

Deconstructing the stigma of ageing: The rise of the mature female influencers

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ecs**Manuela Farinosi** 

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Abstract

This contribution investigates the phenomenon of mature female influencers, exploring how social media platforms have enabled so far marginalised social subjects not only to become *producers*, but also to develop a leading role online, reshaping social representations and practices connected with the world of the older persons. The study addresses the following research questions: what kinds of content do mature influencers elaborate to produce and convey their messages? How do they change the structural relationship between women and fashion? We selected 18 mature influencers, and employed a qualitative approach based on online ethnography and analysis of social media content. The findings suggest that older influencers are challenging the conventional ways of imaging old age and reshaping the cultural meanings associated with ageing, thus contributing to innovation in the social representations and to the creation of alternative imagery of older women. In doing so, they are producing an important discourse for women, the older adults and the whole of society. However, initial attempts by fashion houses to colonise them are emerging.

Keywords

Ageing, fashion, mature influencers, self-representation, women

Introduction

Ageing can be a daunting life process for many people, especially given how the fashion industry greatly glamorises youth, and sexy, skinny bodies, often disregarding the reality

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and beauty of the older individual (Moeran, 2015). Since the 1960s, fashion trends have been directed by youth, and the fashion industry has continued to long for youth. Styles are designed for, and shown on, very young models, and the high fashion scene is almost entirely occupied by youth. The dominance of the visual in contemporary culture means that we are surrounded by pictures that celebrate bodily perfection (Featherstone, 1995), and from which all signs of imperfection are erased, on Photoshop or by the cosmetic surgeons. Images of the fashion industry concentrate on women in their 20s and 30s, and ageing constitutes a disruption in the visual field. We are not accustomed to seeing older bodies associated with fashion settings because they are viewed as something that is unwelcome and undesirable (Hepworth, 2000), and this contributes to the strengthening of a widespread culture of fear of – or contempt for – ageing. For example, empirical research based on a content analysis of Vogue UK from 1990 to 2009 found there was no mention of age or ageing at all in covers before 2007, and that a first attempt by fashion to handle age can be found on a 2007 cover of a special annual edition under the theme of ‘ageless style’,¹ where there were eight models dressed in white, with no visible signs of age on their faces (Twigg, 2013). The ideal of ageless style is reflected by the fact that older women only feature sporadically, and often in ways that dilute or efface their age. In some respects, in the visual market it is as if getting older means being moved to the margins of visibility.

However, a new phenomenon is appearing online which, thanks to the increasing adoption of digital media by older people, and in particular of platforms for self-expression, is trying to subvert this situation, making them more visible and, hopefully, included in the society. A number of mature women have started producing and sharing grassroots fashion communication, proving that ‘old’ is not what it used to be, and that online influence is not exclusive to people of a younger age. While younger influencers (Cornwell and Katz, 2021)² certainly continue to play a big part in the Instagram marketing game,³ older women represent a growing demographic. They are emerging quietly, seeking to buck the idea that ageing cannot still be fashionable, and are gaining more and more popularity (Harvey, 2019). These ‘new’ social media influencers are trying to shatter stereotypes and false myths around ageing, beauty and society’s expectations, suggesting that the concept of age is changing, and that the collective understanding of what later life looks like is outdated.

This article intends to investigate the rise of mature female fashion influencers, exploring how social media platforms have so far enabled these marginalised social subjects not only to become *producers* (Bruns, 2009), but also to reshape social representations and practices connected with the world of the older adult, and especially that of women. By reporting on a qualitative study of 18 mature female influencers, based on online ethnography and an analysis of social media content, it specifically attempts to understand the kinds of content they post online and, starting from these, to analyse how these women are helping to change the structural relationship between age and fashion.

The manuscript is structured as follows. First, it explores the cultural associations of ageing in fashion, focussing in particular on the central theme of invisibility, understood both in terms of market segment, and in terms of media representations. Second, it introduces a case analysis and describes the method adopted in the empirical work. Next, it

presents and discusses the main findings emerging from the data analysis, and, finally, it draws conclusions and offers some reflections.

Ageing and fashion: tearing down the veil of invisibility

Age and ageing are culturally contingent terms, whose definitions are fluid and variable, shaped by a complex set of social, material and symbolic influences, and that are moulded by the practices, values and norms of the surrounding culture (McHugh, 2003; Trusinová, 2014). Fashion has long ignored the topic of age and neglected older people, prioritising the ultra-fashionable and avant-garde, and for this reason has focussed on the youthful and transgressive. As Twigg (2013) pointed out,

Fashion and age sit uncomfortably together. Fashion inhabits a world of youthful beauty, of fantasy, imagination, allure. Its discourses are frenetic and frothy; its images glamorous and – above all – youthful. Age by contrast is perceived as a time of greyness, marked by retirement from display or engagement with the erotic and style conscious. (p. 1)

In fashion studies, attention to age and ageing has long been focussed on topics such as special clothes for the silver generation or the clothing purchase behaviour of seniors (Lee and Kim, 2016), while there are few studies on the older adults and fashion attitude, ageing, and fashion culture or, more generally, on clothing and old age (Ro and Park, 2017). In light of these considerations, it is not surprising to note that at present, with the exception of specific research (e.g. Moon and Abidin, 2020), little work has been undertaken that addresses older fashion influencers (Cereda, 2017; McGrath, 2018). Thus, it is important that this lack of knowledge is dealt with because mature influencers potentially represent a substantial novelty, which can help make older bodies more visible, and overcome the cultural limits that have characterised the fashion system, which has had a long-standing obsession with the myth of eternal youth.

The inattention to more mature people has caused not only a loss in revenues for many companies, and therefore in consumption and service opportunities for these individuals, but also a lack of narratives about older bodies and beauty.

Nowadays the world of consumption, established as the normative life course at the beginning of the 20th century, has been destabilised, and the meaning and experience of ageing have changed after a series of social and cultural shifts and interconnected processes (Walker, 2012). As a result, the later years are no longer as clearly defined as they used to be, and across Western societies the third age is emerging as a distinct cultural space, characterised by a certain degree of freedom from the constraints of work and family responsibility (Gilleard and Higgs, 2007).⁴ Nowadays, many older people have high disposable incomes and a personal history of consumption (Rodà and Sica, 2020). In fact, those currently in their seventies belong to a generation that grew up with youth culture in the 1970s, and that matured with the consumption boom of the 1980s and 1990s. Nonetheless, they are often ‘frustrated shoppers’, who refuse to adopt the style of previous older generations, but at the same time often fail to find their desires reflected in the market (Coughlin, 2017). Despite the fact that over the past century the age structure of the population has been changing considerably and the median age is increasing,⁵

only in recent times have apparel companies and the fashion industry begun to look at this market segment as a real opportunity (Murata, 2011). This lack of attention towards older consumers has been attributed to several factors, from the negative stereotypes associated with ageing, to marketers' comfort with long-standing promotional strategies developed when young consumers were in the majority (Corlett, 1998), from businesses' fears that their products will become associated with old age, resulting in negative repercussions for their brand value (Lee, 1997; Long, 1998; Tunaley et al., 1999), to a sort of 'unconscious age bias' due to a difference between people employed in product promotion and people who then buy the products (Thomas and Wolfe, 1995; Twigg, 2010). In a survey carried out by Nielsen (2014), more than half of the 30,000 respondents said that they 'do not see advertising that reflects older consumers', and of the few campaigns that do feature older people – mainly from the pharmaceutical and retirement industries – older viewers find their contemporaries' portrayal unappealing and overly stereotypical. However, it must be recognised that in recent times, also thanks to the push given by mature influencers, the fashion industry has begun to develop a new language and has proposed a style more suitable for women of their age. Understanding the opportunities in terms of business, both designers and advertisers have in fact started to pay more attention to this growing and potentially profitable segment of the market that has long been underpowered due to the cultural and social limits of fashion itself, mainly oriented at young consumers (Cereda, 2017). More frequently, firms are turning to senior models when choosing their new muse, and the past years have seen several not-so-young models and celebrities figure prominently in campaigns or on the catwalk for fashion brands. Among these we can mention, for example, Sophia Loren for Dolce & Gabbana, Catherine Deneuve for Louis Vuitton and Isabella Rossellini for Lancôme. In what is being called a 'greynaissance' (Bøilerehaug and Jørgensen, 2019), senior models are becoming more visible, and are not only often used for the marketing of products from brands targeting mature segments, but also appear in the branding of popular firms, attracting a wider variety of customers. This cultural shift, even if at first glance 'might be positively construed to demonstrate that at last the disenfranchisement and invisibility endured by older women in the fashion, beauty and celebrity industries – which are central to upholding wider social hierarchies about which women "matter" – have been dented' (Jermyn, 2016: 576–577), must be viewed with some caution. For example, examining the recent increase in older women in fashion and beauty advertisements and photography and, in particular, the 2015 Céline campaign featuring the recently deceased writer Joan Didion, Jerslev (2018) points out that in context of the (young) marketplace of style and fashion the ageing female face is welcome but only through its 'coolness' and in combination with extreme bodily thinness. In a youth-obsessed culture, ageing bodies and faces become interesting and receive attention only when they belong to well-known models, a clear sign that old age is coming into fashion not as a tribute to ageing in itself or as a way to reformulate female beauty, but rather as tributes to iconic celebrities, a way to recall images of their younger selves. Similarly, analysing the older women actors adopted as models in the 2017 Pirelli calendar, Jermyn and Jerslev (2017) note that those unretouched and make-up free photos, while not concealing the signs of ageing and capturing female bodies in various states of undress, exemplify a cool attitude and favour both a certain class bias and body shape. More in general, older women

co-opted into the marketplace of fashion represent only a small niche, and the problem of their underrepresentation persists.

With regard to the scarcity of narratives concerning older bodies and beauty, several studies have shown that people over a certain age are drastically underrepresented in all forms of media, from popular movies to TV shows and newspaper advertisements (Kessler et al., 2004; Lauzen and Dozier, 2005; Miller et al., 2004; Stern and Mastro, 2004; Vasil and Wass, 2006), although it must be acknowledged that the situation is changing slightly in recent years (Holmes and Jermyn, 2015). For example, according to Harwood (2007), prime-time television characters over 65 are fewer than 5 percent, while Atkinson and Ragab (2004), examining movies from 1980 to 1999, found that only 6 percent of the protagonists were over 70. Analysing this phenomenon further, scholars have also noted that older men are consistently represented in larger numbers, and appear as much as 10 times more frequently than older women (Petersen, 1973; Robinson and Anderson, 2006). In this regard, some researchers have talked about ‘symbolic annihilation of women’ (Gurrieri, 2020; Harp et al., 2013), a concept originated by Gerbner (1978), and then applied to the specific situation of women by Tuchman (1978). But in addition to the underrepresentation of older women, it is also pivotal to reflect on the way they are portrayed when they are shown. Studies suggest that the vast majority of older female characters fit a negative stereotype much more often than men in most media (Signorielli, 2004), and this implies that the largest segment of the population is not seeing themselves represented appropriately. In this regard, Meagher (2014) recommends, ‘in order to learn to look at old women in new ways, they need to be wrenched from [. . .] cultural invisibility. Old women must become a part of our visual culture, present in popular visual culture and in art’ (p. 142). The phenomenon of mature influencers certainly goes in this direction because these women, through their performances, are trying to overcome issues such as media underrepresentation and misrepresentation (Byerly and Ross, 2006), and render themselves visible as part of the cultural mainstream (Givskov and Deuze, 2018). They are creating and experimenting with a vision of the beauty of the older bodies outside the box of traditional ageist stereotypes that address to the desire felt by many people interested in issues of style, fashion and ageing to encounter more diverse images of older women. The rise of these figures is closely linked to the spread of digital media and the adoption of social media platforms by the older population (Pargaonkar et al., 2019). One of the most meaningful cultural changes brought by social media is the fact that these channels are not just representational media, but also presentational media (Marshall, 2010), where individuals employ digital literacies (Jones and Hafner, 2012) to craft their online personas, and to engage in an expression of the self to the world (Rettberg, 2017; Thumim, 2012) that is partially mediated and partially interpersonal. Applying the capabilities of these tools, the older persons are now endowed with the capability to autonomously manage their own images, strategically elaborating constructions of their public presentation and controlling how they want their identities to be received, whereas, in mainstream media, they have no choice but to rely on traditional gatekeepers to represent their identities (Abidin, 2018). The technological and social affordances of social media platforms allow them to produce a strategic presentation of the public self in an attempt to reach their goals and successfully influence how others perceive them. In this perspective, computer screens, like traditional glass mirrors,

can be seen as new ‘technologies of the self’ (Rocamora, 2016: 12), a self-constructed, performed and mediatised, self to be shared and circulated online (Papacharissi, 2010). It is through the performativity of presentational media that for the first time in history older women are now able to represent themselves, without the filtered lenses of the traditional media, independently creating textual and visual content, and sharing it online. Gaining extended competencies in creating sophisticated content in the form of photographs, videos and stories, and drawing on a variety of techniques to style themselves for an audience, mature female influencers are able to narrate their passions and their daily lives in the first-person, reclaiming their rights to be seen. Moreover, they are trying to undermine a system based on rigid hierarchical and centralised control of the meanings, which had always characterised the fashion system, offering to their followers an effective opportunity to interface with an atypical discourse on fashion (Rocamora, 2017; Titton, 2015). Generating a set of disintermediation processes, and subverting traditional communication flows existing in the fashion world, they are contributing to grassroots fashion storytelling, creating new online spaces where women who do not fit into the stereotypical feminine fashion model (thin, tall and young) can finally find an accessible person they can identify with.

Aims and methods

Because of the sparsity of prior research within the field, and the topic’s newness, in order to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon of senior fashion influencers, we opted for a qualitative approach (Miles et al., 2014; Silverman, 2015) based on online ethnography, and analysis of social media content. As first, we focussed on Instagram, one of the most popular platforms (Tankovska, 2021) devoted to visual storytelling, and for this reason it has been widely adopted by influencers of all ages. Several structural capabilities allow Instagram to be a site of digital research, such as persistence, visibility, searchability of content (boyd, 2010), and a high degree of richness and interpretability from the perspective of data analysis (Laestadius, 2017). In particular, in our study, the search feature allowed us to carry out a preliminary exploration and find some age-related hashtags,⁶ like #advancedstyle and #fashionover. We used these tags as specific markers to identify content of interest, and to trace the profiles of those who posted relevant material. At first, we collected all Instagram profiles of mature women we could find and then, among all the accounts identified, selected a smaller sample of individuals. The selection was guided by a number of inclusion/exclusion criteria. In particular, we sought to include only those profiles focussed on fashion content, and attached to women over the age of 60, mainly favouring those that did not have name recognition before they started their Instagram account, and whose persuasion power was created, at least originally, by social media. We therefore excluded, as much as possible, professional models, celebrities or artists whose popularity was attributable to mainstream media. Moreover, to respond to the ethical and methodological challenges posed by Internet research, we only considered and analysed publicly available social accounts, and followed the guidelines outlined by the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) (Franzke et al., 2020). In the end, we obtained a final sample of 18 mature influencers who met our inclusion requirements – a rather significant number given the exploratory nature of this

study and the novelty of the phenomenon under investigation – and decided to analyse all of them, without applying further selection criteria, such as geographic location, activity level on Instagram or the number of Instagram followers (Table 1).

The sample resulting from this selection was mainly composed of white upper middle-class women, who are active in Western countries, and, in particular, in the United States. According to the marketing-audience classification of social media influencers proposed by Ruiz-Gomez (2019) and based on the number of followers they have, two of them can be considered mega-influencers (>1 million followers), seven macro-influencers (between 100,000 and 1 million followers), and nine micro-influencers (between 1000 and 100,000 followers). In all cases, the Instagram profile is characterised by a strong discrepancy between the number of followers and the number of people the influencer is following. These women come from very different backgrounds; some have spent most of their youth working in large companies, like Patti Gibbons; others have been dietitians, like Maye Musk; flight attendants, like Colleen Heidemann; psychiatric nurses, like Judith Boyd; consultants in technology sales, like Jan Correll; or university professors, like Lyn Slater. They have been motivated to undertake the ‘career’ of influencer for different reasons. For example, Licia Fertz started, having been encouraged by her nephew who created her profile to distract her from depression due to her husband’s death; Sarah Jane Adams turned to Instagram to promote her jewellery business; Magda Llohis de Gutierrez started for fun, after Ari Seth Cohen, the creator of the project *Advanced Style*,⁷ spotted her on the streets of New York; Lyn Slater started her blog after struggling to find an existing one that spoke to women who lead ordinary lives. Some of them create, publish and curate their own content; others are filmed by family members who manage the various tasks necessary to convey their public images online. Some of them also maintain a blog and profiles on other platforms (i.e. Facebook and YouTube) and in those cases, we explored this content as well.

The main research questions investigated were the following:

RQ1. what kinds of content do older, female influencers present to produce and convey their messages in the social media context (i.e. Instagram)? and

RQ2. how do they change the structural relationship between age and fashion?

In attempting to address these questions, we monitored their online practices and social interactions (i.e. posting, captioning, commenting, replying and hashtagging) for 2 weeks using an ethnographic approach (Hine, 2017), with the aim of exploring their communication strategies, and the relationships they build and manage with their followers. At the operational level, given that online self-presentation takes place through the construction of profiles and through interactions with other users, we focussed on these elements and examined strategies evident within the visual and textual content of posts. Specifically, in addition to the ethnographic observation of their online presence, we collected data related to (1) their Instagram account (i.e. bio, number of followers and who they follow) and (2) a random selection of 20 photos per influencer (360 posts in total), and the associated captions, tags, hashtags, number of likes, number of comments and comment texts. Guided by Baym’s (2015) identity cues categories, we took into account

Table 1. The 18 elderly influencers analysed (darker grey indicates mega-influencers (>1 million followers), intermediate grey indicates macro-influencers (between 100,000 and 1 million followers), and lighter grey indicates micro-influencers (between 1000 and 100,000 followers)).

Name (nickname)	Age	Followers	Following	Engagement rate	Country	Account's Instagram URL
Helen Winkle (@baddiewinkle)	93	3.6M	80	2.40%	US	https://www.instagram.com/baddiewinkle/
Iris Apfel (@iris_apfel)	100	1.6M	130	1.91%	US	https://www.instagram.com/iris.apfel/
Lyn Slater (@iconaccidental)	67	749k	1041	1.05%	US	https://www.instagram.com/iconaccidental/
Maye Musk (@mayemusk)	73	406k	430	1.77%	Canada	https://www.instagram.com/mayemusk/
Linda Rodin (@lindaandwinks)	73	286k	17	1.37%	US	https://www.instagram.com/lindaandwinks/
Sarah Jane Adams (@saramajewels)	63	193k	0	0.56%	UK	https://www.instagram.com/saramajewels/
Colleen Heidemann (@colleen_heidemann)	72	177k	238	2.48%	US	https://www.instagram.com/colleen_heidemann/
Beth Djalali (@styleatcertainage)	63	139k	563	2.20%	US	https://www.instagram.com/styleatcertainage/
Licia Fertz (@liciafertz buongiorno nonna)	91	110k	557	5.12%	Italy	https://www.instagram.com/liciafertz/

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

Name (nickname)	Age	Followers	Following	Engagement rate	Country	Account's Instagram URL
Jan Correll (@silver_isthenewblonde)	63	70.6k	2158	0.65%	US	https://www.instagram.com/silver_isthenewblonde/
Daphne Selfe (@daphneselfe)	93	61.7k	212	0.83%	UK	https://www.instagram.com/daphneselfe/
Eileen Smith (@eileenstylequeen)	81	57.2k	301	1.57%	Ireland	https://www.instagram.com/eileenstylequeen/
Judith Boyd (@stylecrone)	76	56.9k	1157	3.46%	US	https://www.instagram.com/stylecrone/
Dorrie Jacobson (@seniorstylebible)	86	43.7k	1249	1.85%	US	https://www.instagram.com/seniorstylebible/
Debra Rapoport (@debrarapoport)	76	35.1k	2416	1.05%	US	https://www.instagram.com/debrarapoport/
Suzi Grant (@alternativeageing)	71	33.5k	4956	2.23%	UK	https://www.instagram.com/alternativeageing/
Magda Llohis de Gutierrez (@magdalife57)	77	24.8k	559	3.96%	Spain	https://www.instagram.com/magdalife57/
Patti Gibbons (@notdeadyetstyle)	66	17.3k	1402	1.76%	US	https://www.instagram.com/notdeadyetstyle/

both personal (profile picture, short bio, selected hashtags, replies to comments left by followers, etc.) and social ones (followers, likes, comments left by followers and hashtags that express group affiliations). The resulting content was thematically coded (Boyatzis, 1998; Guest et al., 2012), and the corpus was treated with an inductive procedure to identify the most relevant and significant thematic categories to investigate this new phenomenon.

Findings

The analyses generated notable insights about the mature female influencers. Due to space constraints, however, only the four most meaningful findings will be presented here.

The first is related to the online presentations of the self through personal appearance management (Goffman, 1959; Rudd and Lennon, 1994), and clothing behaviours and styles proposed by these women. For them, Instagram represents a space for playful, experimental identity work, where they manipulate their images through the use of clothing, accessories, hairstyle and cosmetics. Drawing on a variety of semiotic resources, the mature influencers very often have fun playing with their image and propose outfits from a registry that demonstrates their courage to push back against ageist stereotypes with irony. Moreover, the content analysis of the materials collected indicated that they usually employ styles that seem to be genuine and individual and, through their posts, they develop what can be considered a true personal branding, useful to be publicly recognisable and to differentiate themselves from one another. Most of these women in fact have one distinctive look. Helen Winkle, for example, likes to wear bright colours, clashing prints, fun t-shirts, crop tops and her outfits always appear to be characterised by a total refusal to conform to dress norms about how a 90-year-old woman should look.⁸ Iris Apfel expresses her eclectic style through the use of thick, round and oversized glasses and chunky statement jewels, accessories that have made her an unquestionable icon in the fashion world. Lyn Slater offers a style characterised by an androgynous, urban and intellectual aesthetic and marked by the use of black garments that contrast with her white hair. She often wears outfits that emphasise opposites: tailored jacket with loose pants, sneakers with sophisticated cut skirts, white ruffled blouse with black leather jacket.

To draw attention to themselves and capture the interest of a loyal audience of followers, in the majority of cases the mature influencers, through practices of self-representation, strategically display an authentic⁹ personality (Duffy and Hund, 2015; Khamis et al., 2017; Wellman et al., 2020). The analysis of the content revealed that their 'strategic authenticity' (Gaden and Dumitrica, 2015), more than any inherent quality, is a core component of their broader self-branding strategy and appears to be part of a 'performative ecology' (Abidin, 2018), which also relies on a series of choices they make to appear more true to their followers and provide them the perception of access to a glimpse of their lives. These choices include posting numerous photos of themselves, disclosing curated personal information, sharing intimate snippets from their everyday life openly, talking about some of their feelings and addressing the audience in the caption of the post, often through questions. Staging authenticity is necessary to gain emotional

connection and to foster closeness and intimacy with their followers, and contributes to establish credibility, generate audience loyalty and strength a sense of community (Zulli, 2018). And it is probably thanks to them appearing more authentic and to their ability to represent their audience more faithfully than mainstream media that mature influencers are gaining more and more traction. Their narratives of ordinariness and their production of an 'authentic' persona are crucial for their success because the more credible they appear, the more they are powerful in influencing their followers. In general, the content they produce revolves around positive ageing and shows a high level of self-acceptance. Never lacking in originality, through their performances, they seem to reclaim their visibility and scream to the world that they exist. They aspire to prove that beauty and style know no age, and strive to promote an optimistic version of later life, as well as an acceptance-oriented attitude towards ageing. In doing so, the mature influencers are contributing to a gradual shift in the common perception of ageing, also encouraging other older women to express their creative freedom. This is confirmed by their words. For example, Lyn Slater, during an interview for the Independent,¹⁰ said,

I'm not 20. I don't want to be 20, but I'm really freaking cool. That's what I think about when I'm posting a photo. [. . .] When I was young, we were burning our bras and promoting free love. We were getting high. Why would [we] accept the ageing image of our mothers?

The second significant result concerns the role played by textual content. In the self-representations produced by mature fashion influencers, albeit on a platform centred on images, text still plays a dominant role, and sometimes the photos represent just the chance to deal with topics of specific interest for the older generation in the captions. In fact, findings reveal that their profiles represent a means to establish social connections and gain emotional support through the shared experience of ageing. The mature influencers, and in particular the macro- and micro-influencers, offer their audience not only basic fashion information regarding recent trends, and trustworthy recommendations and advice on products, services and brands, but also tips on how to wear clothing that camouflages or emphasises certain body parts, and what make-up colours work best for greying hair, also helping other women in this way to manage a changing identity through fashion. Moreover, in addition to focussing on style and beauty, the older influencers often also talk about personal interests and daily activities, and report on experiences about age-related changes. Occasionally their feeds feature posts related to fitness and a healthy life, and, more generally, to issues of interest to mature women such as the menopause, health concerns and, more rarely, grief. In the majority of cases analysed, these topics are then taken up and deepened in the personal blog, a tool still widely used by older influencers (as opposed to younger colleagues). We noticed that the sample investigated maintains different types of blogs, ranging from simple advice on how to combine outfits, to not being resigned to time passing (e.g. *NotDeadYetStyle*), to those who offer a gallery of strictly over-age street styles (e.g. *StyleAtCertainAge*) and those who have made the discourse on fashion a tool for redemption or recreation of one's life (e.g. *StyleCrone* or *AccidentalIcon*). The blog, within the multi-platform communication strategy adopted by them, offers more space to reflect in detail on the subject of age and ageing, and even manages to reach their peers who are not present on social media

platforms, providing them with innovative and alternative perspectives, characterised by freer, more political and deeper content, compared to the traditional media narrative. Moreover, by remaining focussed on the textual level, we have also noticed that these women often tend to point out their narration with humour (Lynch, 2002), ironically dismissing stereotypes about ageing. Photo captions and bios are often thought-provoking, and sometimes characterised by anti-ageism sentiments. For example, Helen Winkle, the most popular influencer on our list with an international Instagram following of 3.6 million, posted in her bio the slogan ‘Stealing ur man since 1928!!’, Licia Fertz wrote ‘Accidentally Aged Model & Influencer. Trieste girl since 1930. NO TIME TO BE SAD’, while Sarah Jane Adams characterises every photo she posts on her account with the hashtag #mywrinklesaremystripes, which she coined herself in 2015 after a make-up artist asked if she would like her wrinkles covered. And through a caption below, Lyn Slater enlivened a photo she posted with: ‘Nothing like a few wrinkles to make life more interesting. Heading out’, accompanying it with the hashtag #AgeIsJustAVariable. The humour they use can be interpreted as another powerful tool for the creation and reinforcement of intimacy (Kuipers, 2009).

The third meaningful finding concerns the relationship the mature female influencers establish with audiences, and highlights the intergenerational impact of this phenomenon. An analysis of the comments left by followers under the photos posted on Instagram by these women shows that their content is not only appreciated by people of their own age, but also – and above all – by younger people, who constitute the vast majority of the platform’s users (Tankovska, 2021). In fact, mature influencers seem to be very popular among the younger generations, who leave them abundant and encouraging feedback. In particular, many young women show a sort of a ‘wish-I’d-been-there’ mentality with their posts and leave comments saying ‘How can we be like you?’ or ‘I want to get older like you’. For instance, a comment under a photo posted by Maye Musk says, ‘When I grow up I want to be Maye Musk’, and it was left by a girl from the United Kingdom. The fact that younger women are the most passionate supporters of these influencers was also confirmed by Sarah Jane Adams, who stated during an interview, ‘The insights of my Instagram page reveal that 75% of my followers are women between the ages of 25 and 34 around the world’. Similarly, also according to HYPRbrands, an influencer marketing platform, 65 percent of Lyn Slater’s followers are under 32, as are 43 percent of Maye Musk’s online fan base.¹¹

In the vast majority of cases, the comments received are characterised by a positive connotation, and revolve around terms like ‘inspirational’, ‘empowering’ and ‘encouraging’, which reflect how these women are perceived by their followers quite well. Most often, comments contain compliments and include emojis and icons that range from decorative to emotive. While this particularly positive climate could be further emphasised by Instagram’s automatic comment moderation feature that filters out comments that might be inappropriate, offensive or bullying, it is nevertheless worth pointing out that the analysis of comments has shown that in general influencers of our sample have very often managed to establish meaningful, supportive connections with their followers. As we will see in more detail in the next point, it is precisely this social capital of theirs that can then be traded on and transformed into economic capital and profit. A further indicator to analyse the kind of social media relationships that these influencers

maintain with their followers is the so-called ‘engagement rate’¹² (Ouvrein et al., 2021). In several cases, especially with regard to mega- and macro-influencers, we can note that this indicator is higher than average Instagram for their category (1.70%). The three influencers with the highest engagement rate are the Italian Licia Fertz (5.12%), the Spanish Magda Llohis de Gutierrez (3.96%) and the American Judith Boyd (3.46%), but the profiles of the two mega-influencers are also noteworthy. Usually influencers with more 100,000 followers have lower engagement than those with fewer followers (probably when an audience grows into millions, it becomes more challenging to maintain the same level of intimacy that influencers create with their smaller communities) (Chen, 2016), while in our case both Helen Winkle and Iris Apfel manage to record a higher than average engagement rate for their category (2.40% and 1.91% vs. 1.70%).

Finally, the fourth noteworthy result concerns the relationship between the mature influencers and the fashion system. After a first phase characterised by a high level of autonomy and spontaneity in the content produced and published on the various platforms they use, in recent times, it is possible to notice the advent of a new phase, strongly characterised by the appearance on the scene of a series of new intermediaries. As the audience of the mature influencers is growing fast and engaging millions, they have begun to receive considerable market attention, which translates on a practical level into the fact that the influencers have slowly begun to be co-opted by ad hoc agencies, specialising in grey models and online marketing. This interest on the part of the fashion and beauty industry in appropriating images of older men and women is actually part of a larger contemporary trend that, under the labels of inclusivity and diversity, has been trying to propose the use of models who are aesthetically capable of representing the multiplicity of the population in terms of gender, ethnicity, body shape and age (e.g. just a few days ago the leading lingerie brand Victoria’s Secret featured its first model with Down syndrome, Sofia Jirau). Mature influencers are valuable to brands looking to reach an older customer demographic, as they can provide them a more targeted follower base. Indeed, their marketability is closely linked to their ability to cultivate a lasting relationship with a curated group of people who meet specific characteristics that appeal to brands. And it is their capacity to draw attention, shape or persuade consumer buyer intentions or opinions and provide an engaged and potentially receptive audience that constitutes the bargaining power on which to trade. As can be seen from the content posted on the profile of some of them, one of the most visible signs of this co-optation is the fact that influencers began intermingling personal posts and sponsored posts, mixing information about a certain product with emotional storytelling, trying in this way to negotiate the relationship with their followers to the demands of advertising. Another clear sign of their integration into the advertising and marketing industry is identifiable in an increasing professionalisation of their practices, aimed at transforming influencers into intermediaries between advertisers and consumers. This professionalisation can be seen not only in the publication of highly curated content and over-edited photos which follow a more or less regular schedule and meet search engine optimization (SEO) criteria (favouring SEO and thus increasing their visibility), but also in a sort of internalisation of the market logic in the production of contents themselves, which tend to be increasingly aligned and integrated into the advertising and marketing industry. In light of what has already happened to their younger colleagues, it should be noted that in the

long run, the assimilation of the mature influencers into the advertising industry can bring both advantages and disadvantages: on the one hand, it can undoubtedly turn their efforts into monetisable opportunities and thus increase their revenue, but on the other hand, it risks leading to a standardisation of the content, which becomes more and more similar to that of traditional advertising (van Driel and Dumitrica, 2021).

At present, this new re-intermediation process appears more evident in mega- and macro-influencers, who are increasingly used to collaborating with fashion brands by integrating product endorsements into their posts, by mentioning a brand name in the caption or participating in exclusive events organised by the brands themselves. It will be interesting to analyse how this situation evolves in the coming months, and how the different influencers under observation will react to the various attempts of co-option into the fashion system by brands, magazines and marketers.

Conclusion

Twigg (2013) argues that normative femininity is formed around an image of youthfulness which leaves those women who do not comply with it in a sort of limbo that she defines as a 'cultural exile from femininity' (p. 5). Therefore, in a visual context saturated with pictures of youth and bodily perfection, and where older women become culturally invisible, mature influencers are playing a counter-hegemonic role by conveying alternative narratives about the older body and beauty. Making the invisible visible through their self-representation practices, they are creating an aesthetic space in which traditional norms regarding appearance as an older woman are dissolved and the ageing body is not hidden from sight, but adorned and displayed with a certain pride. Exposing their figures naturally, leaving their grey hair as it is, showing their wrinkles and other traces of time, they challenge the mainstreaming iconography, and propose new and unconventional images of older women. The photos they post online become a means of destigmatising ageing, and reinterpreting it as a normal and positive feature of the human life cycle. These posts represent a sort of invitation to their peers to break the age barrier. From this perspective, fashion can be seen in all respects as a central tool for empowerment (Fortunati, 2014; Gill, 2016) and Instagram as a way to normalise older bodies by increasing their visibility, showcasing a less stereotypical vision of mature women than that proposed by traditional media. Within this space, as revealed by the results of this study, mature influencers are producing an innovative discourse for women, the older people and the whole of society, contributing to a redefinition of social representations related to fashion, beauty and body.

In relation to *RQ1*, 'What kinds of content do older, female influencers elaborate to produce and convey their messages in a social media platform such Instagram?', the results showed that these women use both visual and textual communication, and this combination plays a pivotal role in spreading a positive message and contributing to a gradual shift in the common perception of ageing. Increasing the visibility of the older women in popular culture, they are revitalising fashion communication by introducing new elements into their discourse that are more political and more radically connected to social change (Caldeira et al., 2020). In fact, challenging the traditional fashion norms, they succeed in being of great support for the social and political development of an

alternative and free image of women at every age, for the reinforcement of their social identity, and for the strengthening of women's power in a wider sense. The content they propose and the outfits they suggest can be read as part of an assertion of value, a repudiation of invisibility and, more generally, as a challenge to the political status of older people. Proposing, as it does, an erosion of the restrictions that have traditionally limited the lives of older women, the work done by mature influencers can be interpreted as an invitation to be more visible and present in the public world, in order to affirm that that older women are still part of things.

In relation to *RQ2*, 'How do they change the structural relationship between age and fashion?', our data suggest that mature influencers, in their own small way, are trying to shatter stereotypes and subvert shop-worn notions of what 'old' looks and feels like. They are redefining cultural expectations of age and femininity and reinventing what it means to be an older woman. Their online feeds and narratives are inspiring for both younger and older generations. The former group would like to become like these women when they are older, while the latter would like to have the courage and strength to emulate them, and to be able to not feel invisible and ignore age as a barrier, as well as following their passions and have a fulfilling life.

The mature influencers are contributing to the deconstruction of the stigma of ageing, and modifying the common perception of later years, counteracting, through online platforms, the cultural exclusion traditionally associated with ageing. They offer an interesting opportunity to reflect on the ways in which ageing is experienced, understood, imagined and reconfigured under the impact of social and demographic changes.

The critical discourse that these women have opened through their blogs and social media accounts is not only quite central and meaningful, but also represents something that was missing in the landscape of both the feminist movement and the ageing movement (Calasanti and Slevin, 2006). Challenging negative age stereotypes, they are proposing, both visually and rhetorically, an image of older women capable of recovering freedom from outdated social roles. They are encouraging their followers to 'learn to look at women in new ways' (Meagher, 2014: 142). In the light of these considerations, in the future, researchers should investigate this phenomenon further and take into consideration the opportunity to enrich the research on mature influencers through in-depth interviews aimed at better understanding the relationship between clothing and identity, and at exploring the cultural values, the personal and professional goals, the motivations, aspirations and the digital literacy of these women. Moreover, there is also a need to expand this exploratory study by using a different sampling method in order to favour greater inclusiveness and broaden the findings. To overcome the limitations and possible bias associated with the sample-selection and to have a more heterogeneous sample, especially in terms of socio-demographic variables, it might be useful to identify further age-related hashtags. In the present work, of the 18 mature influencers who made up the final sample, 11 are based in the United States, 3 in United Kingdom, 1 in Canada, 1 in Ireland, 1 in Italy and 1 in Spain. Although geographic location was not a variable taken into consideration for this study, the decision to concentrate the research on content labelled with hashtags in English had the indirect effect of limiting the composition of the final sample, and therefore the consequent analysis, to Western culture, thereby focussing it on a context characterised by a set of

particular socio-economic and demographic characteristics. Given that this could affect the resulting social representations, and in view of further developments in this study, we believe it is also essential to be able to identify and include influencers from other contexts and cultural backgrounds. This ‘effort’ is pivotal not only to have a broader knowledge of the phenomenon under examination, but also to be able to effectively capture more fully the degree of innovation brought by these women, and to understand whether the use of online platforms is actually also contributing to the spread of more inclusive representations of ageing.

Finally, and in this vein, further study is needed to capture, from a critical perspective, the cultural impact of these new forms of visibility and the actual role that these new types of narratives about the ageing body and beauty produced by mature influencers will play in the near future. Considering that the lifestyle they convey is contingent on the possession of sufficient income and good health, both mental and physical, and that they carry what can appear to be signifiers of wealth and social standing (designer clothes, luxury bags, jewellery, professionally-styled hair, etc.), it is important to ask, What kind of women do they purport to represent? Who are they addressing? Who do they include or leave on the margins in terms of class, ethnicity or bodily shape? Can they be considered to all intents and purposes counter-hegemonic or, instead, viewed more closely, as often happens in similar phenomena, are they contributing to generating new forms of hegemony? As the visibility of these older women grows and the attention from the fashion world and associated industries increases, further research will be needed to answer these questions in depth.

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Notes

1. From that moment on, under the helm of the former editor, Alexandra Shulman, Vogue brought out an annual ‘Ageless Style’ issue, focused on fashion for the older women. It quickly grew to become one of the best-selling issues each year, whose release was ceased when Edward Enninful took over the reins of the magazine. Under his leadership, the first publication to address age can be spotted in the advertorial supplement of the May 2019 issue that featured Jane Fonda on the cover. The actual core of the magazine, however, continued and continues to limit images of older women. This may indicate the greater sensitivity of Shulman – a woman who was entering her 50s at the time – for whom the topic of ageless style was probably much more central than her predecessors and successor.
2. According to Cornwell and Katz (2021)

an influencer is a persona (related to a person, group of people, or organization) that possess greater than average potential to sway others in terms of thoughts, attitudes and

behaviours due to attributes of their communication frequency, persuasiveness, social network or other characteristics.

Actually, the idea that people respond positively to a product or service if someone popular talks about it dates back many decades (brands have often turned to celebrities to support their message and promote their image in advertisements, first in newspapers and later on also in television). However, the rise of influencer marketing is inextricably connected to social media platforms (i.e. Instagram). Through the expression of their passions, over time, certain contributors gain extended competencies in generating sophisticated content, rapidly attracting increasing numbers of engaged followers by successful self-presentation, and thus attaining popularity (McQuarrie et al., 2013). Among the most important characteristics of influencers are authenticity, trustworthiness, attractiveness, distinctiveness, expertise, popularity and contemporariness (Duffy and Wissinger, 2017).

3. According to Statista (2021), the 88 percent of Instagram influencers are thought to be under 34, with 54 percent aged between 25 and 34 years.
4. According to Öberg and Tornstam (1999) this phase can be conceptualised as an extended plateau of late middle years, which is only interrupted by the emergence of illness or serious disability. During this period there is a cultural continuity with earlier stages, strengthened by the common field of consumption. However, it must be emphasised that this new condition is far from universal. For many people outside a privileged milieu older age remains a period marked by a reduction in participation in various domains of social life, a decrease in income and an increase in health problems. Several older persons, whose pensions are insufficient to maintain a decent standard of living, face serious problems of survival. Some groups of people are most affected by poverty, loneliness and social exclusion than others. For example, poverty rates of older women tend to be higher than those of older men because of the so-called 'Pension Gender Gap' (AGE, 2019).
5. Nowadays, older people represent a growing part of the population and, for instance, over half of the EU-27's population is older than 43, on average (Eurostat, 2020). According to an extensive study conducted by the United Nations (2019), this growth is projected to accelerate in the coming decades, and it is expected that by 2050 there will be more than twice as many persons above 65 as children under 5. This will lead to significant social transformation during the 21st century, with challenges and implications for nearly all sectors including labour, the demand for goods and services, financial markets, transportation infrastructures and communication technologies.
6. A hashtag is a sort of keyword assigned by the user that may describe not only the visual content (Giannoulakis and Tsapatsoulis, 2016), but also ideas, feelings, and beliefs (Paparachissi, 2015). It aids in searching, but its adoption goes beyond the labelling of trackable elements, and can indicate participation in a hashtag-based community within the platform.
7. <https://www.advanced.style/>. For a more in-depth analysis on Ari Seth Cohen and the Advanced Style project, see Jermyn (2016).
8. Twigg (2013) pointed out how contemporary culture insistently advocates certain dress norms appropriate for the mature women (e.g. the avoidance of gaudy colours in favour of duller and sober ones) and how many of them accord with this view.
9. 'Authenticity' is a highly contested term (van Leeuwen, 2001). The way it is conceptualised has changed over time and is conditioned by the cultural contexts that drive human experience (Handler, 1986). In fact, the concept has developed and adapted to changing social values and technological innovation. While initially, in its earliest form, it was an ethical principle for leading our lives in a way that connects individuals to community, in the contemporary world it appears to be a strategy for creating and maintaining both a loyal readership

and commercial success (Gaden and Dumitrica, 2015). In sociology, authenticity refers primarily to self-presentation and conceptions of self, meaning ‘the feeling and practice of being true to one’s self or others’ (Vannini and Franzese, 2008: 1621). The concept can then be understood through attributes such as sincerity, genuineness, truthfulness and originality (for a more comprehensive review, see Molleda, 2010). Similar definitions have been provided by celebrity studies, from early work on stardom (e.g. Dyer, 1986) to work on reality television (e.g. Deller, 2016; Meyers, 2020) and Internet celebrity (e.g. Abidin, 2018; van Driel and Dumitrica, 2021). Numerous scholars have written on the relationships between social media personas and authenticity, and have analysed the ways in which social media influencers practice authenticity (e.g. Marwick and boyd, 2011). For example, Nguyen and Barbour (2017), focusing on selfies and the visual presentation, spoke of an ‘expressive authenticity’, while Pooley (2010), referring to the instrumental use of authenticity as means to appear more relatable, coined the phrase ‘calculated authenticity’. Maares, Banjac, and Hanusch (2020) analysing authenticity management strategies and the work done by influencers to generate a persona that is perceived as authentic by the audience, spoke of ‘authenticity work’, and, similarly, Duffy and Hund (2015), McRae (2017) and Long and Wilhoit (2018) conceptualised it as ‘authenticity labour’.

10. ‘These are the glamour grandmas you need to follow on Instagram’, Independent, 01 July 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/fashion/grandmas-instagram-fashion-social-media-style-a8417151.html>
11. ‘Meet Fashion’s Next Generation: Over 60s’, Business of Fashion, 13 April 2018, <https://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/luxury/meet-fashions-next-generation-senior-citizens>
12. Considering that market value of influencers depends mainly on their community and their ability to capture the attention of an audience, engagement rate can be defined as the currency of the social media marketing industry, which can be used to prove the loyalty of their community to potential advertisers. In general, the biggest challenge that users wishing to monetise their digital activity face is to be able to build social capital by attracting a sizable audience of followers and to be able to maintain their interest over time. Engagement rate is used to measure the level of interaction by followers with content created by a user and is often calculated by dividing the number of interactions (likes and comments) by the number of followers (Ouvrein et al., 2021). To calculate the engagement rate of the influencers of our sample (Table 1), we used the software provided by NotJustAnalytics (<https://business.notjustanalytics.com/>), which applies the following ranges to determine whether a certain profile is above or below average: between 10,000 and 100,000 followers: 2.4 percent; >100,000 followers: 1.7 percent.

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