OLDER TIKTOKERS IN DIGITAL CAPITALISM: CONSTRUCTION OF PERSONA AND AGENCY

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ABSTRACT

Social media platforms allow users to intentionally present themselves and engage with narrower and broader audiences, which has resulted in the proliferation of online personas. However, these online personas often align with existing social norms regarding primary axes of social stratification to achieve high publicity. What options are available for users who are not the primary target group due to their age? By what means can someone considered an older content creator gain publicity?

This study examines how content creators over sixty construct their online personas on Hungarian-speaking TikTok. Is it possible to categorise and typify them? How do these personas reflect the experience of ageing? What different social roles do they emphasise as part of their online persona?

This research uses a framework based on Erving Goffman's dramaturgical model to examine the short TikTok videos, supplemented by visual and verbal video analysis and discourse analysis. Five distinct online personas were identified as constructed by older content creators, each with different goals, themes, tools, and reflections on ageing. Gender issues emerged as a key finding of the research, as did how these TikTokers engage with the platform's capitalist dynamics.

KEY WORDS

Older Adults, Goffman, Online Persona, TikTok Video

INTRODUCTION

> It's a difficult thing, don't think it's going to be easy. (…) I've never made a cent from TikTok, and I'm not going to; that's not my goal; I don't care; I'm about to retire, I'll have my pension. (Creator M1)

The quote is from an older woman who speaks into her phone in a six-minute TikTok video. She is responding to a comment asking about TikTok as a source of income. In her response, she tries to defuse the expectation that TikTok is a fancy and quick way to make money while also reflecting on her own situation, where TikTok is not the main source of income. She is part of a growing group of older Hungarian TikTok users who create content on the platform and are the subject of this research.

Hungary's major demographic trend is ageing, as it is in other global northern countries. Older adults are the fastest-growing group in the population, a group that is very diverse in terms of economic, cultural, and social conditions (Givskov & Deuze 2018). In Hungary, the proportion of the population aged 65 and over was 20.6 percent in 2021 (Hungarian Central Statistical Office 2021). Given the demographic trend, the number of older internet and social media users is increasing, and beyond being passive consumers, a growing number of older adults are active content creators, even on platforms such as TikTok, which is more popular among young people.

In December 2024, TikTok had 3.3 million users in Hungary (TikTok 2025a), which is significant compared to the country's total population of 9.6 million. When examining the platform's appeal to older adults, a representative survey of Hungarian internet users in terms of age, gender and education, revealed that only 7.9 percent of those above 60 use TikTok regularly (Kmetty et al. 2024). However, there is no data on how many of them qualify as content creators: how many are TikTokers.

Although older adults are not typically seen as active content creators (Celdrán, Serrat & Villar 2019), several studies have examined their content on various social media platforms. TikTok, as a newer and sometimes controversial platform, has also started to attract scholarly interest, also in relation to older users. This study builds on previous work that analyses videos created by older TikTokers (Guo et al. 2024).

So far research on older TikTokers has referred to them by various names: older celebrities (Cheng 2023), grey-haired influencers (Guo et al. 2024), grandparent influencers (Ma 2024), or "granfluencers" (Ng & Indran 2022a, 2023a). Previous research has mainly examined videos in English and Chinese, where older TikTokers often have millions of followers. The older Hungarian TikTokers in this study, who are not necessarily well-known, had an average of 150,000 followers, which is not surprising given the much smaller language community. Therefore, I omit the terms celebrity and influencer to refer to them, and I also avoid terms that impose expectations or assumptions regarding appearance or social role on older content creators and use the more neutral term *older TikTokers*.

Self-presentation has been a significant research topic regarding older TikTokers (Guo et al. 2024; Ng & Indran 2022a). To further elaborate on this topic, the present study interprets self-representation on TikTok as an active performance shaped by the norms of digital capitalism. Drawing on Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory (1956), this analysis explores how older TikTokers curate their online personas, with a particular focus on how age is framed and performed. Rather than assuming a uniform "older TikToker" persona, the research examines variations in persona construction across the platform. Persona construction is understood as a form of agency that enables older adults to enter the platform and use its features to pursue diverse goals. Accordingly, the main research question guiding this study is: How do older Hungarian TikTokers create their online personas?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical background of digitalisation

Manuel Castells (2010) describes late modern society as a network society, characterised by the proliferation of information and communication technologies (ICT) and the growing significance of networks. The extensive spread of the internet, which began in the 1990s, has created new markets for capitalist operations. Christian Fuchs (2021) defines this mode of operation as digital capitalism, "where processes of the accumulation of capital, decision-power,

and reputation are mediated by and organised with the help of digital technologies and where economic, political, and cultural processes result in digital goods and digital structures" (p. 28). Technological development rendered the emergence and proliferation of social media platforms, allowing users to intentionally present themselves and engage with narrower and broader audiences, offering user-generated content and the perception of interaction (Carr & Hayes 2015).

In a network society, the attention is focused on the individual. Rainie and Wellman (2012) refer to this phenomenon as networked individualism, explaining the interplay between online activity and the formation of subjectivity. Papacharissi (2011) coined the definition of the networked self, which seeks opportunities for presentation, connection and communication with multiple audiences. Erving Goffman' influential work (1956) using the metaphor of theatrical drama to analyse interpersonal relationships has significantly influenced research exploring various aspects of the networked self. Individuals perform specific roles to create and present an image of themselves, and as Miller argued (1995), "electronic interactions" are natural extensions of Goffman's concept. The terminology of online identity refers to the way individuals present themselves online, which differs from their offline identity (Marwick, 2013).

It is necessary to distinguish identity from persona. Persona is the strategic formation of identity that facilitates the relationship between individuals and their social environment (Marshall 2014). In the online environment, this deliberate identity performance is described by the concept of the online persona (Moore, Barbour & Lee 2017). Crafting an online identity becomes natural in the online world, resulting in the proliferation of online personas (Marshall 2014; Marshall & Barbour 2015). The online persona can serve as a self-presentation strategy, a practice to present the self as a commodity to be consumed within the structure of digital capitalism (Marwick, 2018).

Marshall (2021) interprets the commodification of the self as a form of agency. Agency is often defined in opposition to structure (Archer 1996), which in this analysis is represented by the social media platforms and their algorithmic control. Agency is the capacity to act and behave in ways not dictated by others, as defined by Marshall (2021). He introduces the so-called industrialised agency practised by average social media users through the construction and commodification of their persona.

However, the environment in which actors exercise their agency must not be overlooked. The structures of late capitalism are gendered and racialised (Marwick, 2018; Wills, 2018; Fraser, 2022), and digital capitalism is no exception. But how does age manifest in this environment? And what kind of agency can an older adult have in such a setting?

Empirical research on older content creators

Although older adults are generally not regarded as active content creators (Celdrán, Serrat & Villar 2019), significant previous research has focused on the content of older users on different social media platforms, such as blogs (Brewer & Piper 2016; Lazar et al. 2017; McGrath 2018; Celdrán, Serrat & Villar 2019), YouTube (Harley & Fitzpatrick 2009), Instagram (McGrath 2018; Miranda, Antunes & Gama 2022) and other short-form video-sharing platforms (Tang, Ding & Zhou 2023) or applications (Waycott et al. 2013).

As an emerging and contentious social platform, TikTok has recently gained scientific attention, with remarkable research conducted on older users. One aspect of the research interprets older TikTok users as consumers, exploring their motivations and the impact TikTok has on their lives (Li, Liu & Wang 2022) or highlighting their unexploited commercial potential (Cheng 2023). Other studies compare videos created by older and younger content creators,

examining differences in genre and message, as well as the type and form of presentation, explaining the greater popularity of younger creators (Ma 2024). However, younger content creators also produce videos about older adults, and the themes and stereotypes in such content are also inspiring research topics (Abidin 2018; Ng & Indran 2022b, 2023b). The present study pertains to the previous research focusing on videos created by older TikTokers, thus interpreting their activity as a transition from being "presented by others" to "creating self-images" (Guo et al. 2024). Older TikTokers use their videos to engage in discourses on ageing (Ng & Indran 2022a), using different types of humour (Pauló & Gradwohl 2024), and presenting an active lifestyle (Guo et al. 2024), which becomes a normative expectation and risks marginalising those who are not independent or active (Yu & Zhao 2022).

Previous research used both quantitative (Yu & Zhao 2022) and qualitative (Ng & Indran 2022a; Guo et al. 2024; Pauló & Gradwohl 2024) methods to analyse the videos. The present study is related to the qualitative research approach. It can be directly compared with the findings of Guo et al. (2024), who interpreted TikTokers' self-presentation strategies based on Goffman's theory. They identified two categories of TikTokers: those who aim to construct a perfect image on the front stage and those who present an honest and unpretentious image similar to the backstage. I aim to challenge this argument and interpret how online personas are constructed in the context of digital capitalism.

Research Questions

This paper examines the strategies employed by older TikTokers to attract attention in a rather hostile online environment, where ageist stereotypes target them, the platform's algorithm disfavours them, and consequently, their content's popularity can never match that of the younger content creators. Therefore, based on the literature review, the research questions are the following:

- How do older Hungarian TikTokers create their online personas?
- What tools do they use to do so?
- How can we categorise and typify them?
- What social roles do they emphasise as part of their online persona?
- How do the online personas reflect on ageing?
- What strategies do they pursue to tackle the challenges of digital capitalism?

Methodology

Data collection

The first step in conducting a content analysis of TikTok videos was to create a new user profile to keep the search results as unbiased from previous browsing history as possible. Previous studies researching TikTok also followed this approach (Ng & Indran 2022a, 2022b, 2023b, 2023a). The initial experience of gathering videos from older TikTok users revealed that the search algorithm was unfavourable to them, as keywords such as "old", "old age", or "ageing" returned videos about older adults rather than those they created. This is rather surprising, as TikTok's success has resulted from perfecting machine learning-based user content recommendations (Pogátsa, 2024, p. 147). An article (Kersner 2023) about older TikTokers proved useful, as the author compiled numerous Hungarian and non-Hungarian content creators in this age group.

The next step was verifying whether all participants met the selection criteria, specifically that they were at least 60. The question of an age limit has led to a difficult conundrum: should there be an age limit at all? Leaving the researcher to select videos determining whether a TikToker is old based on the video content results in a highly subjective sample. This issue of operationalisation highlights the fundamental dilemma of who is considered old. According to Simone de Beauvoir (1996), ageing can be approached from three perspectives: biological (changes in the body), psychological (at the individual level) and social, all of which are interrelated. The third aspect concerns who society deems old and, in this study, who is regarded as an older TikToker.

Age, the most common measure used to define older adults, often masks differences between individual life situations, but it is easy to define and can be measured accurately. I could have used TikTok's guidelines to draw the age limit, which sets the lower boundary at 55 for the oldest age category of its users (TikTok 2025b). Instead, I based my analysis on the research by Ng and Indran (2022b, 2023a) and set the age limit at 60. This information was drawn from available biographies and profiles or mentioned in their videos.

Twenty-five TikTokers met the selection criteria and were selected for the study, and their first fifty most popular videos were watched, or all if they had fewer than fifty videos. In total, 1,221 videos were collected. The data collection process is illustrated in Figure 1.

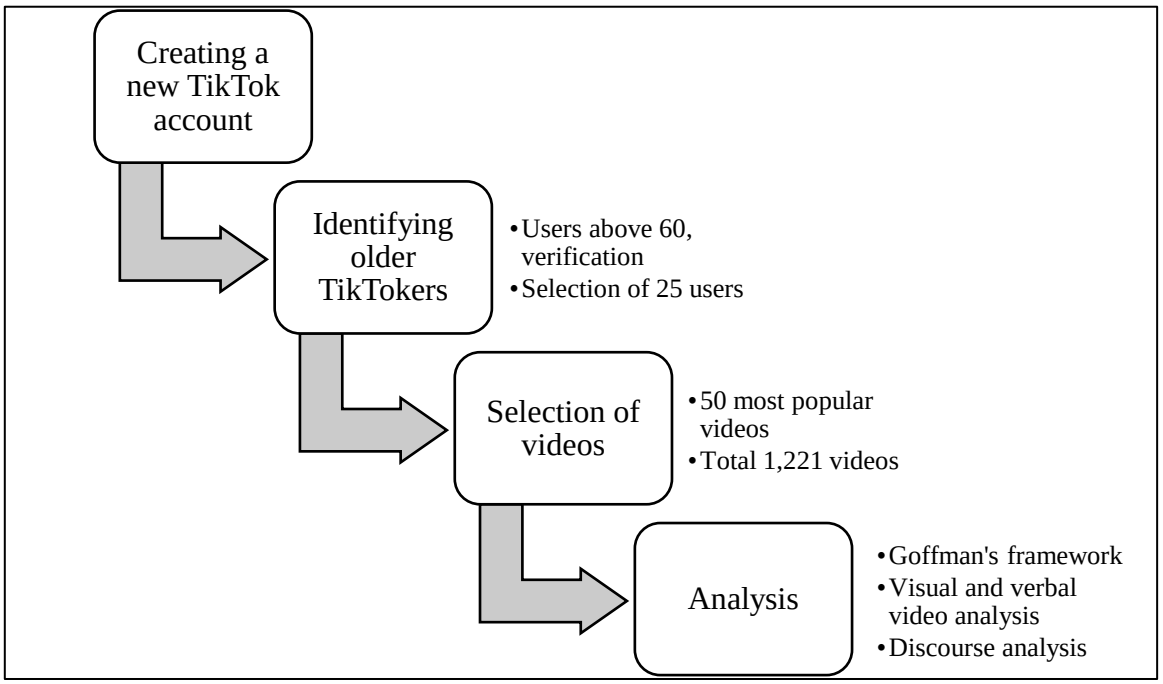

Figure 1 – Data collection process (own work)

Since these videos are publicly available, no permission was asked from the content creators for the analysis. Nevertheless, using publicly available digital content can raise privacy and ethical concerns (Kozinets 2015; Stommel & Rijk 2021). Usernames are not disclosed to protect the TikTokers' privacy, and quoted text is translated and paraphrased. However, the appendix provides a brief overview of the twenty-five TikTokers studied, including their gender, a short description of their content, the follower and like counts (as of June 2025). The sample is gender-balanced, with eleven female and twelve male TikTokers, and two channels are run by a couple, which is also indicated in their username. The sample covers a wide range of content genres, reflecting the diversity of older content creators on TikTok.

Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted in three steps. Firstly, the TikTok profiles were analysed using Goffman's theatrical framework, followed by the examination of the videos in which TikTokers reflected on their position on the platform or aimed to influence their audience to act. Finally, a discourse analysis of the video text corpus was performed. In all three stages, the analysis followed a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Charmaz 2006; Corbin & Strauss 2008). Inductive reasoning and iterative analysis were employed to develop the analytical aspects and codes.

Analysis based on Goffman's dramaturgical theory

Goffman's influential work, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (1956), employs the metaphor of theatrical drama to analyse interpersonal relationships in which individuals play roles to create and present an image of themselves. In theatre, the actor interacts with other performers on stage, which the audience observes. However, "In real life, the three parties are compressed into two" (Goffman, 1956, p. 1), as the role of the audience is always taken on by the interactional partner observing the other's performance.

Both versions can be seen in the TikTok videos examined. In the first case, which is more like the original theatrical scene, the TikToker is either accompanied by another character or performs the scene as a monologue, leaving the audience as observers. However, the audience is invited to observe and interact in the second case. The TikToker speaks directly into the camera and addresses the audience, even posing questions. Therefore, the type of scene can be either theatre or interaction, which provides the first dimension of the analysis.

Goffman contrasts the front and back stages of the performance (Goffman, 1956, p. 69). As no performance is necessary on the backstage, the actor's behaviour differs from that on the front stage, where they are conscious of being observed. However natural, genuine, and unpretentious a TikTok video may appear, it has been recorded deliberately. Therefore, contrary to the argument of Gou et al. (2024), which places these videos in the realm of the backstage, we must consider it the front stage of the performance, the field of self-presentation.

Goffman elaborates on the presentation of the self and defines the front as the "part of the individual performance, which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation of those who observe the performance" (Goffman, 1956, p. 13). A component of the front is the setting, which includes theatrical props such as furniture, décor, and background items, all accessories that enhance the performance. The personal part of the front is identified purely with the performer. It includes clothing and other signs of age, sex, race, rank, appearance, posture, and speech patterns. Both the setting and personal front elements were recognised in the analysis. Moreover, the usernames were also examined to understand how they reflect conscious self-representation or refer to other front elements.

The second dimension of the analysis is the number of front elements, which is determined by whether a TikToker uses a relatively large or small number of front elements in their self-representation. Using the two dimensions of Goffman's framework (the type of scene and the number of front elements) we can create a typology of TikTokers, as illustrated in Figure 2.

Type of scene / Number of front elements	Theatre	Interaction
Many		
Few		

Figure 2 – Framework of analysis based on Goffman's dramaturgical theory

Visual and verbal video analysis

As previously explained, 1,221 videos were compiled during the data collection process. From these, 104 videos of 19 users were selected for analysis based on whether the TikToker aimed to influence their audience to take action or reflected on their situation on the platform by discussing their strategies for gaining followers or earning money.

The content analysis of the videos was primarily guided by the visual and verbal video analysis (VVVA) framework (Fazeli, Sabetti & Ferrari 2023), which enables a qualitative approach through detailed descriptions of the videos. This framework was further enriched by additional elements based on research of the New London Group (1996) and Marone (2017). The integration of these frameworks has led to five main categories for analysing the videos.

1. *General characteristics: summary of the video and metadata (link, username, language, duration, date of upload and review, number of views, likes, comments and saves);*
2. *Multimodal characteristics: verbal and nonverbal communication (transcription of speech and other audio elements, gestures and body movements, images, texts and captions);*
3. *Visual characteristics: technical set-up determining the quality of the videos (primary colour, setting, camera angles, number of shots, appearing objects and background);*
4. *Primary character: perceived and/or stated socio-economic characteristics (name, age, gender, ethnicity, occupation, social position, clothing) and conveyed message;*
5. *Secondary character: same as for the primary character, if they appeared.*

Discourse analysis

During the visual and verbal video analysis, while documenting the multimodal characteristics, transcriptions, titles, subtitles, and any other text appearing in the videos were collected. They provided the corpus for the third stage of the analysis. The corpus was analysed using Atlas.ti software, following an inductive approach: emerging characteristics and patterns of the text formed the coding system. Given that the corpus of texts is relatively small, deriving from 8.5 percent of the original sample of 1,221 videos, this part of the analysis serves only as a complement and confirmation of the analysis resulting from the framework of analysis based on

Goffman's dramaturgical theory and the visual and verbal video analysis. However, the discourse analysis helped to clarify the intertwined nature of the verbal and visual contents of the videos.

ANALYSIS

The typology based on Goffman's dramaturgical theory outlined earlier can now be completed using the results of the analyses. Theoretically, four cases can be distinguished based on the type of scene (theatre or interaction) and whether the content creator uses few or many frontal elements. The analysis revealed that one typology can be further divided into two sub-typologies.

When discussing the personas of older TikTokers, we can identify the public figure, the entertainer, the layperson, the specialist, and the micro-celebrity, as illustrated in Figure 3.

<table>
<tr><td>Type of scene
Number
of front elements</td><td>Theatre</td><td>Interaction</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Many</td><td rowspan="2">Entertainer</td><td>Micro-celebrity</td></tr>
<tr><td>Specialist</td></tr>
<tr><td>Few</td><td>Public figure</td><td>Layperson</td></tr>
</table>

Figure 3 – Typology of TikTokers in the framework of analysis based on Goffman's dramaturgical theory

As shown in the appendix, most of the older TikTokers in the sample fall into the micro-celebrity category, followed by specialists and public figures. Entertainers and laypersons are represented by only two TikTokers each, and their distinctive characteristics make them relatively easy to place within the framework. However, the classification is not always clear-cut. Since each TikToker shares multiple videos, their style of self-presentation may vary from one video to another. This includes differences in the number of front elements and in how they address the audience. The typology is based on general patterns observed across their content, but due to the qualitative and interpretive nature of the analysis, other researchers might have assigned some TikTokers to different typologies. In the following section, I present each category, outlining its typical features and illustrating them with paraphrased quotes from original videos.

Public figure

The first category comprises older content creators who are well-known for their prior political or artistic activities before joining the platform. This group includes both individual channels and those featuring married couples.

In one video, a well-known singer couple appears on stage at the man's birthday concert, which has been promoted in several other videos. Both are dressed in elegant, glittery outfits and talk to the audience between songs, holding hands and joking with each other. At one point, the man says:

> It's a much more incredible honour that I've been receiving this love from you for sixty-five years. (Creator P1)

The scene shows them on stage, which aligns closely with the type of setting associated with their well-known public performances (and occasionally, interviews). We see them as we have known them for years, which is typical of the videos of the public figures. Some videos feature them speaking directly to the viewer, but most of their videos are theatrical in nature, where the viewers find themselves in their usual position as the audience of the performance. Among the front elements, the username merits closer examination. The "official" tag might appear, indicating that the established persona is stepping out from the backstage to present their well-known performance and may pre-empt their name being used by anyone else.

The content of the videos is based on their own existing messages, whether political or artistic. They can convert their popularity outside TikTok into followers, which suggests that their external success spills over to the platform, e.g. more tickets can be sold for the birthday concert if it is also promoted on TikTok. However, these videos raise questions about authenticity: to what extent do these public figures manage their own TikTok profiles, and to what extent are they the creators of their own personas? Professional public relations teams may develop the messages and edit the videos. Nevertheless, I have assumed that the public figure ultimately makes decisions regarding their online persona, so I have not excluded these TikTokers from the study.

The content creators are over 60 due to the selection criterion mentioned earlier, and their age is common knowledge. When mentioned or referred to, it appears as chronological age, a fact known by all without any negative connotation: it can even emphasise the long and strong relationship with the audience, as in the video described above.

What distinguishes these TikTokers from the rest is the fame to which they repeatedly refer. We can see these TikTokers as traditional celebrities, who embrace social media to foster a direct connection with their fans, or to create the illusion of such a connection (Marwick 2015). Nevertheless, they keep their distance by not stepping off the theatre stage, so the relationship is strong and direct, yet still mediated.

Entertainer

The next group features TikTokers, who, while not renowned for their prior activities, have gained significant popularity due to their humorous videos. They are the entertainers, and in this study all are male content creators. Much like public figures, entertainers prefer not to interact with viewers in their videos. Instead, they present pre-written, humorous scenes that resemble theatrical performances.

They use numerous theatrical props: various accessories help entertainers impersonate different characters in the funny scenes. A TikToker uses the props repeatedly and associates them with specific characters, e.g. when he plays an old woman, he wears a scarf on his head and a vest, whereas when he plays an old man, he wears a hunting cap and a walking stick. He can thus play a scene on his own, and he distinguishes the characters with these very stereotypical props. Furthermore, he even employs rhetorical devices, as he recites his humorous texts often in rhymes.

In this case, the setting is a home interior. For another entertainer, on the contrary, the scenes take place in a studio, which is a clear indication that this is no ordinary situation. The performance feels almost professional, and the artificiality of the background reminds us of the stripped-down world of the stage without scenery, as in the following video: the entertainer sits

on a sofa watching a fashion magazine advertisement in which a model dances energetically in the street. As the screen freezes and the magazine's logo appears, the scene shifts back to the entertainer, who begins to imitate the mood of the ad in his own setting. While an uplift music plays, he vacuums, then clutches his lower back as the name of a painkiller appears. He irons, grabs his head, and a headache reliever is shown. Finally, he flushes the toilet, followed by the name of a prostate medication (Creator E1).

When entertainers address ageing, they present and mock ageist stereotypes, such as social disadvantage, slowing metabolism, or physical decline, as in the described video. The stereotypes align with the themes of ageist stereotypes (Palmore 2005), which serve as the primary sources of humour in jokes about older adults (Bowd 2003; Davies 1977; Palmore 2005; Richman 1977).

In the analysed videos, entertainers present the stereotypes in a playful manner, both embracing and distancing themselves from them. It remains unclear whether the TikTokers are drawing on their own experiences or portraying and mocking a fictitious, generalised older adult (Pauló & Gradwohl 2024). This ambiguity is characteristic of self-deprecating humour (Kuipers 2015), making it challenging to determine whether the portrayal of ageism reflects internalised ageism or, conversely, satirises its generalised nature by highlighting the stereotype and thereby combating it. However, in scenes that most closely resemble theatrical settings and depict typical characters, the entertainers present scenarios familiar to their audiences from ageist stereotypes.

Layperson

In contrast to the TikTokers discussed so far, the layperson is the first group of whom the videos look less like a theatre scene. The TikToker speaks into the camera, and when they address the viewers, they do not address them in relation to themselves, i.e., they do not address friends or acquaintances. Instead, they address members of society, such as fellow citizens.

The front elements are few. One of them, the username, appears in two very different functions. It is a generated username, e.g. user123, which does not aid in building an online persona at all but suggests a less intentional creation of the online presence. In other cases, it can refer to the age of the TikToker ("the old" or "X-year-old uncle") which significantly impacts the online persona. The background is usually a home environment, interior, or garden, with no rhetorical devices or other accessories as recurring front elements.

The videos of the layperson are the most natural and authentic ones of the videos examined, with no pretentious allure. However, they are not spontaneous videos; they serve a definite purpose, therefore they cannot be interpreted as a glimpse into the backstage. When talking about ageing, the laypeople highlight the physical and social difficulties they experience and the vulnerability and fragility that ageing can cause. For them, TikTok is a platform where equal participants can connect, experience their social belonging and ask for help.

According to Jürgen Habermas (2023), the public sphere in modern societies is a space "between civil society and the political system" (p. 2), where citizens can deliberately engage in critical discourses concerning their lives. Laypeople interpret TikTok as a part of the public sphere: they not only ask for help but also evaluate the injustices of their situation, framing it as an illustration of the general plight of older adults in Hungary. They expect support from the public sphere while also addressing prominent figures within the political system.

In one video, a layperson sits on his bed, with little of his surroundings visible. He appears sad and lethargic, speaking without seeking eye contact, as if talking into the void. Still,

he appeals for help, explaining that his wife, whom he married a few years ago, has been taken away by her family due to her dementia. Since then, he has been unable to see or speak with her, and he asks viewers for assistance.

> I now turn with affection and trust to the President of the Republic, I turn to the judges, I turn to the lawyers to investigate this matter. Because if this can be done in this country, then it can be done to any old person. (Creator L1)

The quotation also highlights the phenomenon described by Habermas as "blurring the perception of (the) boundary between the private and public spheres of life" (Habermas, 2023, p. 21). However, new media, particularly social platforms, have a considerable empowering force, enabling everyone to become an independent creator without the constraints imposed by the old media gatekeepers. This emancipatory promise, though, cannot be realised due to the algorithmic control of big tech companies (p. 58). The difficulties faced during the data collection process further illustrate how difficult it is to discover the content of older TikTokers under algorithmic control. Laypeople attempt to shape the public sphere, but their efforts are often in vain, as they stand little chance against algorithms that do not favour them.

Specialist

Specialists interact with the audience and use many theatrical props. They emphasise their professional role and present themselves as active participants in the labour market. Goffman also discusses the role of the specialists: they lend credibility to their clients' performances in front of others by assisting in the construction, repair, and maintenance of their front elements (1956, p. 96). Among the TikTokers examined, doctors and various multi-level marketing agents exemplify this definition by focusing on individuals' appearance and health while promoting related products and services.

For doctors, the theatrical props resemble those encountered in a typical, everyday interaction with a doctor: an examination room, medical gowns, and the specific medical vocabulary as a rhetorical device that is translated and explained in the videos. Multi-level marketing agents present products from large companies and use the product itself as a theatrical prop, without any additional accessories or costumes.

Doctors resemble public figures in that they promote their own services and products. However, they cannot rely on the image they have built up over the years, as they are not as widely known. Consequently, they must quickly establish a persona in short videos that viewers can trust. In contrast, multi-level marketing agents emphasise the product's name and attributes, relying on its reputation to create their trustworthy persona.

One MLM agent is an older woman, who usually films herself speaking in her garden, holding the camera in hand. She dresses elegantly and uses a lot of stock images in her videos. This suggests a conscious effort to create a visually engaging message, and the storytelling format creates an emotional connection. In one video, she says:

> I wish I had known when the symptoms of menopause started, what the solution was. How did I feel? It was horrible. (...) Why am I telling you this? I want to help people who are struggling with the same symptoms. (Creator S1)

In these videos, age is seen as a source of knowledge and expertise. For doctors, ageing means a long and experienced practice. This connection is treated as a general assumption, as it remains unspoken in the videos. Multi-level marketing agents talk about their experiences of physical difficulties associated with ageing, e.g. unpleasant menopausal symptoms, but also about how their own complaints have been alleviated by the products they offer, as in the video described

earlier. In this way, they position themselves as lay experts (Prior 2003). It could be argued that such specialists target the older generation and try to appeal to or develop the "grey market". However, doctors also reach out to the young, while multi-level marketing agents are open to all age groups when it comes to networking.

Micro-celebrity

The final group in the study comprises micro-celebrities. Based on Goffman's dramaturgical theory, they occupy the opposite end of the typology from public figures, making a comparison worthwhile. While public figures tend to present scenes more like theatrical performances with few props, micro-celebrities showcase scenes resembling interactions with numerous theatrical props.

I refer to this group as micro-celebrities, a term coined by Theresa M. Senft (2008) that describes a new form of online performance to enhance popularity through web tools. Micro-celebrities seem more authentic than traditional celebrities, and their followers can engage with them in real-time, fostering a considerably more direct relationship.

Marwick and boyd (2011) refine the definition by adding that micro-celebrities treat their followers (even friends and family) as if they were fans. They engage in deliberate fan management and carefully construct their self-presentation as a product for others to consume. Just as ordinary people have begun acting like micro-celebrities, traditional celebrities also employ these tools. In the Hungarian context, traditional celebrities are equivalent to public figures. Nonetheless, this study illustrates that these two groups can still be clearly distinguished according to the typology derived from Goffman's dramaturgical theory.

The type of scene they present is an interaction addressing their followers, whom they refer to as friends, acquaintances, and loved ones, further strengthening the connection with the audience (Guo et al. 2024). They know their audience well: they address the followers by username and respond to their comments. Micro-celebrities merge the public sphere with their personal sphere, making everyone seem like a close friend or acquaintance. This contrasts with laypeople, who seek to engage the actors of the political system in issues that affect the public sphere.

In one video, a micro-celebrity narrates off-screen. The scene opens with a large tray of stuffed cabbage on the kitchen table. His wife enters the frame, wiping her hands on a tea towel, while the camera captures the background in detail, revealing the kitchen and living room filled with personal objects. Although the TikToker is not visible in this video (unlike others where he speaks directly to the camera in selfie mode), his image appears on a mug placed on the table. He says:

> The mugs have arrived. (…) Let it be, the kiddies love it. Here they are, which I have to give away. Let it be, the kiddies love it. Have a nice day! I love you all. (Creator M2)

As the quote illustrates, micro-celebrities emphasise their close relationships through affectionate language, and use various rhetorical devices, particularly repetition. Some micro-celebrities start their speeches with a distinctive greeting (anaphora) while others conclude with a characteristic farewell (epistrophe). In the case of the cited micro-celebrity, the repetition is so frequent that it has become his signature catchphrase, which his followers recognise, and he has successfully begun selling T-shirts and mugs featuring that phrase.

Similarly to the videos of the laypeople, the setting is not separated from the private domain: the videos take place in a domestic environment. Recurring props, e.g., a chef's hat,

suggest a conscious construction of the online persona. The usernames are also revealing as they refer to grandparental roles (grandfather, grandmother). One TikToker identifies so strongly with his username that he repeatedly refers to himself as TikTok's grandfather in his videos.

Grandmother TikTokers comprise half of the micro-celebrities, and they all use a tag referring to it in their usernames (granny, grandma). An affectionate manner of speaking characterises their videos and the fact that they appear in scenes appropriate to their social role: cooking or enjoying time with their grandchildren. The videos feel natural, as if we are stepping into someone's living room or kitchen; however, we must remember that the TikToker is intentionally stepping onto the stage by hitting record on their phones.

Micro-celebrities' age highlights their role as grandparents. When they discuss ageing, it takes on different connotations. Positively, they emphasise their longevity, the age they have reached; negatively, they talk about the challenges and disadvantages they encounter. However, they do not seek help: they aim to establish a more direct and honest connection by revealing their difficulties.

Discussion

Applying the framework based on Goffman's dramaturgical theory, a typology of five personas of older TikTokers was identified: the public figure, the entertainer, the layperson, the specialist, and the micro-celebrity. As described in the analysis, these personas differ in how they connect with the audience, the number and kind of front elements they use (such as setting and props), and how they present their age, although some personas share similar patterns within these dimensions.

The question of whether all the TikTokers studied can be considered micro-celebrities is open to debate. Marwick and boyd (2011) argue that both micro-celebrities and traditional celebrities use the same tools: fan management, the construction of self-representation, and commodification. These tools render fame a continuum rather than a strict dividing line. This also applies to the TikTokers in this study; the micro-celebrities have the most followers, not the public figures who, despite being much more famous outside of TikTok, have fewer.

However, I contend that the other groups do not qualify as micro-celebrities due to their different, more distant relationship with followers. Only micro-celebrities maintain an affectionate, intimate tone with their followers, which is best captured by Horton and Wohl's term, *para-social relationships*, which is "intimacy at a distance" (1956, p. 215). Micro-celebrities employ the most tools to develop a persona best suited for fostering such a relationship. Senft (2013) highlights another aspect of these distant connections: the *strange familiarity* that "arises from exchanging private information with people from whom we are otherwise remote" (p. 352). Nonetheless, older micro-celebrities can mitigate this strangeness by emphasising their grandparental roles, thereby achieving familiarity and intimacy. However, this quasi-familial relationship is commodified and transformed into an object of consumption.

The analysis presented above shows that the older Hungarian TikTokers use various tools to construct their online persona: the setting (background, furniture, décor, and other objects) and personal front (clothing and other elements, rhetorical devices, and the username, which was not included in Goffman's original definition).

As Williamson (2016) notes, those online personas that are "locked into existing social norms" regarding primary axes of social stratification can achieve high publicity. The classic

components of socio-economic status, such as age, gender, and class position, can determine position in social stratification. Regarding age, the social roles expected of older adults are most prominently presented by specialists and micro-celebrities, who link age with wisdom, experience, or grandparenthood. Gender differences emerge in two groups: entertainers are exclusively male, which may relate to that jokes are more associated with men, therefore, women who joke "run the risk of being disgraced" (Kuipers 2015). The other strongly gendered group comprises grandmothers. Although there are grandfathers among the micro-celebrities, their videos tend to be more varied, whereas grandmothers' videos predominantly focus on cooking and grandchildren. Class position can be inferred from technical solutions, clothing, and the setting's background, which places public figures in a higher social class and laypeople in a lower one.

Whichever component is pronounced in their persona, each group has a distinct approach to ageing: for the public figure, age is common knowledge; for the entertainer, it serves as a source of humour; for the laypeople, it brings despair; for the specialist, it becomes a source of wisdom; and for the micro-celebrity, it forms the basis of direct interaction, similar to familial relationships.

The goal of all TikTokers is to achieve high visibility, and the way to do this is to create a persona that followers can relate to. Publicity is the primary objective for micro-celebrities and entertainers; however, others also have different goals. The layperson asks for help, while the public figure and the specialist promote their existing products or services.

Aside from TikTokers and their followers, companies also use the platform, making it worthwhile to examine how they relate to older TikTokers. Specialist multi-level marketing agents promote the products of large companies, so the TikToker's persona becomes a marketing tool. This raises the question of the TikTokers' agency. Are they initiating registration on the platform, or is it a suggestion or requirement from the company?

One user was excluded from the sample. Although very similar to other older TikTokers, this account does not belong to a real person, instead, it features an actor portraying an older woman using the tools typical of micro-celebrities. The account is affiliated with a company, and the product is almost imperceptible in the background, hardly mentioned in the initial videos. Just as micro-celebrities transform their constructed persona into a consumable commodity, the persona of real multi-level marketing agents evolves into a marketing tool, in this latter case, the company itself creates the persona whose sole purpose is to promote the product. The portrayal doesn't even require a real person, just an actor who can convincingly play the role of the older TikToker.

A further research direction could be to investigate whether the typology presented, based on Goffman's dramaturgical theory, can be applied to other groups on TikTok (or other social media) besides the older age group. Since the current study follows a qualitative and interpretive approach, the classification reflects the researcher's reading of patterns across the content. Therefore, it would be valuable to explore whether other researchers would apply the typology similarly. On the one hand, it is worth investigating whether the typology, set up on a theoretical basis according to the type of scene and the number of frontal elements, can be applied and filled in to assess the external validity and generalisability of the model. On the other hand, it may also be worth analysing whether the typology of public figures, entertainers, laypeople, specialists and micro-celebrities emerges in case of other age groups.

In addition to age classification, there are other social stratification boundaries, groups along ethnic, gender, and class boundaries. It may also be worth studying what typology

emerges regarding other social groups. This is an intriguing question because social networking sites encourage users to present themselves, but within the boundaries allowed by existing social norms of gender, ethnicity and class (Williamson 2016). What are these accepted norms that can be used to gain high publicity?

In addition to the content analysis of videos, a future direction for this research could be to explore the lived experiences of older TikTokers through interviews. These interviews could shed light on their motivations for creating content, the knowledge and skills required to get started, and the challenges they have faced. According to the literature, content creation is often part of a "composite career" (Bainotti 2025), in which individuals take on multiple roles and jobs across various domains, sometimes combining online activity with traditional forms of employment. Since ageing is typically associated with withdrawal from the labour market and increased inactivity, it becomes particularly relevant to ask how content creation and influencer labour relates to older adults' sources of income (if it is a source of income at all).

As one of the TikTokers cited at the beginning of this paper noted, being a content creator is not easy. This is further illustrated by a moment of frustration in one video, when an entertainer, otherwise known for comedic sketches, responds to a platform ban. He sits wearily in front of the camera and says:

> I'm happy that I've managed to get so many followers in a year and a half (…) well, there are 1200 videos to choose from, kids. There were days when I even made 9. (Creator E2)

This glimpse highlights the intensity and emotional toll of content creation, even for experienced users.

Future research could explore how older influencers understand and navigate their creative labour: what forms of agency they exercise, what constraints or opportunities they encounter, how they interpret these in relation to age, and how their lived experiences vary. Such research could also provide practical implications, by offering insight into how platforms might design more age-inclusive environments that support diverse forms of participation and self-expression.

The study has its limitations. As the Hungarian-language TikTok community is relatively small, it was difficult to find older content creators, and it is possible that not all of them were identified. The number of videos analysed was also limited. This issue may be easier to overcome when studying TikTokers from other social groups or larger language communities. Despite the small number of TikTokers, the methodological triangulation tools allowed for an in-depth qualitative analysis. The presented visual and verbal video analysis method is well suited for analysing content where audio-visual information is important in addition to linguistic information.

Marwick (2018) warns that internet research has focused on the United States and, to a lesser extent, the United Kingdom and Australia, which risks universalising local phenomena. The study of older Hungarian TikTokers can demonstrate that the exploration of smaller linguistic communities is important and can provide a basis for comparison to enrich scientific discourse.

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