators that can be defined by their significant online following, distinctive brand persona, and patterned relationships with commercial sponsors.

As good conversation catalysts, that spark conversation by spreading their ideas, opinions and information (Keller & Fay, 2016), with high, frequently daily, posting (e.g., Arriagada & Ibáñez, 2020). Their influencer activity is increasingly platform dependent and content creation seems to be contingent upon each platform conditions for distribution, analysis, and re-circulation, as well as platform infrastructures and changes overtime (e.g., Marwick, 2015; Nieborg & Poell, 2018). This shapes their activities and leads to a different presence of the same digital influencer in the several SNS. It also reinforces, according to Arriagada and Ibáñez (2020), their constant presence online.

What mainly characterizes SMI is that they are considered as credible, trustworthy, and expert sources of information and advice for their followers (e.g., De Veirman et al., 2017; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017); thus, their communicative practices tap into the wider cultural appeal of authenticity (Duffy, 2020). Besides being authentic, being original and unique also stand as relevant factors to become or to be recognized as a SMI on Instagram (Casaló et al., 2020).

In their seminal study, Freberg et al. (2011) concluded that SMI are perceived as outspoken, smart, ambitious, productive, and poised. Familiarity and emotional proximity also seem to play a relevant role; far from the social distance maintained by celebrities, SMI cultivate a sense of intimacy, accessibility, proximity, and relatability that constitute the basis of affective relationships with their followers and help them gain more power of influence (e.g., Abidin, 2015; Marwick, 2016). The effectiveness of an SMI is also related with congruence between digital influencer and fans personalities and/or Self dimensions (such as self-concept or self-image). Preliminary evidence from Casaló et al. (2020) suggests that the perceived fit between the influencer's persona displayed in his/her account(s) and the followers' person-

ality strengthens their influence over their audience. Schouten et al. (2019) add that SMI followers acknowledge a higher similarity and wishful identification with these influencers when compared with celebrities, making the formers more effective as endorsers.

Ruiz-Gomez (2019) claims that there are several key factors to achieve and sustain long term public recognition in the attention economy, such as personality factors (as having strong storytelling skills, being relatable and portray authenticity), being able to provide compelling and distinct content in a specific field that is relevant to the interests of an audience, their reach (ability to gather a community of followers) and generate meaningful engagement.

## **2.2. Older social media influencers**

In the digital domain and despite the so-called digital divide, some individuals from older age cohorts have been challenging stereotypes, empowering themselves and appropriating of digital tools to give voice to content channels (Picázo-Sanchez & García-Marín, 2021). Although this movement is still at the beginning, there are some emblematic cases of older digital influencers who have been challenging the paradigm and stereotypes of age, and assert themselves on SNS such as Facebook, Instagram, Youtube or even TikTok.

Research focusing on older adults as digital influencers and their specificities is still at an early stage, although preliminary evidence from the study of McFarlane and Samsioe (2020) in Instagram suggests that they can provide unique contributions to the construction of social and cultural contexts through their image, content creation and personality. On a complementary perspective, Picázo-Sanchez and García-Marín (2021) empirical research look at the personal gains for these individuals but also at social dividends for the whole age cohort. Their study reveals that Spanish seniors Instagram activity as influencers not only stimulates e-inclusion, but also empowers them and provides a social space to express themselves, besides renewing the society respect for these age segments.

Through a comparative analysis between young and elderly fashion digital influencers, Farinosi and Fortunati (2020) conclude that elderly influencers (70+ women) tend to adopt more personal and authentic styles in their Instagram communication and are more textual and less visual than their younger counterparts. They also seem to be revitalizing fashion communication, since they are not only focused on style, fashion and beauty of mature women but also express their values and personal interests, introducing a more political and more aimed at a social change discourse. Their content production revolves around perennial style, ageless active, bold beauty, and positive ageing, maintaining a defying stance toward age representations in fashion and, at the same time, dismissing age and women stereotyping with humour and grace. This evidence is somehow similar to 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 frequently associated with senior citizens.

Another interesting point of convergence of these two studies lies in the audience response: Farinosi and Fortunati (2020) found out that the young women that are the main followers of these older Instagram influencers frequently comment, in a positive and “wish-I’d-been-there” manner, older SMI posts. The positive connotation of the feedback is also expressed in Picázo-Sanchez and García-Marín (2021) study. The weekly posts of the 3 older Spanish SMI examined receive a friendly and respectful feedback, in which a hate discourse is absent.

### **3. Research Method**

This qualitative exploratory study focused on the content analysis of two Instagram accounts - @Baddie Winkle and @Iris Apfel. Baddie Winkle has 4 million followers and Iris Apfel have 1,5 million followers. They are American and the first have 93 years and the second 100 years old. 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 (humour, irony/

funny, informative, emotional); Brand promotion; Signs (hashtags, icons, emojis, memes); Interaction/engagement (likes, comments, site/blog link, repost, site/blog link). We analysed the posts posted between April and July (2021) by the two influencers.

#### 4. Results

Our results show that these influencers' behaviour on Instagram is different, but also their communication styles and engagement strategies for their followers differ. Regarding their behaviour, we observed that between April and July 2021 both influencers posted a total of 59 posts, of which 12 were posted by Baddie Winkle and 47 by Iris Apfel. There is a 1:4 ratio of the number of posts, with the latter presenting a higher posting frequency than the former. The post themes revolve mostly around fashion and art, although Iris Apfel uses Instagram to explore a more diverse set of interests than Baddie Winkle, whose posts focus on three themes, as can be seen in Table 3.

**Table 3.** *Subjects of the posts*

Subjects	Frequency		
	Baddie Winkle	Iris Apfel	Total
Special days	2	6	8
Art		15	15
Fashion	8	12	20
Food	2	1	3
Friends	0	6	6
Memories		2	2

In the posts the two influencers mobilize audiovisual and multimedia resources to communicate, being they photography, video and also music integrated in the videos. Of these, photography is the most used resource. However, the behaviour is different between the influencers. While Baddie

Winkle resorts more to video complemented with music, Iris Apfel uses photography more (out of 47 posts, 45 are photographs) (e.g. Table 4).

**Table 4.** *Audiovisual and Multimedia resources of the posts*

Audiovisual and Multimedia resources	Frequency		
	Baddie Winkle	Iris Apfel	Total
Photography	5	45	50
Videos	7	2	9
Sound/music	6	1	7

When we analyze the data in Table 5, the tone of communication that stands out is funny. Baddie Winkle posts are only funny or with satiric humor. 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.

**Table 5.** *Communication tone of the posts*

Communication tone	Frequency		
	Baddie Winkle	Iris Apfel	Total
Humor	4	2	6
Funny	5	22	27
Emotional		6	6
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 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). However, in the case of Iris Apfel in all posts, it is clear that glasses are part of her identity. In the posts the influencers use signs. Of the 59 posts, 88% have hashtags and emojis.

After the publication of the posts, there was an interaction and engagement with the influencers through likes/views and comments. In total, from the 59 posts, there were more than 4 million likes/views. In the case of comments, 29 thousand were made. When we analyze the data of each one of the influencers, it is Baddie Winkle who has more, both in likes/views and comments (e.g. Table 6).

**Table 6.** *Interaction/engagement*

Interaction/engagement	Frequency		
	Baddie Winkle	Iris Apfel	Total
Likes/visualizations	2 713 028	1 521 889	4 234 917
Comments	15 343	13 691	29 034
Signs - Hastags, emojis	9	43	52

There is a heterogeneity in terms of fans' responses to the various posts. Baddie Winkle gets more engagement from her followers with 4 times less posts compared to Iris Apfel.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

The ageing of the population, the advance of ICT and the opening of social networks have allowed the reception of massive phenomena led by so-called digital immigrants. Indeed, despite the difficulties portrayed by the famous digital divide (Prensky, 2001) 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 and creative agents in the creation of content, occupying a space, for a long time restricted to younger generations, contributing to the building up of a vast audience and a wide range of interested, engaged and interactive followers.

It is certain that, although the study presented here is exploratory in nature, a first aspect to highlight has to do with the fact that this is a territory marked by the female universe and, therefore, very prolix in posts and content linked to fashion (clothing, accessories, and cosmetics) and lifestyle. The analysis of the rankings, such as Forbes (2020) or Influence.me (2021), shows that, like Baddie Winkle and Iris Apfel, there is a considerable number of other mature influencers, over 60, who in a very peculiar way, are challenging the paradigm and negative stereotype related to aging, breaking with the *status quo* and 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 loss and limitation is subverted by these influencers who, through the digital content they post, open paths, not just to sustain their desires, choices, sensuality, and femininity, but also to erect social and cultural contexts adjusted with this mindset (Mucida, 2011; Mcfarlane and Samsione, 2020; Picázo-Sanchez and García-Marín, 2021). By being protagonists of their lives, living their life projects with freedom, they project contemporary aging in a positive, dynamic, and freeway - always with eyes towards the future!

Moreover, the analysis of the publications of the two influencers under study reveals the presence of content without major audiovisual resources (eg video), highlighting, on the contrary, the sovereignty of photographs with an artistic nature, marked by eccentricity and by the exaggeration of the bright colors, the bold props (which don't seem to match) and the unorthodox poses. This is mixed with socially and politically (in)correct opinions, where the tone of humorous and fun communication is a prominent element, laughing at themselves, defending the freedom to experiment without fear of the judgments and prejudice of others. Baddie Winkle's slogan "stealing your man since 1924" or Iris Apfel's "more is more, less is bore" are famous!

These two personalities leave a huge ballast of influence with an age eclectic audience, such as teenagers, young adults, and adults - a fact visible to millions of fans of their pages (Baddie, 2 713 028 fans; Iris, 1521 889) that accumulate and interact with them, mainly through comments. In line with the literature (Farinosi and Fortunati, 2020; Picázo-Sanchez and García-Marín,

2021), a more in-depth analysis of comments made by fans (predominantly women), the mechanism of admiration and projection is well present and, contrary to what happens with the generality of young digital influencers, there is a clear absence of negative, jocose, and destructive comments verifying, instead, a tolerant, friendly, and complimentary speech.

Naturally, the source of influence that these two mature women have generated around them, has led to sponsorship by different brands, in product categories such as clothing, accessories, cosmetics, hotels, or travel agencies. Regarding engagement and the interaction with followers, the non-sponsored publications seem to receive the highest number of views and likes, namely those in which influencers appear alone in situations of pure entertainment (eg dancing or swimming).

Future research can aim to understand the motivations of senior digital influencers, as well as which are the factors that increase their ability to influence and their engagement with their followers, such as the space and voice they occupy in a environment that rewards an accurate mastery of digital tools, features and literacy, and in which the taboo and age prejudice lead to a view of the elderly as incapable of challenging and triumph in the digital realm.

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