Introduction: Gender, Age, and the New Media

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When people speak of "the digital divide," they usually refer to the ways in which the use of information and communication technologies differs between groups so that "the gap that exists between individuals advantaged by the internet and those individuals relatively disadvantaged by the internet" (Rogers 96). It is important to understand that the digital divide cannot only be linked to the availability of resources; rather, Cecilia Castaño argues that "the crucial factor is the ability of each individual to use innovations in function of their specific needs and interests" (Castaño). The significance of who uses the opportunities of the digital realm, the gap in knowledge, and the differences in who accesses the internet and who does not are also commonly associated with differences in chronological age. For this reason, the digital divide has, among others, been framed as a "grey digital divide" (Mubarak and Suomi 1), which indicates that it is predominantly the younger generations who actively use the so-called "new media." Data on social media, too, caters to a reading of the new media as being primarily used by younger people given that, in 2021, 84% of people aged 18-29 said they used at least one social media site, compared to 45% of people aged 65 and older ("Social Media Fact Sheet"). Accordingly, the understanding that older people are incapable to properly engage with the new media is common—considering, for instance, the subreddit /r/oldpeoplefacebook/ which is dedicated to sharing the misadventures of older family members in the digital realm ("Cracker Bargle").[1]

However, there also appears to be a clear upward trend regarding the participation of older adults, given that in 2016, only 35% of people aged 65 years and older said they used social media, compared to a mere

[1] When we refer to old age in this introduction, we are aware that we are dealing with a culturally specific concept. While according to public perception old age is often believed to begin at retirement age (Achenbaum 301), scholars of age studies regard age as a more fluid concept where a distinct line between old age and the rest of the lifecourse cannot be drawn (van Dyk 99; Velten 11).

7% in 2010 ("Social Media Fact Sheet"). In fact, research by the Goodman Group suggests that older people's engagement with new media can be beneficial: Video gaming, for instance, can aid cognitive stability for older adults (The Goodman Group). The intended benefits of video gaming, however, are highly age specific: While in younger generations, media use might be tied to entertainment, it tends to be framed as a contribution to older people's health. By focusing on health rather than on entertainment, such approaches to video gaming resonate with concepts of older age as tied to physical and cognitive decay.[2]

At the same time, research on the "digital gender gap" suggests that gender, too, presents an impacting factor on social media use. Reiko Kuroda remarks that women tend to have less access to digital technologies and warns that "[i]f the digital gender gap is not addressed, digital technologies may exacerbate gender inequalities rather than help to reduce them" (n.pag.). Using the internet, then, has social significance because it may reinforce existing inequalities and therefore impact social participation. Given this emphasis on the digital divide with reference to age and gender, it appears only fitting that in contrast to younger peers, older people, and older women in particular, tend to be framed as unfamiliar with the opportunities offered by the digital world. For instance, *The Guardian* reported in 2016 that "Google has thanked an 86-year-old British woman who proved old-fashioned manners have a place in the modern world when she typed 'please' and 'thank you' in an internet search" (Holmes, n.pag.). May Ashworth's polite interaction with Google's search engine is situationally comic because she treats the AI's algorithm in the way she would have interacted with a phone operator. Here, a gendered dimension might already become apparent: Whereas older men might be framed with reference to the "grumpy old man" stereotype,[3] Ashworth appears as the polite grandmother who remains reliant on someone else's help, although the world wide web may appear as a space where everyone can help themselves. Drawing from this intersection of age and gender, this special issue engages with stereotypical readings of the absence of (gendered) older people in the digital realm, on the one hand, and with increased interest in their presence, on the other.

[2] Margaret Morganroth Gullette, whose work will be discussed in more detail throughout the next pages, has famously criticized a reading that equals the experience of aging with decline, for further reference, see *Aged by Culture* (7).

[3] Attempts have been undertaken to underline the inaccuracy of the "grumpy old man" stereotype, for instance, *Medical Daily* titled "The Grumpy Old Man Stereotype Is a Lie: Trust Increases with Age, Improves Overall Well-Being" (Dovey), and a study conducted at Aarhus University "says the stereotype of the grumpy old man is a myth and borderline ageism" ("The Grumpy Old Man Isn't That Grumpy at All").

Before we can further engage with the presence and presentation of older people in the digital realm, however, it is vital to address what we mean by the new media in the first place. Clearly, the use of "new" is always relative to a given present, and, as Geoffrey B. Pingree and Lisa Gitelmann remind their readers, "[a]ll media were once 'new media'" (xi). Jessica Pressman, too, notes that the term "only has meaning in relation to 'old media,' and, of course, what is old is always also historically specific" (365). "New" thus also holds the promise of relating to what is current and Martin Lister et al. explain that "[c]alling a range of developments 'new,' which may or may not be new or even similar, is part of a powerful ideological movement and a narrative about progress in Western societies" (11). Referring to digital media as "new" already relates them to future developments, and, it can be argued, positions them in opposition to stereotypical readings of not only old media—but also of older people. Aside from a linguistic framing, a specific development is commonly linked to the "new" in new media: Terry Flew and Richard Fisher note that "[t]he concept of new media is integrally bound up with the history of the Internet and the Web" (6). The significance of the internet for the new media also becomes apparent in their being "digital, interactive, hypertextual, virtual, networked, and simulated" (Lister et al. 13).[4] This means that we encounter the new media as a multivaried field of digitally facilitated practices, which allows for both connections between users and for connections between created content and users. It is these forms of connection that the papers of this special issue discuss when they consider the ways in which age and gender appear as categories in video gaming, social media, influencerdom, and artificial intelligence.

The articles presented in this issue thus engage with the new media as a realm that allows older people to actively participate, on the one hand. On the other hand, the papers also address the fact that older users of the new media often face surprise or even shock because of this participation as the existence of the subreddit /r/oldpeoplefacebook/ already suggests. Clearly, the conception of "old people"—similar to the performance of gender—occurs within a specific cultural frame. Regarding the construction of age, components of being "old" intersect and influence one another reciprocally. Physically, "old" tends to be tied to illness or deteriorating health, as Margaret Morganroth Gullette underlines in her ground-breaking *Aged by Culture* (2004). She critically reflects on a metanarrative in which "aging equals decline" (7), an unsurprising notion given that Seneca already proclaimed that "old age is an incurable disease" (qtd. in Soren et al. 918). Socially, being old has

[4] For further reference on the history of the internet, see "Internet History and Culture" in Flew and Fisher's *New Media*.

been tied to exclusion, loneliness, and even insignificance.[5] It is important to note that "old," in contrast to "wise" or "experienced," is often associated with mental incapacity, unfitness, and need of assistance. "Old" age, then, also relies on cultural constructions and is socially embedded. Hereby, age can be understood as a relational category as Rüdiger Kunow suggests. He explains that old age is an attribution that produces actions and reactions because "[i]t always *takes two to age*, one person at a certain stage of his/her life course and (at least) one other person interacting with him/her in ways determined by the first person's age, real or presumed" (24; emphasis in original). Kunow's statement underlines that cultural processes interpret and evaluate the physical appearances commonly tied to older age such as grey hair or wrinkles. At the same time, Kunow's insistence on relations resonates with the significance of the new media for the discussion of gender *and* age given that both categories are positioned in relational nets of communication and behavior. Cultural age—in addition to chronological age—becomes a category that is intersectionally experienced: The experience of aging can thus not be disentangled from structural inequality and categories such as gender, sexuality, race, dis/ability and class.

By relating to these connections, this special issue aims to bring the intersectional experience of age to the fore and turns its attention towards the perceived opposition between "new" media and "old" people. The articles investigate how this supposed opposition is influenced by gender norms and stereotypes that are connected to both older age and the new media. The contributions trace the gendered presence of older people in different forms of the new media, and they are particularly interested in the framing, presentation, and self-representation of age, aging, and gender in digital spaces. Taken together, the special issue as a whole thus aims to contribute to the discussion of age and aging in correlation with gender in the popular realm. The interrelations between age and gender were already established by Susan Sontag in her "Double Standard of Aging" (1972) and further investigated in, for instance, Sally Chivers's *The Silvering Screen* (2011) or more recently in *Gender and Age/Aging in Popular Culture* edited by Nicole Haring, Roberta Maierhofer, and Barbara Ratzenböck (2023).[6] Given that stereotypically male behavior tends to

[5] Applying the metaphor of older age as the waiting room to death, suggested by Heike Hartung and Rüdiger Kunow (18), Julia Velten comments that "a waiting room is an isolated space, reserved for those in transition to somewhere" (24).

[6] Haring, Maierhofer, and Ratzenböck suggest that "[t]he interconnectedness between gender and age has been evident since the 1990s, where recognizing age as a social construct would not have been possible without the introduction of race, class, and gender as categories of analysis in the decades before" ("Introduction" 9). Therefore, aging intersects with a multitude of categories that could not be approached in any further detail in this special issue, prominently with race. For further reference on the

relate to physical presence, age can shape stereotypical readings of decline of masculine vigor and potency. Moreover, the double standard may also relate to sexuality, for instance, when favoring heteronormative ideals of grandparents over people on the LGBTQIA+ continuum.[7] Arguably, role-specific behavioral patterns are also informed by both age *and* gender. This intersection of both age- and gender-appropriate behavior is also prominently portrayed in pop-cultural engagements. In her discussion of female anger in *The Good Fight* (2023), Ella Fegitz emphasizes that representations of non-age-appropriate behavior have political potential and can offer narratives of self-empowerment. She argues that in breaking away from presenting older women as docile, the show is "offering female anger in older age as key to feminist engagement and political mobilization" (3). The intersection of older age and gender thus becomes apparent specifically when it comes to what is perceived as appropriate behavior. Accordingly, specific stereotypes prominently intersect age and gender and do not function without referring to both categories. Considering examples such as the cougar, the badass grandmother, the grumpy old man, or the MILF, it becomes apparent that the older body is still a gendered body.

This intersection of age and gender can also be traced in the new media and is illustrated within the following comment by Kim Kardashian. Kardashian, who has amassed 362 million followers on the social media platform *Instagram*, explained in an interview with *The New York Times*: "If you told me that I literally had to eat poop every single day and I would look younger, I might. I just might" (Strugatz). The newspaper's *Instagram* post that advertised the article was liked more that 164,000 times and commented on almost 7,000 times. Some commentators explained that Kardashian failed to look young, kubamichael, for instance, wonders, "[i]s it just me or does she look 41ish?" and tmerritt416 notes, "[t]his pic looks like a corpses [sic] skin." Others commented on the normative portrayal of women's aging that Kardashian promoted: "Absolutely sad! This discourse reforces [sic] the idea that say [sic] 'women don't have the right to age'. Please, @nytimes don't give voice, stage, lights to this words..." (fabicatarse). lissetbove states in a similar vein: "That's pathetic!!! we women must learn to appreciate ourselves as we are, and grow old gracefully, aging is part of human nature and for more surgeries or special products we cannot stop a natural process, but we can accept it and

intersection of race and age see Maria Zubair and Meriel Norris's "Perspectives on Ageing, Later Life and Ethnicity: Ageing Research in Ethnic Minority Contexts." For further reference on digital divide and race see Robert W. Fairlie's "Race and the Digital Divide."

[7] For further reference on the representation of queerness and aging see Linda Hess's *Queer Aging in North American Fiction.*

enjoy it as [sic] each stage." This example underlines three key concerns of this special issue. First, it illustrates the pervasive correlation of beauty, youth, and womanhood that Kardashian caters to. Her musings about eating feces suggest the pressure that staying "young" entails. Moreover, human excrement appears specifically taboo in connection with the cleanliness typically associated with femininity.[8] Yet, apparently, only one fate is worse for a woman than being related to feces: getting old. Second, it introduces the matter of who frames a narrative as a key component of discussions on social media: Although Kardashian is quoted, it is also *The New York Times* that is blamed for providing a platform for her comments on feminine aging. Third, it underlines that new media facilitate a kind of communication in which various opinions and stereotypes are aired, reproduced, and reinforced regardless of whether they are harmful or painful. In the case of Kardashian, signs of aging are still read as a sign of decay (Kardashian is literally described as a corpse), on the one hand, whereas calls for the misogynist potential of such claims are uttered, on the other hand. This notion is particularly interesting as Kardashian does not specifically refer to herself as a woman—rather, Sontag's double standard of aging is implied without a need for her to comment on her gendered identity. Here, the relational nature of gender and age is revealed: it does not only take two to age (cf. Kunow 24), the ways in which people age are additionally configured by one's gender identity.

Whereas in the example of Kardashian, a new media celebrity's aversion to aging is cause for debate, the trend of older people participating in the new media also opens up a new market, in which older people become a target audience for digital technologies. One prominent example is robotic and AI care work, which allows for new forms of human-machine-interactions as Benjamin Lipp shows in "Caring for Robots: How Care Comes to Matter in Human-Machine Interfacing." Here, Lipp shifts perspectives and suggests that care robots not only administer care but also receive care from humans, thus, care is reconceptualized as being reciprocal in nature. *The Guardian* even titled in 2021 that "The Future of Elder Care Is Here – And It's Artificial Intelligence" (Corbyn). The significance of the topic—and its possible pitfalls—is further underlined by a WHO Policy Brief titled "Agism in Artificial Intelligence for Health" issued in 2022 (World Health Organization). The brief not only outlines that AI can be informed by existing forms of agism and even inspire it, a notion against which they

[8] *The York Times*, for instance, titled in 2019: "Women Poop. Sometimes At Work. Get Over It.," and it quoted Nicholas Haslam, who referred to gendered difference: "At one level it's an association of women with purity. […] At another it's a double standard applied to hygiene and civility, where the weight falls disproportionately on women to be clean, odorless and groomed" (Bennett and McCall).

propose eight countermeasures, which range from active participation of older people in AI development to the investment in digital literacy in older people and their caregivers (Stypińska and Franke). The fact that digital health care for older people holds a prominent share of the market is also visible in the gaming industry. For instance, in 2005 Nintendo released *Brain Age: Train Your Brain in Minutes a Day!* The game focuses on short puzzles and riddles and evaluates the user's "Brain Age Score" according to their performance ("Dr Kawashima's Brain Training"). It is interesting to note that in this scoring, better performance equals a younger "Brain Age Score." Even though, as Elizabeth M. Zelinski and Ricardo Reyes emphasize, the game "has been marketed to older adults as a game that improves cognition" (232), the aim is to retain a highly functioning brain, which is read as a "young" brain. While the success of *Brain Age* illustrates a growing engagement of older adults with digital media, it might also point towards still-existing ties between technology and youthfulness: by playing the video game, older adults may make their brain—and in extension themselves—younger again. Here, engaging with new media, and video games in particular, is granted medical significance as the older user remains cognitively able and, if they play the game enough, can keep up with younger users. It is thus no coincidence that several studies have investigated connections between video gaming and cognitive ability in older adults.[9]

The new media, it becomes apparent, present vital and fertile grounds for discussions of age, aging, and gender. This special issue not only draws attention to the presence and staging of older people or fictional characters in the digital realm, the included articles also navigate how stereotypes of being "old" are reaffirmed, facilitated, and deconstructed by the possibilities offered by the new media. Hereby, this special issue contributes to and draws from a variety of fields, such as gender studies, aging studies, disability studies, gaming studies, and the sociology of aging. Finally, by reinserting the (self-)representation of older people in new media into the scholarly discussion, this issue emphasizes the variety of narratives that comprise the intersection of age and gender in the digital age.

This special issue of *gender forum* is comprised of four contributions that trace the presence and staging of older gendered bodies in new media. First, Cecilia Colloseus investigates artificial intelligence as the underlying staple of many forms of engagement with new media. Specifically, she traces the narrative framing of AI and discusses it in

[9] For an overview of studies conducted on video gaming and health benefits for older adults see Amanda K. Hall et al.'s "Health Benefits of Digital Videogames for Older Adults: A Systematic Review of the Literature."

relation to one specific metanarrative: the trickster tale. Hereby, she illustrates not only the processes of meaning-making that shape approaches to AI, she also draws specific attention to AI's tricks themselves, tricks that often refer back to the neglect of specific groups, often defined by gender and age. By engaging with the trickster narrative, Colloseus also proposes its potential as a subversive force that may just be employed by those who have been disenfranchised.

Whereas Colloseus emphasizes the absence of older adults, specifically women, in the production of the technologies designed to help them, Amina A. Touzos's contribution focuses on the presence of an aged fictional character in video games. Her close reading of Geralt of Rivia of CD Projekt's *The Witcher* series (2007-2015) sheds light on the presentation of masculine aging in video games. By relating to age studies, disability studies, and gaming studies, Touzos investigates Geralt's staging as a "silver fox" and his move towards a patriarchal role. Hereby, she also traces the question of what she perceives as the character's "super-abled hypermasculine aging body" and the player's role in performing said body themselves.

Ruth Gehrmann's article on the staging of grandparents on social media ties into this presentation of aged bodies in the new media. By focusing on three case studies from the UK and the United States, she illustrates that the role of the grandparent tends to hinge on gendered readings. At the same time, she wonders how these digital grandparents cater to stereotypical readings of their role while also offering the possibility to erode clichéd readings. The matter of staging thus becomes a focal point, and the article wonders who performs grandparenthood online: the grandparents or their grandchildren?

Finally, Mita Banerjee's discussion of Baddie Winkle adds another aspect to the intersection of gender, age, and the new media: analyzing the granfluencer's role and her framing as sexually desirable in particular, Banerjee also investigates the possibilities of (self-)representation of older women in the digital realm. She speaks of the "aging grotesque" and thus underlines the sensationalist potential that lies at the core of Winkle's performance of both gender and age.

The different foci of the presented articles illustrate the multitude of discussions that the new media trigger with regard to gender and age. Hereby, they suggest the potential of the new media to popularize, challenge, cement, or even circumvent stereotypical readings of the gendered aging body.

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