The Digital Granny: Staging Grandparents on Social Media

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Abstract

This article engages with the framing and performance of grandparenthood on social media and specifically discusses the intersection of the role of grandparent and gender. It thus takes into account that even though the internet tends to be read as a realm for younger generations, the new media and social media in particular play a prominent role in the lives of older people. Hereby, this article wonders how being a grandparent, a role that is commonly associated with the non-digital and the domestic and that tends to be approached with binary gender norms, can be performed in the digital realm. By focusing on three case studies from the U.S. and the UK—"Grandad Joe" Allington, Ross Smith and his grandmother Pauline "Granny" Kana, and Trisha "YourFitGrandma" Goldsmith—this contribution follows the presence of grandparents on social media, prominently *TikTok* and *Instagram*. While these successful accounts illustrate the presence of older generations in the digital realm, the discussion suggests that their staging still relies on referencing well-known gendered stereotypes of older people in general and grandparents in particular. Moreover, the discussion emphasizes the pivotal role of both younger audiences and grandchildren in the staging of grandparents and thus also resonates with the matter of authorship on social media.

Grandparents and the New Media

Age studies have emphasized that the category "age" is a fluid, situational, and flexible form of differentiation and that a clear distinction between "old" and "young" seems not only simplistic but is, in fact, impossible.[1] With reference to this fluid nature, Anita Wohlmann, for instance, wonders whether we should "rather speak of a spectrum, in which the markers of young and old are flexible and situational" (15). Still, specific social roles elicit particular readings of advanced age, and being a grandparent in particular will commonly be equaled with being "old": grandparenthood implies generational difference to one's grandchildren and thus always entails the relative dimension of "older than." This notion of generational difference between grandparent and grandchild also becomes apparent in the new media. Here, grandparents are commonly framed as needing their children's or grandchildren's help. For instance, the nonprofit organization *Savvy Cyber Kids* notes on its website that "[w]hile technology often brings us together, it can also drive us, generationally, apart. The challenge of getting tech advice from your children and grandchildren can sometimes result in family moments best forgotten" (Savvy Cyber Kids). Here, technology is presented as a divisive factor separating generations and, in effect, grandparents and grandchildren. Fittingly, in 2017 the online edition of the *Daily Mail* presented "[t]he hilarious blunders that prove grandparents and technology DON'T mix—from using an iPad as a chopping board to watching TV with binoculars" (Gurkan). This piece ties grandparents to an outdated past, and it presents them as being unfamiliar with the processes of the digital world.[2] Hereby, the digital realm is framed as a space in which grandparents—with their focus on the concrete, domestic, and personal—have no place. This notion is particularly harmful given that "greater exposure to ageism is generally related to less use of the internet and [given] that notable gender differences exist": especially "older women" are cast as being "more susceptible to the impacts of internalized negative age stereotypes than older men" (Choi et al. 1219, 1220). Being deemed too old for technology may therefore contribute to less involvement of older people—specifically women—in the digital realm.

Despite dynamics that push older people away from new and digital technologies, such technologies have also become a basic amenity for

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[2] For further reference on the role of ageism in internet use, see Carol C. McDonough's "The Effect of Ageism on the Digital Divide Among Older Adults."

older people and have "increasingly immersed into the daily lives of people as they grow older and have become significant to identities, life-styles and social networks of people in mid-to-later life" (Peine et al. 1), a development that also inspired the field of socio-gerontechnology.[3] Social media in particular gained significance during the COVID-19 pandemic and its quarantines and lockdowns by allowing groups that were deemed specifically vulnerable, such as people over 50 years of age, to stay in contact with loved ones (Sixsmith et al. 22).[4] Although the internet still tends to be perceived as a realm for younger generations—as the example of *Savvy Cyber Kids* underlines—social media actually plays a prominent role in the lives of older generations.

Despite this role of technology, a certain tension becomes apparent between the digital realm and the role of grandparents because grandparents are commonly associated with the non-digital and the domestic. Examining this tension, I want to engage with the framing and performance of grandparenthood on social media, discussing the intersection of social constructions of old(er) age and gender. In doing so, I also investigate the intergenerational ties suggested in the gendered role and ask who is staging—and thus "doing"[5]—grandparenthood in the context of the new media: the grandparent or the grandchild.

Before entering the digital realm, it is useful to first discuss the role of the grandparent and its ties to gender and sexuality. As already noted, *being* a grandparent coincides with taking on the *role* of grandparent, a role which might take a variety of forms, ranging from mentor to surrogate parent.[6] As Nancy A. Orel and Christine A. Fruhauf underline, research in grandparents has changed drastically in the last fifty years. Current readings have shifted away from 1950s' views of grandparents, which presented them as "a source of wisdom, strength, and stability," and suggested that "grandparents benefited from the high status and prestige that the role of grandparent was given" (Orel and Fruhauf 179). Instead of perpetuating such generalizations, new studies tend to "provide

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[3] Within the field of socio-gerontechnology, Alexander Peine et al. seek "to develop more empirically grounded theoretical understandings of the constitution of ageing as intertwined with the use and design of technology, including digital technologies" (1). For further reference, see their "Socio-Gerontechnology: Key Themes, Future Agendas."

[4] The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) notes that "[o]lder adults (especially those aged 50 years and older) are more likely than younger people to get very sick from COVID-19. The risk increases with age."

[5] I employ the term "doing" with reference to Klaus R. Schroeter's "doing age" which (in recourse to Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman's "doing gender") he ties to "the social performance, corporal presentation and staging" of aging (159, my translation).

[6] For an overview of scholarly research on the roles of grandparents, see Orel and Fruhauf (179-80).

insights into the continued diversity of grandparenthood" (180). Nevertheless, heteronormative and binary gender norms persist in approaches to grandparenthood. As Orel and Fruhauf assert, "American society seems to deliver the most criticism, oppression, and intolerance to LGBT individuals who attempt to assume the roles that historically have been identified as key 'family' milestones that only heterosexual individuals and couples experience" (180). Grandparenthood appears as such a "milestone" that tends to be approached with expectations concerning gender and sexuality. The significance of gendered readings of grandparenthood also becomes apparent in studies suggesting a tendency of grandchildren to prefer maternal grandparents—and maternal grandmothers in particular—to other grandparents.[7] Indeed, these studies suggest that readings of grandparenthood also relate to understandings of the family as based on heterosexuality and binary gender norms. Linda Hess notes that "[i]n the second decade of the twenty-first century *growing old*, *aging*, and *old age* are still principally imagined in heteronormative terms" (2; emphasis in original). In a related manner, grandparents tend to appear in the form of heterosexual (married) couples and as clearly gendered grand*mothers* and grand*fathers* in the pop-cultural sphere.

Bringing the relatively "young" realm of social media[8] and the gendered role of grandparents into conversation, it is vital to consider older people's representation on social media. Prominently, so-called "grandfluencers" or "granfluencers" have vast followings.[9] "The Old Gays," for instance, have gained more than 8.5 million followers on *TikTok* (@oldgays); and have been covered in *The New York Times*. Here, Charley Locke explains that "while these senior influencers may very much be performing for the camera they're also sharing a new vision for what it means to live meaningfully with age" (n. p.). By gaining recognition as influencers on social media, they not only participate in the world beyond the domestic realm, they also showcase a performed reality

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[7] Ann R. Eisenberg even claimed in 1988 that "[t]he results suggest that the gender of the grandparent can be more important than proximity in determining the quality of grandchild-grandparent relationships" (205), see also Judith Semon Dubas for a reference to the preference of the maternal lineage.

[8] Numbers suggest the dominance of younger generations on social media. For instance, "[a]s of 2021, *TikTok* had a total of 78.7 million users in the United States. Around 37.3 million of these users belonged to Generation Z" (Ceci), while *Instagram* had amassed 1.21 billion users worldwide in the same year, with more than two thirds aged 34 and younger and only 2.1% aged over 65 years (Dixon).

[9] Mita Banerjee's article in this special issue further discusses the significance of granfluencers by focusing on the age performance of Baddie Winkle.

beyond old age as decay.[10] This access to a world typically associated with those deemed young allows older people to be part of many conversations that might otherwise remain off-limits. As empowering as it may seem, this sentiment also suggests that the digital realm needs to be accessed and understood in order to showcase that life can be "meaningful" in older age. In contrast, absence from the digital realm may signify the opposite. Access to and participation in social media thus hold normative potential for "doing age" successfully. This notion resonates with the concept of "Successful Aging" as developed by John W. Rowe and Robert L. Kahn.[11] Even though the concept aims to reframe older life as a time to look forward to, it also risks excluding anyone who might not be deemed a "best ager." In this regard, social media presents an arena in which successful aging can be performed: without said performance, older age runs the risk of not appearing "meaningful" in its own right.

Exploring this interplay of gender norms, access to social media, and the performance of grandparenthood, I engage with three case studies of grandparents from the UK and the United States who are active on social media, and I discuss the gendered staging of grandparenthood. Of course, the presence of grandparents on social media cannot be reduced to the examples discussed here as there are numerous accounts, several of which amass millions of followers.[12] There are overlaps between granfluencers and the grandparents I discuss here, yet I have chosen my case studies based on the prominence of the performance of grandparenthood. In other words, the accounts discussed all focus on being a grandparent as the decisive factor in their presentation on social media. I refer to this presentation as a form of "staging" to underline the artistic process that is at play in this performance of grandparenthood. Hereby, tensions arise between the "ethics of authenticity" (Wellman et al. 69) common to social media and the observation lent from theater studies that "[b]y its very nature, a staging organizes, filters, abstracts and extracts from reality" (Pavis 1).

Tracing the staging and prevalence of gendered stereotyping of grandparents on social media, this article focuses on "Grandad Joe" Allington, Ross Smith and his grandmother Pauline "Granny" Kana, and

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[10] The cultural dominant narrative of older age as decline has been famously discussed and opposed by Margaret Morganroth Gullette, for further reference see *Aged by Culture*.

[11] According to Rowe and Kahn, aging successfully entails "low probability of disease and disease-related disability, high cognitive and physical functional capacity, and active engagement with life" (433).

[12] The relevance of grandparents on social media also shows in their discussion in the public realm, for instance, in articles such as "Grandparent Influencers with Feeds Full of Wisdom" on *Izea*, or "Top 9 Badass Grandmas on *Instagram*" (Aguilar).

Tricia "YourFitGrandma" Goldsmith, three grandparents who have amassed a considerable following on the video-sharing platform *TikTok*.[13] Their accounts showcase a vast range of age and gender performances in the digital realm, both by deliberately questioning assumptions about older age and by playing into stereotypical readings. By analyzing these performances of grandparenthood, this article emphasizes the often-overlooked presence of grandparents on social media, and it underlines a key difference in framings of "old" and "grandparent": the presence or absence of grandchildren. Inquiring into the role of grandparents and their gendered representation also resonates with the intersection of autobiographical narratives and (co-)authorship. Mita Banerjee and Julia Velten have underlined the complexities of authorship in cases of centenarians' autobiographies and explain that "[t]he possible loss of narrative authority may be compensated by the fact that the life story of a centenarian would otherwise not have been written in the first place" (2; emphasis in original). Grandchildren may thus enable their grandparents to be staged in the digital realm, however, their involvement complicates notions of authorship and readings of gendered self-representation and -actualization.

Whose POV? Staging grandadjoe1933

The fact that Joe Allington from Birmingham, England, is a grandfather is the most fundamental feature of his *TikTok* profile, which is fittingly named "grandadjoe1933." The account's title emphasizes two aspects: Alington is a grandparent and, given his birth in 1933, can be considered as being of advanced age. As of early 2024, "Grandad Joe" is followed by more than 7 million accounts[14] who watch clips featuring Allington, his daughters, and most prominently, his granddaughter. Aside from presenting their close bond and occasional mild-natured pranks, the account also reflects on the loss of Allington's wife ten years ago. Staged in the familial setting, the account presents Allington as a friendly patriarch, a position in which gender and familial roles inform each other. The reading of Allington as a patriarch is posited in a "Creator Spotlight" (2020) on *TikTok,* which suggests:

> We love to see families coming together on TikTok and there's no greater patriarch then [sic] @grandadjoe1933. With a little help from his loving granddaughters, Grandad Joe creates 'wholesome family content' for his 2.4 million TikTok followers to enjoy.

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[13] For further reference on the development of *TikTok*, its formats, and first insights into its psychological impact, see Montag et al.

[14] By February 2024, grandadjoe1933 has amassed 773,000 followers on *Instagram* and 6,6 million followers on *TikTok*.

Because Allington is presented as the family's head, a certain control over his account's content is implied. This role may relate to masculine readings of the patriarch, yet his presentation also resonates with a shift in the role of grandfather. Ann Buchanan and Anna Rotkirch constitute:

> In traditional societies, grandfathers are often seen as the head of the male lineage, a figure of authority and a transmitter of cultural values. This is now being complemented by the image of the grandfather as a softer and more caring figure. (4)

While the "Spotlight" comments that "Grandad Joe" holds the role of the patriarch, the shift towards the grandfather as a provider of care and as an active participant in his grandchildren's lives also informs his online presence. Moreover, the "Spotlight" also points to the support "Grandad Joe" receives from his children. I want to further investigate this interplay of Allington as the head of the family, on the one hand, and as being staged by his family, on the other, in so doing, I draw particular attention to the ambiguous authorship of grandadjoe1933.

Allington's online presence attempts to draw attention to issues pertaining prominently to older generations, a fact that shows especially in the account's engagement with the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing lockdown. The pandemic contributed to an increased interest in older people,[15] and it is no coincidence that hundreds of thousands of viewers followed Allington looking at empty shelves in the supermarket (Grandadjoe [@grandadjoe1933], "I've had to repost"). While such shortages may have been experienced by many, Allington's age presents him as specifically vulnerable, as one of the more than fifty thousand comments exemplifies: "Its the older generations i feel the worst i did this older ladies shopping today (i think she was 91) and i couldnt get anything and went to 3 stores [sic]" (Tc Demon). Grandad Joe becomes the face for the experience of these "older generations" and his vulnerability is prominently displayed – despite the fact that he does not wear a mask at the supermarket. As Timothy Armoo, who works in the marketing of influencers, explains in 2020: "Right now, people are checking up on their grandparents and quite a lot of video content is going out with people taking care of their grandparents. Grandad Joe is pretty much the perfect embodiment of it" ("Coronavirus").

Another central aspect of the pandemic, namely social distancing, was also narrativized in a video featuring Allington. In March 2020 and on the peak of the lockdown, a video features Allington secluded from his

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[15] Despite this emphasis on vulnerability, however, it is noteworthy that the treatment of older people during the pandemic, specifically regarding the conditions in state-run care facilities, has found harsh criticism, with Margareth Morganroth Gullette speaking of an "American Eldercide."

family. The eleven seconds-long clip consists of three frames and subtitles. It first shows Allington waving from his window; then, a shot of a young person waving back with a child in a stroller; and finally Allington alone in his room, sitting visibly distraught, head bowed down, hiding his face as if crying (Grandadjoe (@grandadjoe1933), "I miss seeing all my family").[16] The video is accompanied by Harry Styles's "Falling" (2020). The lyrics "[w]hat am I now […] I'm falling again" lend themselves to the video's somber tone. The video portrays the lived experience of an older man in isolation—social distancing is addressed alongside a lack of otherwise regular intergenerational contact. The video resonated with viewers, who commented: "Can I give U a virtual hug?" (Beth), or who referred to their own grandparents, worrying that they might be sharing Grandpa Joe's experience. This response suggests, first of all, that grandparents have come into the social media spotlight during the pandemic as their status of "older than" and their relationship to family members emphasized their special vulnerability but, one might argue, also their value.[17] Second, most comments are posted by members of younger generations, generations perceiving Joe as a grandfather rather than as a peer.

While Grandad Joe's staging is shaped by the first-person narrative in the captions of his posts, which allows for a portrayal of him at the intersection of masculinity and fragility, the video's filmic composition reveals the involvement of others in the artistic process. At first glance, the video's subtitles introduce a first-person narrator, who the audience assumes to be Allington himself. The clip's point of view is important given that Allington seemingly reveals a hidden truth: the loneliness and despair the grandfather hides from his loved ones. In the first frame, the clip alludes to Allington's role as the head of the family: waving to his family, he cannot let them see his sadness. The expressed desire to hide emotions—he has to "[put] on a brave face," as the subtitles of the clip remind the viewer—follows gendered readings of his role. By hiding his emotions, the grandfather aligns with Paul Ekman's reading of "display rules" which are "overlearned habits about who can show what emotion to whom and when they can show it. Examples of display rules in many

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[16] Link for quick access: www.tiktok.com/@grandadjoe1933/video/6809337166704037125?is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1

[17] The loss of parents and grandparents experienced by their descendants has been discussed in the public realm, *CNN*, for instance, explained in 2021 that "Covid-19 has taken the parents or grandparents of 140,000 US children, and minorities were hit harder" (Fox). The topic has also found critical attention, see Hillis et al. for further reference. The probability to experience the loss of a caregiver is tied to race as "[r]ates of COVID-19–associated death of parents and grandparent caregivers were higher for all racial and ethnic groups than for White children" (Hillis et al. 5).

Western cultures are: males should not cry; females (except in a maternal role) should not show anger" (320). The video alludes to this gendered presentation of emotions by offering a second frame and the seemingly hidden perspective of Grandad Joe alone in his bedroom. This second frame in which the lonely grandfather holds his head undercuts the performance in front of his family. In offering these divergent perspectives, the video suggests that the brave face he shows his family is a performance, whereas the loneliness he experiences in his bedroom is not.

This narrative of hidden emotional turmoil only functions within the framework of the first-person narrative: In order to show that Grandad Joe can—according to masculine tropes—only express his emotions in solitude, he has to be alone. This narrative, however, is opposed by the presence of the person who is actually holding the camera. Given that the video not only presents different angles but a slightly unsteady framing, it can be derived that someone else is filming, which indicates that the "isolated" grandfather is, in fact, not alone. Hereby, the video reveals a key aspect of grandadjoe1933: the account is very much a team effort. Who this team is, who is holding the camera, and who is responsible for editing the material needs to remain opaque given that the video's effect relies on the grandfather's seemingly hidden perspective. Following the logic of the video, he would present his experience of loneliness to his loved ones via the tool of social media rather than during their visit.

The presence of someone filming and selecting the material, then, needs to be dismissed in order to allow for the video's appeal to work, namely the presentation of the private—the fact that the viewer gets to see the grandfather cry. This claim of authenticity is central to the presentation of lifestyle content on social media. Mariah L. Wellman et al. explain that influencers

> rely on an *ethics of authenticity* when navigating difficult choices about which commercial brands to work with, what type of content to produce, how to disclose financial relationships to audiences, and whether to obscure practices that might otherwise damage their personal brands. (69; emphasis in original)

Although Wellmann et al. here speak about the intersection of social media and the tourism sector, the principle of authenticity also applies to the staging of digital grandparents: if the content on social media appears to be the direct and unedited lived experience of grandparents, the matter

of authorship, and in extension agency, becomes crucial[18]: While the presence of grandparents on social media might work against the absence of older people in the digital realm, their external staging runs the risk of turning them into props displayed on their own accounts.

This tension is further underlined in an interview with *BBC* in which Allington explains that "he has little-to-no involvement in the videos he posts" ("Coronavirus"). Allington's lack of creative participation counteracts the staging of Grandad Joe, which deliberately opts for the grandfather's voice. Allington furthermore explains: "I quite enjoy being made up, dressed up, and made a fool of. Wendy says: 'Dad, we're doing TikTok, we're doing this today.' Then I just do as I'm told. I'm very obedient, you know" ("Coronavirus"). While Allington's comment is clearly tongue-in-cheek, his statements still reveal an interesting dynamic in his online presence, one in which he is a prop in a production rather than its author. Yet, the responses of viewers, who mainly refer to how their own grandparents might be feeling, illustrate social media's claim to authenticity: in order for the story to be emotionally persuasive, the grandfather needs to be accepted as the narrative's author.

The online presence "grandadjoe1933," then, offers valuable insights into the representation of grandparents on social media and contributes to understandings of the gendering of their role. First, the account's content shows that the matter of authorship is complicated when it comes to the presentation of the first-person narrative of a grandfather who apparently remains uninvolved in the artistic process. Second, the suggested authenticity of Allington's experience as the isolated grandfather also shapes his gendered role as grandfather. Rather than staging his own loneliness, the discussed video frames Allington's struggle in alignment with gendered tropes, prominently, the revelation of his emotional distress resonates with existing stereotypes of "hard shell, soft core" when it comes to masculinity and emotions. This reading is also perpetuated by several commentators urging Allington to remain "strong" (Jess) while another calls him "soldier" (Movie moments). At the same time, the staging of Grandad Joe positions a grandfather in close relational and familial ties and narrativizes that isolation causes emotional distress in an older man. It becomes apparent that the role of grandfather, and, in effect, its staging in the digital realm, is subject to change. While Allington may be read as a "patriarch" in the *TikTok* "Spotlight", his presentation also indicates that "[t]he expanding roles of masculine behaviour are also broadening the role of what a grandfather can do"

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[18] In "Women Growing Older: Agency, Ethnicity and Culture," Sharon Wray frames agency in the following way: "It is defined as the ever-present possibility of individuals to act in a way that generates feelings of power and control, it is not something that people either do or do not possess" (514).

(Buchanan and Rotkirch 4). Grandad Joe might not be crying alone in his room, but he is nevertheless presented as crying.

The Misfit Granny: Ross Smith and Pauline Kana

While the framing of "Grandad Joe" emphasizes the familial bonds to his (grand-)daughters and presents him as a good-natured, at times even emotional, head of the family, Ross Smith and his grandmother Pauline "Granny" Kana tend to choose a different approach when performing their grandparent-grandchild-relationship. The U.S. American Ross Smith has amassed more than 23 million followers on *TikTok*, where he prominently features his grandmother, who was born in 1926. It is interesting to note that the account hosts Kana as part of a group whose bodies are deliberately used for comic effect. For instance, in a clip titled "Implant versus Car Tire," a model with large breast implants mourns for an implant that has been run over by a car (Smith, "Implant"); in "The real reason your headphones get tangled 💀", Kana places her headphones in her pocket, after which Sam Replogle and John Ferguson, two comedians with dwarfism, are shown entangling them (Smith, "The Real Reason"). The grandmother, then, is part of this comedic ensemble and helps her grandson to challenge notions of deviance from expected norms.

In contrast to "Grandad Joe," Smith presents his grandmother in his own account. The uploaded content is obviously styled, and rather than relying on ethics of authenticity, it mainly presents short sketches. When Smith hangs a poster of a naked man in his grandmother's bedroom ("The greatest Present"), or shows her tugged into a penis-shaped blanket ("Granny got a new blanket 😂"), he challenges stereotypical readings of older women as "both sexually inactive and sexually uninterested" (Payne and Whittington 492). Even more, by showcasing his cursing grandmother ("Bad luck 😫"), he pushes boundaries of age-appropriate behavior and frames Kana as deviant from expected readings of grandmotherhood.[19] Fittingly, "Granny" is not presented as specifically vulnerable to the COVID-19 pandemic; instead, she is shown with a flamethrower, scorching a model of the Virus, looking straight into the camera and exclaiming, "It's time to die, Corona" ("This is how granny is going to end corona"). The grandmother is depicted as an action hero, engaging in combat first-hand. Here, as elsewhere in Smith's uploads, the

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[19] The significance of age-appropriate behavior was already suggested by Vivian Wood in 1971, and Hanne Laceulle explains in a 2018 article: "Late modern individuals seem to be drawn into a compulsive demand to engage with lifestyles that are in fact largely prescribed by the structural dynamics of late modern systems, for instance an economic system characterized by deregulation" (42).

staged nature of the video is obvious and enables the effect of humorous opposition. Holding a flamethrower, Kana does not yield to readings of the "rocker-bound granny" (Payne and Whittington 494). The background music of Alicia Keys's "Girl on Fire" adds an ironic layer to the clip because Kana is clearly no girl anymore. As a tongue-in-cheek comment, the video thus offers an alternate image of the older generation in times of corona: rather than lamenting their loneliness, it presents them as agents in the fight against the virus, albeit humorously. Hereby, Smith's framing of Kana not only counteracts conventional representations of older age as tragic and imperiled, but specifically of older womanhood as passive, docile, or lacking agency.

In Smith's videos, the subversive potential of the role "Granny" is revealed: the conventional sweetness that is tied to the role of grandmother is placed at odds with Kana's fierce stance against an outside threat. This notion of fierceness is repeatedly emphasized in the presented content, prominently so when the grandmother visits a body builder convention, speaking harshly to able-bodied and tattooed younger people (Smith, "Grandma messes").[20] In the video that features Granny as she interacts with a well-muscled younger man, as in many others, Kana's comments are humorous especially because they are uttered by an older woman, whose slender appearance and gray hair might suggest vulnerability and need of protection. The physical difference between a body builder and a grandmother is particularly striking given the shift in power, which presents the older woman in control of the conversation. The instance depicted above (Fig. 2) draws attention to the boundary-crossing of an older woman inquiring into the (assumed) sexual prowess of a younger man as Kana comments: "Small muscles / I wonder what else is small." Moreover, Granny's stance shifts perspectives on the able-bodied aesthetics of body building: by commenting on the contender's toned body in terms of its possible shortcomings, its fitness is revealed to be part of a performance, too. Similar to the grandmother who is rude, self-confident, and engages with society beyond her domestic sphere, images of the stereotypical body builder are abandoned: in Kana's interrogation able-bodiedness is questioned alongside hegemonic understandings of (heroic) masculinity.

Yet, particularly in instances in which powerful younger men are addressed, a gendered reading points towards the trope that strong men are tame when encountering their own grandmothers. At the same time, Kana's behavior also corresponds with readings of older women who

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[20] Link for quick access:
www.tiktok.com/@rosssmith/video/6963760823231696134?is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1&lang=de-DE

appear prickly or unruly, a characteristic that has historically been applied to older women speaking or behaving in ways that society might deem unfit for their age and gender. In its prickliness, Kana's performance resonates with pop cultural readings of the "Badass Grandma," used, for instance, in the list "Badass Grandmas in TV and Movies" by *Entertainment Weekly*. In the online article, a staff member explains: "Forget the stereotype of an apron-clad grandma baking cookies and playing Bingo—today's grandmas are looking for a little more excitement!" (EW Staff). Even though Kana's performance may play with notions of deviance from societal norms, then, it also ties into pop cultural representation of unruly grandmothers. While the clip thus presents a playful approach to the matter of age and affirms an older woman's right to taking a self-confident stance, it also draws from stereotypical readings of older women as unruly subjects.

Aside from navigating gendered conceptions of age-appropriateness in such interactions, Smith's account prominently stages the grandmother in a series of clips titled "Grandma's Self Defense Class" in which Kana secures her house in a manner deliberately referring to the iconic *Home Alone* franchise (1990-). Similar to the 8-year-old Kevin, who defends his home against wicked but clumsy burglars, Kana is shown toppling over cans of marbles or securing her hallway with an array of mouse traps. While Kana explains how to secure one's house in this fashion, the viewer follows the stereotyped burglar, who is broad-chested, shirtless, and wears striped pants and a hat when being caught in her traps (Smith, "Grandma's Self Defense").[21] The clip's humorous potential majorly derives from the playful engagement with pre-existing cultural ideas about old age: staging the grandmother alone in her house resonates with an understanding of single older women as particularly vulnerable to burglary or fraud, for instance to the grandparent scam, in which older people are tricked into offering financial support to someone posing as a grandchild.[22] In Smith's version, heteronormative readings of the grandmother as needing the protection of a presumably physically stronger and more capable husband are subverted: Kana is neither staged as vulnerable nor as being at the mercy of the intruder. Instead, by showcasing the grandmother as capable of securing her own home, the video plays with the notion of domesticity associated with grandmotherhood and reinterprets the domestic grandmother as a grandmother who is able to defend herself. Furthermore, by referring to *Home Alone*, Kana's role evokes that of the protagonist Kevin, namely

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[21] Link for quick access:
https://www.tiktok.com/@rosssmith/video/6861716954525338885
[22] For further reference on older people being at risk of the grandparent scam see Katalin Parti (33).

that of the seemingly vulnerable underdog who might be physically overpowered but who is cognitively superior. Through the allusion, Kana's wit becomes a central element in her performance: by remaining mentally fit, the video suggests, she is able to keep up with the problems of the modern world. Young and old age are thereby equalized in the clips and gendered boundaries between rebellious boy and rebellious grandmother are humorously challenged. By juxtaposing different ages and stereotypical gender roles, the video underlines that a central element of Kana's framing is the apparent inappropriateness with which she acts and how this inappropriateness of behavior and depiction informs her performance of grandmotherhood. In other words, most of Smith's sketches would not work if Kana was not older, and many of them would not work if she was not a woman.

By employing *TikTok*'s aesthetics and focusing on short clips that refer to pop cultural texts, Kana's presence on Smith's account playfully engages with—and at times even circumvents—conventional readings of older womanhood and grandmotherhood. By framing his grandmother in the digital sphere as witty, active, interested in the world (and younger men), Ross Smith thus challenges a perceived absence of older people in online spaces. In an article by *CNBC*, Smith is quoted:

> "Honestly most people—and I was probably one of those people at the time—don't have respect for the elderly," Smith explained. "Once you're old, you kind of go away and go to a nursing home. Doing this opened my mind to how awesome old people are and how cool they live their lives. They appreciate the small things we don't appreciate in this fast-paced advertising industry-based life." (Castillo)[23]

Smith's comment prominently ties into pre-existing readings of older people at the margins of society. His notion that older people "kind of go away" resonates with Heike Hartung and Rüdiger Kunow's assessment of older age as "something like 'a waiting room' in which people bide their time until they die; a waiting room, moreover, that is mostly peopled by women" (18). Smith clearly positions himself—and social media—as a means to showcase the hidden lived experiences of older people. At the same time, he also reveals a certain homogenization of older generations as a group of people who "appreciate the small things we don't appreciate." This linguistic differentiation between "us" and "them" also identifies older people as part of an out-group, an out-group that does not contain the "we" that can be assumed to be both: the younger generation and *TikTok* users.

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[23] It has been underlined that "elderly" may feed into harmful stereotypes about older age, see Kate de Medeiros's "Elderly and Senior Citizen: Contested Terms" for further reference.

Even more, Smith's comment also offers insight into the question of who stages grandparents on social media. As Smith emphasizes his own changed perspective on his grandmother, it becomes clear how deeply the relationship to Kana is impacted by his account. "Granny" has become of interest to him not only as his ancestor and a beloved family member, but also as a business partner, a fact that stands somewhat at odds with Smith attempting to critique the "fast-paced advertising industry-based life" (Castillo). As the article notes, "Smith is amazed by how much their act has taken off and that he could make a career out of hanging out with his grandma." Presenting his grandmother, then, is also a story of financial success. After all, *Money* titled in 2019: "This 26-Year-Old Created a Money-Making Empire with Viral Videos Featuring His Grandma" (Glum). While his grandmother is thus pivotal to his financial success, Kana's online presence as part of a comedic ensemble also works against stereotypical readings of older age as a time of isolation. Even more, as Kana is shown to deliberately deviate from behavior commonly associated with the role "grandmother," the subversive potential of the grandmother as an unruly subject is established. Yet, somewhat comparable to "Grandad Joe" Allington, Kana does not appear in control of her portrayal online, as the *CNBC* article explains: "Granny gets the idea that their act is a big hit— though she calls every platform Facebook, Smith noted" (Castillo). Despite Kana's success on social media, the comment mirrors the common notion of older people's inability to maneuver the digital realm. Moreover, it suggests that Kana is ignorant of her online presence: even though her account may thus counteract stereotypical readings of older age, the comment on her non-involvement in her own presentation frames her as someone who enjoys doing humorous stunts with her grandson but who does not claim authorship of the presented contents. It is thus important to note that the grandmother's unruliness is deliberately staged by someone else, and that the narrative of her rebellious deviance is written by her grandson.

"Love it when you call me Grandma": Tricia Goldsmith

The previous examples have introduced the intricate ties between the digital performance of grandparents and the involvement of their grandchildren in staging said role. In the last section of this paper, I engage with an example that does not feature a similarly strong presence of grandchildren: Tricia Goldsmith's account. The account's name, "yourfitgrandma", already presents its unique selling point: the combination of physical fitness and grandmotherhood. Moreover, the "your" in the *TikTok* handle imagines a relationship to her implied audience: Goldsmith is addressing their three million followers as

belonging to the younger generation twice removed from her own.[24] Both characteristics suggested in her account's title—her being a grandmother and her being physically fit—are further developed in her uploaded content. Goldsmith presents herself with her family and shows her grandchildren, but most of her content serves to frame herself as physically fit and sexually desirable. Before examining this self-presentation, it is important to note a difference in chronological age here: the accounts of both Allington and Smith emphasize the chronological age of the presented grandparent, with Allington and Kana being almost ninety and over ninety. Goldsmith's chronological age is not featured as prominently. Instead, their role of "grandmother" bears more significance than their birthyear of 1967. This tendency signifies that being older than fifty and remaining fit does not appear specifically worthy of attention—considering, for instance, 50-year-old Jennifer Lopez's role as an erotic dancer in *Hustlers* (2019). In other words, her birthyear of 1967 does not present Goldsmith as necessarily "old" according to cultural standards. Being a grandmother and fit, however, may cause surprise and further engagement. The term "grandma," then, appears as a distinctive feature that sets her body, which conforms to common beauty ideals, apart from countless other fit bodies of different ages on *TikTok*.

While the presented content of Goldsmith posing in lingerie or showing acrobatic dance moves confirms readings of sexualized womanhood, it also challenges assumptions about grandmothers. This notion is underlined, for instance, when Goldsmith replies to an *Instagram* follower's question of, "How's your day grandma," with the erotically charged "Love it when you call me grandma" (Goldsmith, "Ask Me Anything."[25] Here, "Grandma" becomes a term of endearment that by no means suggests unattractiveness, but rather can be understood analogous to the sexualized use of "daddy" or "mommy." Gender prominently informs this exchange as Goldsmith self-confidently claims the "Grandma" title and thus subverts readings of grandmothers as both nonsexual and undesirable. While they are answering the follower's question, their hair glitters with the help of an *Instagram* filter, and "Grandma" appears as the sole instance in the video marking Goldsmith as "old." She thus opposes Susan Sontag's sentiment that for "most women, aging means a humiliating process of gradual sexual disqualification" (31). This reading is further underlined by Goldsmith employing the GILF trope ("Even more of a GILF"), inserting "Grandmother" into readings of the MILF:

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[24] As Goldsmith lists their preferred pronouns as both they and she on *Instagram* ("Profile Page"), I am using both pronouns throughout this analysis.
[25] Link for quick access:
www.instagram.com/stories/highlights/18208476607028173/)

Made popular by the 1999 film *American Pie*, the acronym MILF, standing for "Mother I'd Like to Fuck," has evolved into a complicated and contradictory term. Perceived simultaneously as porn genre and source of empowerment, this term exposes some of the tensions surrounding sexuality and motherhood and the ways that considering mothers as sexual beings can be both a provocative and risky enterprise. (Friedman 50)

As the quote by May Friedman suggests, readings of older women as MILFs—and GILFs respectively—emphasize the presence of maternal sexuality. At the same time, they run the risk of objectifying the women these terms are applied to and of reducing the female experience of any age to sexual desirability (Friedman 51). Goldsmith, it might be argued, pushes the envelope even further than some given their insistence on grandmotherhood as a unique selling point. As the role of grandmother relies on its relationality to a younger generation, so does the term "GILF" because the "I" in the acronym prominently refers to the generation of grandchildren. Presenting herself as a sexual grandmother—and even more, a sexually desirable one—thus lies at the core of Goldsmith's online presence.

As has already been noted, grandparenthood tends to be framed in accordance with heteronormative frameworks of gender and sexuality. Despite prominently using the term "grandma," Goldsmith lists her preferred pronouns as both "she/they" on *Instagram* ("Profile Page") and thus also opts for a gender-neutral pronoun. Hereby, she works against expectations about members of older generations adhering to binary gender norms. In fact, she openly addresses her genderfluidity in connection with her role as grandmother by accompanying her clips with hashtags such as "#bi #genderfluid #love #55 #capricorn #grannytraps." In a clip titled "Literally! I felt pressured from his Catholic parents while my dad was saying, 'You dont have to marry him'," Goldsmith speaks of her "bi-awakening," which she accompanies with images of her wedding to a man; she had "felt pressured from his [her husband's] Catholic parents" to go through with a traditional wedding and now uses her experiences of heteronormative expectations in order to join conversations about her identity's journey. Her sexuality is therefore discussed with reference to different labels: while, as already noted, she speaks of her "bi-awakening" in 2022, she identifies as "demisexual" in another clip from 2021 ("Answer to @_demicha"). Obviously, these terms are in no way exclusive or contradictory, rather, their discussion underlines that as a grandparent, Goldsmith is not necessarily located within heteronormative structures.

If one considers who stages grandparenthood, it is noteworthy that Goldsmith constantly emphasizes that she runs the account herself, rather than being framed by a member of the younger generation. Given this insistence on self-representation, it is particularly significant that their account defies expectations of heterosexuality and gender-stability

commonly associated with grandparenthood. This also begs the question of who upholds such images of grandparents in other instances, where grandchildren are more actively involved: The grandchildren or the grandparents themselves?

Speaking, Speaking for, or Speaking of? Grandparents on Social Media

What can be derived, then, from these case studies of grandparents' presence on social media? First, my case studies from the United States and the England suggest that the impact of grandparents on social media is a more widespread phenomenon than commonly assumed, a notion corroborated by online presences of grandparents from other countries, for instance, Iran Khanoom, who is from Iran and Paris-based, or German Helga Sofie Josefa's "Marmeladenoma" account on *YouTube*.[26] Second, these accounts deliberately relate to cultural ideas about the gendered role of grandparent; both by breaking with assumptions and by playing into them. Grandadjoe1933 stages Allington as a loving grandfather who, following readings of masculine behavior, only expresses vulnerability in private. By discussing Allington's vulnerability to the COVID pandemic, his presentation also navigates his changing role as head of the family. Pauline Kana's online presence relates back to pre-existing notions about older womanhood and is staged to humorously question conventional notions of "doing" grandmother. Further negotiating the stereotypical behavior of grandparents, Smith frames his grandmother to deliberately oppose stereotypes of docile grandmotherhood: both accounts, then, react to pre-existing cultural conventions of grandparenthood. To an extent, the same holds true for Tricia Goldsmith. By portraying herself in a deliberately sexualized manner while insisting on her status as a non-heteronormative "grandma," they surprise their audience by offering a reconfiguration of stereotypical readings of the role of grandmother.

By humorously or critically reflecting on the role of grandparents, the three accounts that I have presented employ grandparenthood as a unique selling point. It can be derived that grandparents in the digital realm draw attention because they are not expected to be part of discussions happening online. Their presence itself thus already works against existing stereotypes surrounding older people on social media.

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[26] In collaboration with her daughter, Iran Khanoom presents lifestyle shots via her *Instagram* account (@iran.khanoom), *Harper's Bazaar Arabia* labeled her "the Middle East's foremost senior influencer" (Foreman). Helga Sofie Josefa reads fairy tales and received her name "MarmeladenOma" from her grandson who also produces the videos (Wienand).

Armoo underlines that "young TikTok users have a soft spot for grandparents" and notes:

> On TikTok, if you did something with your parents, people might think that's a bit cringe […] But if you did it with your grandparent, it's so incredible that your grandparent would know how to use TikTok, that it becomes quite cool. ("Coronavirus")

The surprise of learning that a grandparent knows how to navigate *TikTok*, it seems, appears "incredible" enough to warrant attention from younger audiences. Grandparents, then, run the risk of becoming novelties staged for the amusement of a younger audience, and their online presences straddle a fine line between giving agency to and speaking for the older generation. Following social media's claim to authenticity and its emphasis on individual lived experience this divergence between who is active and who is passive—who is staged and who is staging—raises questions of agency and authorship.

Given these content-creating grandchildren, it is important to remember the differentiation between older people on social media and grandparents on social media: grandparents become grandparents through intergenerational ties. Being a grandparent online always entails the perspective of someone else; it is a role that only gains meaning through intergenerational relations and that thus also depicts aging as a relational phenomenon. It may be unsurprising, then, that those older people advertised as "Granny," "Grandad Joe," or even "yourfitgrandma" are presented not as peers to their followers, but as distinctly "older than" a presumably younger audience. They become grandparents not only of the younger generation that stages them but digital stand-in grandparents for their younger followers.

By being online, digital grandparents thus reposition grandparents as the topic of conversation, concern, and interest, in effect counteracting conventional readings of older age as a time of social isolation. At the same time, however, they present (or even sell) "grandparenthood" to a younger audience and are as likely to rely on gendered stereotypes of older age as they are to try and dismantle them. In all three examples, grandparents appear interesting enough to draw the attention of younger social media users, but with few exceptions they tend to be introduced as surprise visitors, rather than as natives in the digital realm.

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