Successful Aging on *Instagram*? Gender, Age, and the "Rise of the Granfluencer"

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Abstract

This article investigates the phenomenon of the granfluencer at the intersection between age and gender. At first sight, the granfluencer seems to work against the notion that old age is inevitably accompanied by decay and a lack of productiveness. Yet, as "grandparents" become influencers, it seems that productiveness can be described only in terms of a neoliberal market economy. Taking the social media persona of Baddie Winkle as a case in point, I suggest that Winkle can be seen as both confirming and subverting assumptions of age at one and the same time. Drawing on the work of Margaret Morganroth Gullette as well as Susan Sontag's "The Double Standard of Aging," this article reads Winkle as a potential example of "Successful Aging" and asks whether there are ways of growing old beyond the dictates of neoliberalism. At the same time, Winkle can be seen to disprove assumptions of the alleged unattractiveness of older women by openly flaunting her sexuality. This may earn her clicks, and at the same time makes us see age (and gender) in an entirely new light.

Introduction: Granfluencers as Entrepreneurs of Aging?

What is the role of age in social media? Arguably, the terrain of social media has been said in both public discourse and general perception to be reserved for the young. Older people, conversely, are often assumed to be absent from social media. It is in this climate that the so-called "granfluencer" seems to be an exception to the rule. In portrayals in mainstream media, granfluencers have been described in a rhetoric that is characterized by its sensationalism:

> Anyone who still thinks Instagram is reserved for young people is as dated as the social network was before it brought in Snapchat-style Stories.
> Because a new type of influencer is emerging – one that has more style, lols and life inspo than you can shake a selfie (or walking) stick at.
> Enter: the "granfluencer". As in, grandparents or simply older people who are better at social media than you. While it's true that almost three-quarters of Instagram influencers are thought to be under-35 (with 42% aged 18-24), that doesn't mean there isn't space for these age-defying internet icons. Last year, an influencer marketing agency claimed that the accounts they identified as the top 10 senior influencers on Instagram had seen a 24% increase in followers since September 2017. (Harvey)

Seen from this perspective, granfluencers are a "sensation" precisely because they seem to refute assumptions about age and the digital divide.

At the same time, however, the trope of the granfluencer seems problematic for a number of reasons. Even as the media discourse surrounding granfluencers claims to *transcend* stereotypes of old age, it may actually reinforce such stereotypes.[1] While it is unclear when exactly an individual is actually "old" enough to qualify as a granfluencer, this paper illustrates that some of the sensationalism associated with granfluencing applies especially to older individuals, particularly the "oldest-old." Through their sensationalist rhetoric, representations of granfluencers reinforce commonplace assumptions about age, sexuality, attractiveness, and productivity.

In the pages that follow, I employ Baddie Winkle as a case study of the phenomenon that is the granfluencer. Known as one of the oldest models in the world, Baddie Winkle's self-representation, as a model for fashion and beauty brands and in her own social media account, can be described as "flamboyant." Through her signature style—her flashy, sexy outfits, her in-your-face attitude—, Winkle sets out to defy commonplace assumptions about both gender and age. It is with reference to such defiance that Helen Ruth van Winkle has given herself the name "Baddie."

[1] Stereotypical concepts of old age have a gendered undertone when it comes to portraying granfluencers. It must be noted that as a rule, the concept of the granfluencer refers to cis-gendered individuals and appears to refer to binary gender-models.

Winkle achieved fame on social media in 2014 after her great-granddaughter featured an image of her ("Baddie Winkle"). As the present essay suggests, Winkle sets out to engage in "activity," as opposed to what is commonly assumed to be the "anti-activity" of older age. She became a fashion model at the age of 85, starring in advertisements for Smirnoff, INC.redible Cosmetics, and Sally Beauty. While Winkle also sells her own designer clothes, she is especially known through her modeling and her *Instagram* presence—as of 2023, she has amassed 3.2 million followers on the platform. Winkle has been photographed with celebrities such as Miley Cyrus and Khloé Kardashian and has been invited to the red carpet of the *Orange Is the New Black* premiere; she has thus clearly become a celebrity.

Winkle's celebrity status, however, exceeds her role as a fashion model: she uses her colorful outfits and extrovert personality to draw attention to herself as much as she sells the products that she advertises. In a manner that is characteristic of the sensationalism that I have described above, Winkle has been described as an "octogenarian [with] 2.9 million Instagram followers […] and a fandom of supporters and gawkers who can't get enough of the cognitive dissonance of a woman who looks like your grandmother wearing the kinds of things *you* feel too old to wear" (Wang, emphasis in original). It is this "cognitive dissonance" that can be analyzed from the perspective of both age studies and gender studies. Winkle is a star because her appearance is said to be "out of synch" with common assumptions about old age and gender. One of the central questions that remains, however, is whether Winkle's performance subverts or confirms established notions of age, gender, and physical attractiveness.

In this article, I relate the phenomenon of the granfluencer to the notion of "successful aging," which originated in the life sciences (see section 2 below) but has migrated to the sphere of social life. Successful aging, I claim, is not only a Western concept that fails to take into account alternative understandings of age, particularly from the Global South[2]; it is also a deeply neoliberalist notion.[3] I read Winkle's age and gender

[2] For a detailed discussion of non-Western concepts of aging, see, for instance, the edited collection *Aging in the Global South* by Alejandria-Gonzalez et al. (2019). As Cheng et al. argue, societies in the Global South have revolved around a "more holistic approach of health and wellness" when it comes to notions of aging (Cheng et al. 1), thus calling into question the emphasis of the "successful aging" model on economic productiveness, social "productivity" and physical and mental fitness. Moreover, as Subharati Ghosh et al. suggest (x), for societies in the Global South, it might be more urgent to combat age discrimination and social isolation for older individuals, particularly women, than to focus on questions of lifestyle and "best aging."

[3] For a fully-fledged critique of neoliberalism as such, see Wendy Brown's *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (2015). For a discussion of the role of

performance both with reference to her reception in the new media as well as her self-representation. Even as the media coverage on granfluencers, which is mostly created by younger audiences, may be sensationalist, this tone needs to be balanced against the self-representation of older people on social media. As I argue, Winkle can be seen both as a very specific media persona, with individual strategy and style, and as part of a wider phenomenon of "granfluencing." Read through her age and gender, Winkle thus appears as a highly ambivalent presence within the new media.

Taking this ambivalence into account, I ask how the notion of the granfluencer might be reappropriated from the perspective of critical aging studies as well as gender studies. At the core of the granfluencer, there is a specific notion of what it means to age "successfully" and to be "productive" well into one's retirement. These notions of productivity, as I illustrate below, are deeply entrenched into the ideology of neoliberalism (Shimoni 2; Fegitz 1815). In this sense, the phenomenon of the "granfluencer" does not originate in a void; rather it indexes a specific historical moment in Western societies. At a time when social welfare is being cut and there are fewer social services provided by the state for older and marginalized communities, older people are exhorted to remain "active" well beyond the retirement age (Moulaert and Biggs 23; Katz "Busy Bodies"). According to Shir Shimoni, "norms" such as successful aging "help to deflect responsibility for health and well-being from the state onto individuals, and thereby conceal the erosion of social welfare by neoliberal austerity policies" (2).

Granfluencers such as Baddie Winkle, I suggest, can be seen as examples of such active or successful aging, as they have become "entrepreneurs" of the self, as Shir Shimoni has noted (4). This "entrepreneurship" of the self can be traced on various levels, discussing the granfluencer's economic productivity (selling consumer merchandise and featuring in advertisements). At the same time, I read the phenomenon of—and demand for—active aging against the grain by pointing towards alternative ways of "aging well." In so doing, I also engage the nexus between age and disability studies.[4] Thus, we may be able to resist the normative assumptions inherent in the idea of "successful aging" only if we imagine an allegiance of, rather than an opposition between, age and disability.

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neoliberalism in health care, see Salmaan Keshavjee's *Blind Spot: How Neoliberalism Infiltrated Global Health* (2014).

[4] For further reference on the intersection of discourses on aging and disability see Chivers's *The Silvering Screen*, Aubrecht et al.'s *The Aging Disability Nexus* and Marr's *The Politics of Age and Disability in Contemporary Spanish Film*.

The Emergence of the Granfluencer

At first sight, the emergence of the granfluencer seems to correspond with the trend that older people are becoming more visible in media representation (Shimoni 1; Dolan). From the award-winning TV show *Grace and Frankie* (2015-2022) to aging celebrities such as Jane Fonda, Helen Mirren, and Judy Dench (Shimoni 1), older people are no longer only represented in marginal roles, but have come to be the protagonists of different narratives. Moreover, the focus has shifted from negative portrayals of old age as the site of decline to positive representations of older people (Shimoni 2). Both in the ways in which granfluencers are represented in the media and in the ways in which they present themselves, granfluencers embody this "positive" turn. Just as retirement age can infinitely be extended in the age of neoliberalism (Formosa 23), the social and economic role of the "influencer" can also be practiced in older age: "grandparents," in other words, can also become "influencers."

In poses and performances that, from the perspective of mainstream culture, used to be "reserved" for much younger women, Winkle can be said to defy agist and sexist assumptions of what it means to be an older woman. Julia Velten has suggested with regard to older age "that there is appropriate behavior connected to this life stage" (44), and it is in this context that Winkle tackles the idea of "age appropriateness" as it is inherent in the dictum of what older women should wear. The concept of "age appropriateness" is thus inseparable from established notions about both gender and age and it is much more often applied to women. Accordingly, fashion styles and behavior play a crucial role in when it comes to presenting oneself in a way that is deemed "age inappropriate"; hence, fashion can easily defy assumptions of what is "proper" or even "socially legitimate" for an older person. The charge of "age inappropriateness" has to be considered as stabilizing the social norms of age and gender so that "[n]ot acting one's age, for instance, is not only inappropriate but dangerous, exposing the female subject, especially, to ridicule, contempt, pity and scorn" (Russo 21).

It is at this point that we may want to interrogate potential reasons for Baddie Winkle's social media success. Media representations about Baddie Winkle, I would argue, have been characterized by a certain sensationalism—a sensationalism that Winkle herself carefully cultivates. At the core of this sensationalism, there is Winkle's portrayal of her own sexuality.[5] At first sight, this openness about sexuality can be seen as a

[5] One of the questions that arises here is whether at the core of Winkle's self-representation, there is a reference to either sexual activity or sexual attractiveness. I would argue here that both implications can be traced in Winkle's self-portrayal. In both

form of reclaiming sexuality in older age (McHugh and Interligi 89). Winkle can be said to challenge the idea that older bodies (particularly the bodies of older women) are no longer sexually attractive by deliberately moving into poses that are deemed "out of keeping" with her age, such as a "bikini shot," which shares visual aesthetics with the well-known swimsuit competition of beauty pageants. Winkle thus seems to invite the male gaze, turning herself into an object of "scopophilia" or "*to-be-looked at-ness*" (Mulvey 8, 11; emphasis in original). As I illustrate below, the question of whether Winkle's social media persona subverts established notions of gender, desirability and age or confirms them, hinges on the ideas of congruity and incongruity. To the extent that Winkle's self-representation on social media is seen to be *incongruous* with her age, she may be said to confirm rather than refute sexist and agist assumptions of what it means to be an older woman on social media.

Granfluencers as Successful Agers?

The phenomenon of the granfluencer is closely related to the concept of successful aging, originates in the life sciences and particularly in gerontology. The concept was quickly adapted into social life and made usable in advertisements for health supplies, vacation resorts, or lifestyle choices[can you say for what? Health supplies? Lifestyle equipment? Gyms?].[6] According to Rowe and Kahn's 1998 book-length study, "[s]uccessful aging is multidimensional, encompassing the avoidance of disease and disability, the maintenance of high physical and cognitive function, and sustained engagement in social and productive activities […]. The stage is set for intervention studies to enhance the proportion of our population aging successfully" (433). Successful aging thus entails that the individual is enabled and expected to take charge of their own aging process, given the right lifestyle, diet, and attitude.

What seems significant here, however, is that in order to describe this form of self-directed aging, Rowe and Kahn resort to a metaphor from the sphere of economics. One can either age "successfully" or "unsuccessfully." From the perspective of aging studies, the idea of successful aging could not be more problematic.[7] At its core, the notion of successful aging exhorts the individual to take charge of their own

instances, she can thus be said to defy the idea that sexuality is absent from later life, particularly for women. See McHugh and Interligi (89).

[6] I return to the idea of the "commodification of age" below.

[7] The problematic nature of Rowe and Kahn's concept has been repeatedly underlined, see Formosa; Gilleard and Higgs's "The Third Age and the Baby Boomers: Two Approaches to the Social Structuring of Later Life"; Moulaert and Biggs.

aging process (Shimoni 4).[8] In the era of neoliberalism, the state works not through direct intervention but through individuals "governing" themselves (Lemke 191). What the concept of successful aging illustrates is that individuals are called upon to "regulate" and constantly keep track of their own aging process. At first sight, this notion of self-tracking may be associated particularly with younger people, who monitor their fitness, sleep-cycle and exercise schedule through devices such as fit-bits (cf. Motyl 196). It can be argued, however, that the idea of quantifying the self can also be extended into old age, since the individual, as Rowe and Kahn illustrate, is called upon to maintain "high physical and cognitive function" (433). In short, the notion of "successful aging" is deeply embedded in the logic of neoliberalism, which posits that solely the individual is responsible for their own health and well-being. Through this focus on each individual's responsibility for their own body, the state can vacate its former role of providing dependable systems of social security, health care, adequate job opportunities, and an environment that is conducive to healthy living (Moulaert and Biggs 32; Brown 9; cf. Robison).

Moreover, the concept of "successful aging" contains a value judgment that requires scrutiny because it implicitly puts "successful aging" against other less successful forms of aging. Holstein and Minkler emphasize the danger of a new "master narrative"; they critique this normative vision by focusing on its unarticulated (and perhaps unexplored) values, assumptions, and consequences," and they "argue that these unexamined features may further harm older people, particularly older women, the poor, and people of color who are already marginalized" (787). As the next section of this paper shows, the notion of successful aging is particularly pertinent to the phenomenon of the granfluencer. The very link between the emergence of "granfluencing" as both a social and a functional role reinforces the claim that successful aging has become a master narrative: successful aging has become a role model that individuals try to emulate in their own aging performance, whether it be online or offline. An exploration of granfluencers through the concept of successful aging thus serves two arguments at the same time. It sheds light on what may be neoliberalist implications of "granfluencing," and it helps enable a critique of the overall notion of neoliberalism through the concrete image of the granfluencer. On the basis of Holstein and Minkler's critique, the "successful aging" of granfluencers can be further unpacked. First and foremost, the notion of "success" could be inquired into." How is this success to be measured? And who is to say what counts as "successful" or as "failed" aging? In the case of granfluencers, this question may at first sight be answerable in a quite specific and material

[8] The concept is thus in line with Foucault's notion of governmentality, see "The Technologies of the Self" 19; Lemke 191; Binkley 372 for further reference

sense: with each click, granfluencers become more successful; with each new follower, their success is more visible.

Measurable success also plays into a key component in the rhetoric of neoliberalism: the idea of social and economic productiveness. After all, one of the reasons why the "granfluencer" has been described in such sensationalist and triumphalist rhetoric is that it is implicitly seen as a counter-image to the idea of older people as being a burden to society. As social scientists have noted, public discourse about aging societies has often been accompanied by an alarmist rhetoric (Katz, *Cultural Aging* 13). In this context, the changing demographics and the role of the so-called "oldest old" as the fastest growing segment of the population has been portrayed as an "avalanche" threatening to engulf the rest of society in its wake. This alarmism, in turn, is linked to the idea that older people are a "burden" on society. According to Morris Barer et al., "[c]laims that the health care system is about to be engulfed in a 'wave of grey' have become commonplace. Recent cost escalation is commonly attributed to the aging of the population, and there is no shortage of dire warnings about the cost implications of the even more dramatic aging, and costs, still to come" (193).

The twin concepts of frailty—in the sense of ill health— and economic unproductiveness are at the core of the assumption of older people as a "burden" on society and especially on national healthcare systems. At the same time, this rhetoric proposes that they "fail" to make up for this cost because as retirees, they no longer contribute to the net domestic product. But as Barer et al. emphasize, this increase in the cost "caused" by older people can in fact be seen as misleading (193): while it is true that the health care costs for this segment of society have been increasing, this increase is also due to the fact that medical care is now being provided where previously it would have been faltering (193). At the same time, as philosopher Christine Overall points out, the idea of older people as being a "burden" on society also carries sexist implications. She notes that it is women who, prior to their entering old age, have often been bearing a major proportion of care work, caring for children or older relatives in what is mostly unpaid labor (49; cf. Samantroy and Nandi 1). In the context of such disparities when it comes to the allocation of care work in Western societies, it is all the more problematic to speak of older people as being a social burden (Overall 49).

Despite these counterarguments voiced by Barer and Overall, the concept of older people as being "unproductive" and ultimately "costly" has persisted in public discourse. One of the claims that I make in this article is that the phenomenon of the granfluencer can be explained in

part through this rhetoric. To the extent that older people are seen as generally "unproductive" (especially in an economic sense), granfluencers may become alternative models of aging. With each new performance, they show that old age cannot only be "fun" but also economically productive: the profession of "granfluencing," after all, is clearly a business model (Zabel 4). But seen from the perspective of aging studies, the phenomenon of the granfluencer as a form of "successful aging" is deeply troubling. It implies that "productiveness" can only be measured in terms of economic success—with the successful granfluencer thus reinforces the logic of neoliberalism. As Wendy Brown has suggested, neoliberalism has extended the logic of the market to all spheres of human existence: "as a normative order of reason developed over three decades into a widely and deeply disseminated governing rationality, neoliberalism transmogrifies every human domain and endeavor, along with humans themselves, according to a specific image of the economic" (9-10). Neoliberalism espouses the idea of the entrepreneur (Shimoni 1) and pits it against "undisciplined" models of living one's older age. Here, too, the granfluencer seems to fit neoliberalism's scheme: one can be an "entrepreneur" practicing "technologies of the self," as Shimoni has suggested (4) well beyond the age of retirement.[9] Baddie Winkle, whose performance I will now look at in more detail, seems to be indicative of this definition of productiveness as *economic* productiveness. In the following analysis, I will focus on a central question: if the format of the granfluencer is problematic in terms of its neoliberalist underpinnings, might it also be appropriated as a stage for alternative representations of aging, particularly at the intersection of age and gender?

Success or Setback? The Case of Baddie Winkle

As I have noted above, one of the central flaws of the notion of the "granfluencer" may also be at the heart of the concept of successful aging: the idea that "success" can only be conceived in economic terms (Brown 9). What is missing from this model, then, is the idea that one can grow "successfully" old in terms that are measured on the basis of social relations, not on the basis of economic output (Moulaert and Biggs 36).[10]

[9] This notion is also clearly in dialogue with Foucauldian concept of "government of oneself", for further reference, see *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78*, p. 132; Luxon.

[10] While Rowe and Kahn also address the question of social embeddedness, I would argue that their notion of sociality is still tied to the neoliberal model, where social embeddedness is seen in terms of the success, quantification and quality of social connections.

It is significant that the beginning of Baddie Winkle's social media career started with a photograph that her great-granddaughter posted of her (Yurkevich). This moment of a great-granddaughter taking a picture of her grandmother, I argue, can be read from two different perspectives: one that confirms the notion of "successful aging" and another that subverts it. From the perspective of both neoliberalism and successful aging, Baddie Winkle becomes "successful" only the moment in which she becomes an entrepreneur as a "granfluencer." In this way and as a performer on social media, she can be said to extend economic productiveness into older age. As age studies scholars have argued, successful aging is characterized by the attempt to prolong the third age—that is, the age of "active" or "productive" aging—for as long a period as possible (Shimoni 1; Marshall and Rahman 585). According to Marvin Formosa, "[c]ore active ageing practices include lifelong learning, working longer, retiring later and more gradually, being active after retirement and engaging in capacity enhancing and health sustaining activities" (24). By contrast, the fourth age, in which the individual may live with disability or frail health, is considered unproductive and must be evaded by all means (cf. Gilleard and Higgs, *Cultures of Ageing*). It is here that "successful aging" is pitted against "failed aging." As Formosa notes, "[p]ositive aging is, therefore, guilty of age-denial. It focuses its energy and efforts on celebrating and propagating the so-called 'third-age lifestyle,' and in doing so, promotes its ethos at the expense of older and more defenseless people, namely those in the fourth age" (30). Seen from this highly problematic perspective, we might read the phenomenon of Baddie Winkle as follows: the minute she is transformed into a granfluencer, Baddie Winkle would be seen to confirm the fact that she is solidly located in the third age; and this location can be described in economic terms. After all, she posts her picture (or lets her great-granddaughter post it) and hence becomes an entrepreneur and granfluencer.

Taking my cue from Marvin Formosa, Thibauld Moulaert and Simon Biggs and their critique of successful aging, I would like to read this beginning of Baddie Winkle's social media career against the grain. Rather than posting the picture on *Instagram* and embarking on the idea of the granfluencer, Winkle could have fully enjoyed the time with her great-granddaughter without making this time valuable in terms of the social media market. In this scenario, "success" would have been conceived in terms of social connectedness. As Gilleard and Biggs have argued, it is by insisting on these other "non-marketable" notions of "success" that we may be able to resist the norm of successful aging and conceive of a fulfilling older life in terms that are not steeped in the economic tenets of neoliberalism ("The Third Age" 13). In order to devise

alternatives to the dictates of successful aging, Moulaert and Biggs propose that we may want to "believe that there is 'more to life than work' [...] and to hold an expectation of an active and leisured phase of the lifecourse" (24). The idea that rather than posting the photograph taken by her granddaughter on *Instagram*, Winkle could have just enjoyed the moment, could be seen to be in line with the notion of "anti-activity activity" suggested by Moulaert and Biggs (36) and the focus on the role of leisure—in the sense of being "idle," engaging in everyday activities, simply living one's life—in older age. Within a neoliberal framework, successful aging suggests that leisure activity, such as enjoying one's time with one's grandchild, should be turned into an activity that can be commodified, as in the entrepreneurship of the granfluencer; contemplating an alternative to such commodification and economization, however, might be to refuse such entrepreneurship.

Regarding the successful aging of Baddie Winkle, media coverage has underlined the fact that she has also modeled for designer underwear. According to Elizabeth Di Filippo, "Winkle has cemented her image as a sensual, man-stealing hippie by modelling the latest collection of Savage x Fenty, the inclusive lingerie line from singer and business mogul, Rihanna" (n.pag.). Crucially for my purposes here, Winkle has also been particularly successful on social media. As an article in the magazine *The Brag* points out, "Instagram fashionista Baddie Winkle is fierce, fashionable and fabulous – and she just happens to be 92 years old" (Lynch). On the surface, this description of Baddie Winkle suggests that age has nothing to do with her success: "she just happens to be 92 years old" (Lynch). But this argument can also be reversed. The sensationalism that underlies Winkle's media representation emerges precisely from the presumed incongruence between her age and her actions. She can be described as "fierce, fashionable and fabulous" precisely because she does not act her age and her modeling career is seen as a sensation because it is not in keeping with her age. The sensationalism with which Winkle's performance has been received, then, may in fact be symptomatic of the persistence of stereotypes about old age, especially for women. To the extent that Winkle's performance is "shocking," in other words, it reinforces assumptions of how older women should behave. These assumptions, as a form of "age ideology" (Gullette 7) have been overcome only when a specific performance is no longer considered as "outrageous" or "outlandish." This has crucial implications for assessing Baddie Winkle's social media success. Arguably, her success may be proof of the fact that a certain type of age ideology still persists particularly with regard to the representation of older women.

At the same time, there is a distinction between this reception of Baddie Winkle's performance, one the one hand, and her *self-*

representation, on the other hand. Considering Winkle's self-representation, her "inappropriate" poses and modeling for designer underwear at age 92 can be read as subverting established conventions at the intersection between age and gender. By assuming a pose that is deliberately unusual, then, Winkle may in fact make us rethink normative assumptions about beauty, desirability, femininity, and age (Mulvey 11). The same logic may be at the core of another of Winkle's *Instagram* posts. In this nude performance, Baddie Winkle poses in the woods, only dressed in leaves that make up a "natural" bikini (qtd. in Nair). From the perspective of Winkle's self-representation, this could be seen as the appropriation, by an older model, of a set-up that seems to be reserved to younger models who would be classified as "attractive" and "sexually desirable." At the same time, however, the photo acts like a litmus test of one's own age ideology. It asks to reflect on what one perceives to be "desirable" in the first place. Seen from this perspective, the "click" or "like" of Winkle's *Instagram* post is ambivalent: as I have noted above, audiences may "like" the post because they are shocked by the alleged incongruity of a 92-year-old woman in a bikini. Conversely, however, they may like the fact that Winkle has successfully subverted the idea that only younger women can pose in bikinis on social media platforms.

Seen from this angle, Winkle manipulates what Laura Mulvey has termed "scopophilia," that is, "pleasure in looking" (8). Mulvey's concept originally emerges from her investigation of Hollywood film; she argues that the camera was closely aligned with a male pleasure of looking (11). According to Mulvey, "[i]n their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. Women displayed as sexual object is the leit-motiff of erotic spectacle" (11).[11] This "pleasure" of looking at women, Mulvey argues, is tied to the notion of female attractiveness. The woman is the object of the camera; the subject, according to Mulvey, is the male gaze that the camera perspective catered to. Applied to Baddie Winkle, this would imply that by moving into the object of what Mulvey terms "to-be-looked-at-ness," Winkle appropriates the gaze. She positions herself as the object inviting the gaze. This gaze, in turn, may be assumed to be a male gaze as much as a youthful one. By inhabiting the pose of the person

[11] Mulvey's original article "Visual and Other Pleasures" (1975) was still predicated on a heteronormative scenario, with the male gaze deriving pleasure from looking at women. Mulvey herself has subsequently elaborated on other, non-normative forms of looking. In her subsequent book *Afterimages*: *On Cinema, Women, and Changing Times*, she writes, "Throughout film history, queer spectators have, of course, read against Hollywood's conformist grain, finding their own visual pleasures and queering the gaze [...]" (246).

that is to be looked at, then, Winkle questions the politics of desire that is at the core of Mulvey's theory. In so doing, she challenges assumptions that her body would not be an object of pleasure, of "*to-be-looked-at-ness*" (11; italics original).

The question of scopophilia, I argue, is at the heart of potential interpretations of Baddie Winkle's *Instagram* appearance. From one angle, the idea that her body is not "pleasurable" to look at implies agist assumptions about age, gender, and desirability. Conversely, however, she appropriates the notion of scopophilia by implicitly arguing that her body can be the object of scopophilic desire, thus defying the above-described assumptions. What is problematic even in this second reading, however, is that Winkle, as a woman "posing" for the camera, remains the object of the gaze.

The similar ambivalence surrounds Winkle's self-representation as a "sexual predator," and a woman who deliberately defies notions of female morality. As Lynch notes, "[a]s for how she came up with her famous Instagram handle, she said: 'I'm a bad bitch; always been a rebel. So we decided 'bad'—'baddie.' And then my last name was van Winkle, so we put the Winkle on'" (Lynch). At the same time, "Winkle," of course, deliberately puns on "wrinkle." Baddie Winkle can in fact be seen as defying the anti-aging industry by stressing her "wrinkles" precisely through the pun that her name implies. She is proud of her winkles, I posit, in a gesture that defies notions of agism. Through the implicit reference to her wrinkles that, in the pun, are "under erasure" (Anderson 44), present and absent at the same time, she carefully cultivates her shock potential. The poses she inhabits are seen by some as incongruous and shocking, by others as deliberately subversive. Both these readings, however, hinge on Winkle's age, as emblematized by her "wrinkles."

Moreover, in her *Instagram* posts, it is as "Baddie" that Winkle sets out to confront and defy existing notions not only of age but also of gender. In a culture where the practice of "slut shaming" is common, Winkle, at age 92, proudly proclaims herself to be a "slut." In many of her posts and performances, she refers to herself as a sexual predator: "Stealing your man since 1928" (Lynch). This motto has several implications. First, it is set in a traditional heteronormative scenario: it is other women that Baddie speaks to, positioning herself as their competitor on the dating market. Second, the post may once again play with the audience's reactions in a litmus test of their own age ideology. Here, too, this slogan may alternatively be read as sensationalist or subversive. To what extent, Winkle implicitly asks, do we take this threat at face value? The question whether or not we see Winkle as having the potential of "stealing" "our" man, then, hinges on specific assumptions

about age, gender, and desirability. Again, two readings are possible. First, viewers may "like" the post because they do not take Baddie's threat seriously, thus exhibiting an attitude that is agist in its implication that at 92, Baddie would no longer be seen as "attractive" and would hence not be a competitor for much younger women on the dating market. Second, audiences may assume that they cannot take the threat at face value because at 92, Baddie would no longer be assumed to be sexually active (McHugh and Interligi 89).

At the same time, I want to read Winkle's slogan against the grain, seeing it as an appropriation or refutation of agist assumptions. Thus, the motto "Stealing your man since 1928" can be understood as deliberately defying conventions about both sexual attractiveness and sexual activity. Considered from this perspective, Winkle appears as being in line with the increasing visibility of older women's sexuality in media representations. For instance, in films such as *Good Luck to You, Leo Grande* (2022), starring Emma Thompson, older women are featured as protagonists: their sexual activity and their bodies are no longer dismissed from the public mind, a dismissal that carried sexist and agist assumptions in the first place.[12] Seen from this angle, Baddie Winkle becomes a role model for younger women. At age 92, she openly refers to both her sexual attractiveness and her sexual activity, thus countering ideas that women's sexuality can or should not be openly expressed. Yet she does not confirm the stereotype that older women are non-sexual (Fullmer et al. 137). Her pose can thus be seen as countering the notion of "slut shaming" by practicing "slut reclaiming."[13] After all, in one of her *Instagram* posts, Winkle is wearing a T-shirt with precisely this caption: "Be a slut, Do whatever you want" (Dukoff).

Baddie Winkle and the "Aging Grotesque"

At the core of the idea of whether Winkle's persona is "pleasurable" or shocking to look at, lies what I term the "aging grotesque." Winkle has become a sensation on social media because her aging body and her

[12] In the film, Emma Thompson stars as a 55-year-old schoolteacher who, after her husband's death, wants to rediscover her sexuality and proceeds to hire a young sex worker (Daryl McCormack). *Good Luck to You*, *Leo Grande* thus demonstrates not only the heightened visibility of older women in mainstream film, as Shimoni has observed, but the film is also potentially subversive in openly portraying an older woman's sexuality; it shows the protagonist's sexual activity and highlights the fact that an older woman can still be seen as sexually attractive.

[13] I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this term. In this sense, Winkle may be seen to be in line with the practice of "SlutWalks," which have emerged in a number of cities. See Annie Hill's "SlutWalk as Perifeminist Response to Rape Logic: The Politics of Reclaiming a Name."

poses—such as the party pose in a short black leather skirt, the nude pose in an outdoor setting—are seen to be incompatible with each other. According to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, the "grotesque" can be defined as "a style of decorative art characterized by fanciful or fantastic human and animal forms often interwoven with foliage or similar figures that may distort the natural into absurdity, ugliness, or caricature" ("grotesque").[14] Seen from a perspective that "sensationalizes" Winkle's social media performance, this idea of the grotesque, linked to assumptions of both age and gender, might be applied to Baddie Winkle and the way in which her performance has been received. Here, too, the "natural" is "distorted" into "absurdity, ugliness, or caricature." From this angle, her style would appear "grotesque" because it is seen as a "distortion," "fanciful or fantastic," of what old age *should* be. At the core of the aging grotesque, there is the "cognitive dissonance" that has also been present in media descriptions of Baddie Winkle, as I have noted at the outset of this paper. Winkle's success on social media, seen from this perspective, is based on the fact that her pose (her clothing style, hairstyle, and make-up) is said to be out of synch with her age.

To the extent that audiences are "shocked" by the image, they may have successfully imbued the dominant culture's definitions of age, gender and beauty. As Margaret Morganroth Gullette, one of the founders of the field of aging studies, has suggested, "[i]f we mean by ideology a system that socializes us into certain beliefs and ways of speaking about what it means to be 'human,' while suppressing alternatives, it is useful to call this training 'age ideology'" (6-7).

Looking at the poses of Baddie Winkle, it is important to interrogate the notions of sexual attractiveness and female beauty that may underlie the reception of Baddie's performances. It is important to note in this context that in media coverage, Winkle has been described as "fierce, fashionable and fabulous" (Lynch); she has not been described, on the other hand, as "attractive." Seen from one angle, the absence of attractiveness may in fact be the essence of Baddie Winkle's success. In this context, Winkle would be successful on social media because she is seen as disruptive and, I would argue, grotesque. It is in this grotesqueness—the idea that a 92-year-old woman posing in a bikini is"inappropriate" for her age—that Winkle's social media appearance, in its *reception*, could be seen to confirm Susan Sontag's idea of the "double standard of aging." According to Sontag, men rarely panic about aging in the way women often do. Getting older is less profoundly wounding for a man, for in addition to the propaganda for youth that puts both men and

[14] The notion of the grotesque has also been central in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. See, for instance, Natal'ia Ivanova's discussion.

women on the defensive as they age, there is a double standard about aging that denounces women with special severity (31).

What Sontag emphasizes is that as they age, men are believed to retain their physical attractiveness, while aging women are seen as having become unattractive. It is from this assumption that fears of aging may emerge, particularly for women. Yet, as critics from the field of age studies have emphasized, this is a fear rooted not in biology, but rather in cultural and social conventions (Gullette 7). What is seen as attractive or unattractive, as sexually or culturally desirable, lies in the eye of the observer, and this "eye" is socially conditioned. "Getting older," Sontag writes, is "wounding" for women; with each passing year, they are said to move further away from the "propaganda for youth" that seems to be ubiquitous especially in the media (31).[15] With regard to the performances of Baddie Winkle, this raises a central question: does Winkle subvert or confirm such "propaganda for youth"?

Seen from a perspective that holds that women grow "unattractive" as they age, Winkle's "success" in earning her followers' "clicks" is based on the incongruity between her body and her pose; it is located in the fact that she steps into these scenarios—for example, the nude shot as the emblem of female beauty and sexual desirability (Betterton 21)—despite the fact that her body seems to be "inappropriate" for such poses. Alternately, one can argue that she refutes such age propaganda because she appears in poses—the bikini shot, the lingerie model—that are usually "reserved" for younger women. At the same time, Winkle confirms the desirability of such poses; she remains trapped in the idea that women are there to be "looked at," as Mulvey notes (11).

It is in this context that I would like to return to the notion of the "aging grotesque." In her groundbreaking study *Aged by Culture*, Gullette describes a device at the Boston Museum of Science. She recalls that

> [a]t the Boston Museum of Science, one exhibit in particular attracted long lines of children: "Face Aging." […] After standing for long periods with remarkable patience, the youngsters sat down inside under bright illumination, faced forward trustingly […]and had their portrait taken by an automatic camera. […]. Then, tapping a button like a VCR remote, each child could rapidly call up simulations of what she or he would look like at one-year intervals up to age sixty-nine. [...]

[15] It must be noted that there is currently a countermovement to such propaganda, as in the 2007 Dove advertising campaign titled "Pro-Age", as well as other related campaigns. As Celebre and Denton have suggested, "Dove sought to change the culture of advertising by challenging beauty stereotypes; they selected real women whose appearances are outside the stereotypical norms of beauty (e.g., older women with wrinkles, overweight women)" (Celebre and Denton). While such campaigns are clearly fruitful in making us rethink common – and commonly held – assumptions about age, beauty and gender, these campaigns may still be the exceptions to the rule when it comes to the general depiction of women in advertising.

> In seconds, the computer added grotesque pouches, reddish skin, and blotches to their familiar faces; the faces became elongated and then wider and then saggy […]. The children were almost uniformly shaken. One eight-year-old girl […] moaned, "I don't want to get old!" […]. Nobody stayed in the booth long. (3-4)

As Gullette demonstrates, the children were shocked by their future selves because this older version of themselves seemed grotesquely unattractive. Through this image of the technological aging device at the Boston Museum of Science, Gullette demonstrates that the associations we bring to aging are culturally conditioned. The algorithm, she notes, was less an objective mirror simulating biology than a man-made technological device (4).

Seen through the dominant age ideology, Winkle succeeds as a fashion model and social media influencer because she benefits—both in a literal and a figurative sense—from sensationalism that is also at the heart of the Boston Museum of Science's aging device: to some, it may simply be shocking to see a 92-year-old woman in her underwear. The "aging mirror" takes our present self—its clothing style, its hairstyle, and its pose—and simply "fasts forward": As in a simple act of photoshopping, it pastes our "old" face onto our young body. This act of juxtaposition, Gullette emphasizes, has two effects: first, we find this image of our future, older self grotesque, and grotesquely undesirable; second, we are unable to step out of the parameters of beauty that underlies the algorithm.

It is crucial to note, however, that feminist theorists have set out to "reclaim" the notion of the grotesque (Brooks 226).[16] This is an idea—and feminist practice—that might also be applied to Baddie Winkle. Seen from this angle, Winkle would be seen to *appropriate* the aging device for her own purposes: by putting her present, 92-year-old self into the clothes of a much younger woman (the bikini, the mini-skirt), she does, in reality, what the aging algorithm does to the young people who want to learn what they will look like when they are much older. By appropriating the logic of the aging device, however, Winkle dares the audience to say that her appearance is unattractive. It is in this sense that Winkle could be said to "return the gaze": *[d]efying* claims that this "aged" version of herself is grotesque—with the body being out of keeping with the pose—, she could be said to expose the agist and sexist assumptions that mark the normative gaze.

At the same time, however, even this appropriation of the grotesque, I argue, remains trapped in the same normative parameters. Winkle may transform or appropriate the pose, in other words, but she does not step

[16] The grotesque, in turn, can be fruitfully brought into conversation with Julia Kristeva's concept of the "abject," see "Approaching Abjection" for further reference.

out of it. She is trapped in the act of a woman's "to-be-looked-at-ness," to use Mulvey's terms (11). It is at this point that I want to return to Gullette writing about the Boston Museum of Science. Gullette resists the cultural inscriptions of age on which the device's algorithms are based and thinks of beauty differently. As she notes,

> I was also skeptical about the predictive power of the software they had used in the exhibit. Because I know beautiful people in their sixties, I had been surprised that no one on the monitor looked good, aging, to my willing eyes. No one looked *better* as they reached midlife, although youngsters can improve considerably with age, acquiring more harmoniously related features. The bogus faces had none of the qualities one might expect: drama, humor, intelligence, character. (5; emphasis in original)

What emerges from Gullette's account is the opposite of the aging grotesque: Gullette imagines a society in which women can age and still be considered attractive. Winkle may bend the algorithm, but she does not ultimately leave the algorithm behind. What Gullette calls for is that we conceive of beauty differently, and hence unlearn assumptions of beauty, gender, and age. But Gullette asks us to imagine different markers of beauty. These markers, she writes, would be "drama, humor, intelligence, character" (5). While Winkle is showcasing humor, she is doing so via the use of the grotesque, which begs the question whether older women can only perform Gullette's markers within the realm of the grotesque. It is through these different manifestations of beauty, then, that one may be able to leave the idea of "to-be-looked-at-ness" behind. "Intelligence," "humor," and "character," one might argue, cannot be "objectified"; these are facets that are inseparable from subjectivity and individuality. The aging grotesque, I have argued above, may be seen as shocking—confirming established notions of beauty and age—or it may be subversive, but it remains grotesque. The "poses" that Gullette calls for, on the other hand, are profoundly different. They require the camera to be differently positioned and to elicit different ways of looking. What if the camera looked at an older woman in profile? What if it captured her smile and the way this smile transforms the lines of her naked body? Such a gaze is more akin to the ending of the film *Good Luck to You, Leo Grande*, in which the character played by Emma Thompson looks at herself in the mirror; she is completely naked, and she sees—a beautiful woman.

The Walking Cane as Accessory: Age and Disability in Baddie Winkle's Catwalk Performance

Although I have argued that Baddie Winkle's staging of her body online inhabits the poses made for a conventional to-be-looked-at-ness, she

does challenge normative assumptions about age and beauty precisely by playing with and appropriating notions of the aging grotesque. This notion of defiance can also be related to one of the accessories that has become Baddie Winkle's trademark: her walking cane. Crucially, the cane is both a fashion accessory and a walking aid. In this juxtaposition, Winkle challenges her audience to rethink notions of disability and sexual attractiveness. One of the most common ableist stereotypes has been the charge that they are either less desirable than able-bodied individuals or are seen as having no sexuality in the first place (Mollow and McRuer 1). As Jennifer Bartlett, Sheila Black and Michael Northen have shown in their edited collection *Beauty Is a Verb*, such stereotypes can be countered through performances, actions: rather than wanting to be the object of desire ("a beautiful body") and stepping into the roles and poses that have been designed for able bodied individuals, people with disability may be "doing" beauty in ways that highlight their sensuality and their confidence inside their own bodies.[17] Just as in her self-representation, Baddie Winkle defies the assumption that one can no longer be "sexy" in old age, she challenges the idea that disability detracts from sexual desirability. By turning her cane into a glamorous fashion item, she both highlights its existence and changes its nature: it is both a prop and more than that. In this instance, too, incongruity may be in the eyes of the observer. I have argued above that old age and sexual desirability are held to be mutually exclusive in dominant perspectives on aging, and the same is true for disability. To the extent that audiences are shocked by a 92-year-old woman in a short black leather skirt with a walking cane, these audiences are revealed as being both agist and ableist. Here, too, Winkle's performance becomes a litmus test of her audience's ableism or their potential to unthink assumptions of able-bodiedness.

It is at this point that I want to return to the idea of successful aging. Winkle's performance inhabits and defies the concept of "successful aging" at one and the same time. As a granfluencer she embodies a role that emerges as the epitome of successful aging, a role in which older people become "entrepreneurs of the self." At the same time, however, I propose that the actual performance of the granfluencer in general, and of Baddie Winkle in particular, also subverts notions of successful aging. As Formosa emphasizes in his critique of successful aging, we need to find ways to resist successful aging becoming a master narrative. Successful aging, as I have argued above, stresses and expands the period of the third age, an age in which individuals are still active, healthy,

[17] For further reference on the connection between beauty, sexuality and disability see Jennifer Bartlett, Sheila Black and Michael Northen's *Beauty Is a Verb*; *The Routledge Handbook of Disability and Sexuality*, edited by Russell Shuttleworth and Linda Mona; and *Sex and Disability*, edited by Robert McRuer and Anna Mollow.

and serene, as opposed to the "fourth age" marked by disability. By highlighting rather than hiding the use of her cane, Baddie Winkle challenges the very divide between "successful aging" and "failed aging." Given the fact that she insists on her cane and has turned her walking aid into a fashion accessory, Winkle's performance appears inclusive: she invites and includes people with disability into the realm of successful aging. From such an intersectional perspective, her performance defies arguments that pit age against disability. As Sally Chivers forcefully argues, we need to look for ways in which age studies and disability studies can be linked rather than being opposed to one another (23). Winkle's performance, then, can be a "site" where both perspectives may converge.

It is at this point that I return to the notion of the "entrepreneur of the self."[18] As I have argued at the outset of this paper, the notion that productiveness is tied to economic viability in the age of neoliberalism is deeply problematic. At the same time, however, these neoliberal formats may also open new ways for self-representation (cf. Katz; cf. Katz and Marshall). As a granfluencer, despite its neoliberal underpinnings, Winkle creates new forms of visibility for older women and for people with disability. Precisely by "daring" her audience to say that she is not sexy or desirable because of her age or her disability, she may be said to "call the bluff" of liberal audiences who are confident about their own open-mindedness. Finally, Winkle may be said to manipulate her audience to maximize her profit by catering to two audiences at one and the same time. As I have argued throughout this paper, Winkle very likely earns "clicks" from audiences who are shocked at what they perceive as the incongruity between her age and her outfit; but she will equally be "liked" by audiences who see her as challenging stereotypical assumptions of both age and disability. She appropriates the role of the granfluencer as an "entrepreneur of the self" and uses it for purposes that run against the dictates of neoliberalism. At the same time, even if Winkle's performance of the self defies established notions of both age and gender, she nonetheless subscribes to neoliberalism's key tenet of "productiveness," in both its ideational and its economic sense. In this process of economization, it must be noted, neoliberalism has marginalized all other notions of "success." As Brown suggests, one may be able to resist this rationale of neoliberalism by wresting notions of success away from its economist underpinnings. To be successful, one might argue in defiance of Rowe and Kahn's neoliberalist model of successful aging, is to conceive of retirement not as unproductive but as individually and socially fulfilling. What may be needed, as critics of the successful aging model have

[18] Foucault's concept of "the entrepreneur of the self" from 1979 has also been related to a critique of neo-liberal subjectivity. For further reference, see Dilts.

argued, are "anti-activity" activities (Moulaert and Biggs 36; cf. Katz, *Disciplining Old Age)*; and forms of "undisciplining old age" and finding "open spaces for exploring new avenues for the older self" (Moulaert and Biggs 36). It is in this sense that Winkle confirms rather than defies the tenets of neoliberalism. What would have happened, one may wonder, if instead of using her grandmother's photograph on *Instagram*, Winkle's granddaughter would have just showed her grandmother the picture? What if they had gone on to engage in "anti-activity activities" (Moulaert and Biggs 36), enjoying their time together? As Brown suggests that we may want to defy neoliberalism by choosing to be economically *un*productive.

Conclusion: Alternative Visions of Success

In this paper, I have analyzed the social media phenomenon of the "granfluencer" as a deeply ambivalent phenomenon. Using the case study of Baddie Winkle as an example, I have suggested that while the role of the granfluencer is very much adheres to the tenets of neoliberalism, it may nonetheless be appropriated by older individuals, particularly women, to challenge assumptions of age, beauty, gender and sexual desirability. I have argued that the role of the granfluencer adheres to neoliberalism's demand in that it extends the individual's productiveness well into old age and that it can conceive of productiveness only in economic terms. In this vein, I have proposed, the phenomenon of the granfluencer is highly similar to the notion of "successful aging." It is this notion that I have tried to critique by highlighting the fact that we are being called upon to "take charge" of our own aging process at a time that social benefits (health care, disability pension, social services) are being eroded in the era of neoliberalism. At the same time, I have suggested that performers such as Baddie Winkle can be said to "step into" this role and subvert it from within. At the core of such an appropriation is the concept of the aging grotesque. To the extent that audiences are shocked by the alleged incongruity between Winkle's age and her sexy outfit, they may in fact be revealed to be agist. At this juncture, it is essential to separate the audience's reaction to Winkle's persona from her own self-representation. Finally, I have argued that by using her walking cane as a fashion accessory, Winkle challenges the distinction between what is considered to be successful and "failed" aging, between the third age and the fourth age.

Seen from this perspective, her performance is very much an inclusive one, calling for a dialogue between aging studies and disability studies. Drawing from the work of Margaret Morganroth Gullette, Shir Shimoni, Thibauld Moulaert and Simon Biggs, however, I have wondered

whether we must not eventually step out of the parameters of neoliberalism: Winkle inhabits the format of the (potentially neoliberal) granfluencer even as she subverts it. Ultimately, I would argue, one will be able to unlearn the dictates of neoliberalism only if one steps out of its mindset: a mindset that urges to conceive of success only in economic terms. Crucially, this would involve defining success in profoundly different terms: in the fullness of social relations, in the relationships that we have built over time and continue to build. One may be influencers, in other words, in one's offline relationships; and one may change or affect the lives of our family and loved ones without ever posting a single picture on *Instagram*. This, too, is success.

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