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To be or not to be old: Romanian women's experiences with social media and anti-aging discourses

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Abstract

In the context of the proliferation of anti-aging discourse on social media platforms, this study investigates how Romanian women aged between 49 and 80 relate to digital content that promotes aesthetic youth as an aspirational norm. Grounded on a sociological theoretical framework integrating capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986), neoliberal aesthetic governance (Rose, 1999; Gill, 2007) and age social constructionism (Gullette, 2018; Berger & Luckmann, 1966), the research analyzes data from a questionnaire administered to a sample of 110 women. The study explores the relationship between exposure to anti-aging content, its perceived realism and attitudes towards aging, highlighting processes of internalization, reflexive complicity and aesthetic resistance. Contingency analyses show that frequency of content viewing is correlated with perceptions of realism and attitudes towards ageing, while active engagement (like, comments) is associated with increased internalization of aesthetic norms. The results suggest, based on a small sample of 110 Romanian women, that social media may function as an algorithmic visibility regime that potentially amplifies neoliberal ideals of youth, while also indicating possible spaces for identity and counter-narrative negotiation. The study contributes to the digital sociology of ageing by exploring, within the limitations of a non-representative sample, how female ageing may not only be a biological process but also a symbolic territory of contestation and social resignification, where agency appears to be mediated by technological, affective, and discursive infrastructure.

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Keywords

Anti-aging discourse; Social media; Aging and femininity; Aesthetic normativity; Digital visibility; Reflexive complicity; Neoliberal governmentality; Ageism; Symbolic resistance; Cosmetic procedures; Algorithmic culture; Romanian women; Gendered aging; Gerontechnology;

Introduction

In recent decades, anti-aging discourse has been transformed into a transnational normative regime, fueled by the convergence of aestheticized biomedicine, digital marketing and hyper-performative visual culture. Social media, in particular, has become a central arena in which narratives about age, beauty, and self-care are negotiated, performed, and internalized in an intensely personalized and algorithmically regulated manner (Bucher, 2018; Cotter, 2019). In this context, adult women are not merely consumers of content, but reflexive actors subject to continuous aesthetic pressure, where every like, share or view can be understood as an act of (re)confirming hegemonic bodily norms (Elias & Gill, 2018; Gullette, 2018).

At the intersection of algorithmic visibility and biomedical discourses of ageing, anti-aging products are no longer presented merely as cosmetic solutions, but as technologies of the self-performative devices that promise the reversibility of time and the restoration of social identity in a youth-obsessed culture (Featherstone, Hepworth & Turner, 1990; Rose, 1999). This transformation marks the shift from ageing as a biological process to ageing as a discursive, cultural and political issue - a 'category of aesthetic governance' (Katz & Marshall, 2003) in which women are simultaneously subjects of self-control and objects of normative evaluation.

From a sociological perspective, this reconfiguration of ageing in the digital sphere involves a structural tension between science and consciousness: on the one hand, the epistemic authority of the expert - dermatologists, skincare specialists, pharmaceutical brands - constructs the legitimacy of anti-ageing products on the basis of scientific innovation; on the other hand, women's subjective trust in information sources becomes the filter through which acceptance, use or rejection of these symbolic rejuvenation technologies is negotiated. Thus, the credibility of sources - be it influencers, medical specialists, friends or brands - becomes a key social variable in shaping perceptions about the efficacy and ethics of anti-aging interventions (Ylännä, V., 2015; Petersen, 2018).

In Romania, this phenomenon takes on particular valences due to the post-socialist transition, the accelerated expansion of digitalization and the persistence of traditional cultural norms regarding femininity, bodily visibility and dignified ageing (Mortaş, 2008; Honelová, 2024). Adult women, especially those between 49 and 80, are thus situated in a space of intersectional tension, where social class, professional status, educational attainment and digital capital influence not only access to information, but also the capacity for critical evaluation and symbolic agency (Bourdieu, 1986; Van Dijk, 2020).

The present study aims to explore these dynamics through a mixed, sociological approach, examining the potential relationships between the frequency of exposure to anti-aging content on social media, the perceived realism of these messages, the level of trust placed in different sources, and attitudes towards the use of anti-aging products and procedures. The objective is twofold: (1) to explore possible mechanisms through which social media may serve as a space for aesthetic governance and symbolic distribution of body value, and (2) to identify potential typologies of agentive responses to anti-aging discourse based on respondents' trust in sources and social positioning.

This article therefore contributes to the literature on the sociology of the digital age by proposing a layered and reflexive reading of how women age in digital environments saturated with aesthetic pressure, but also with possibilities of narrative resistance. Between science and consciousness, between algorithm and agency, the anti-aging discourse becomes a fertile research ground for understanding how media technologies reconfigure identity, corporeality and temporality in the postmodern era. This research contributes to this corpus through a quantitative and correlational analysis of how social media exposure, trust in information sources and personal agency influence Romanian women's reporting of anti-aging products, adding a regional perspective, underrepresented in the international literature (Plastina, 2022; Yoon & Cole, 2008).

The discourse of ageing in the digital age involves an ecology of social, aesthetic and technological meanings in which female subjectivity is constructed, contested and negotiated in a hyper-performative visual regime.

At the heart of this study is an analysis of how women over 50, in a digital ecosystem marked by commercial algorithms and hegemonic aesthetic norms, interact with anti-aging discourses on social media platforms.

The proposed conceptual framework integrates the perspectives of Bourdieu's (1986) capital theory, digital capital (Van Dijk, 2020), digital literacy (Seifert et al., 2018), and the theory of distributed agency in socio-technical contexts (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), complemented by concepts from media studies and critical gerontology. Starting from here, the theoretical framework is developed at the intersection of four conceptual axes: (1) algorithmic aesthetics and the normativity of youth; (2) female agency and neoliberal empowerment; (3) reliance on sources as a decision-making vector; and (4) ageing as a layered, mediated and interpellated social phenomenon.

Related work

In recent decades, the body of literature on female ageing, the social construction of beauty and the neoliberal discourse of bodily responsibility has consolidated as an inter-, trans- and multidisciplinary field of research, involving body sociology, social psychology, gender studies and media research. The anti-ageing phenomenon is conceptualized from the perspective of a cultural industry in which biological age is (re)significand as an aesthetic deficiency, encouraging biotechnological intervention and the consumption of corrective products (Gilleard & Higgs, 2000; Mykityn, 2006; Gimlin, 2010).

The literature reflects a convergence between medical, media and commercial discourses that promote the image of the ideal woman as young, supple and socially active, imposing a normative aesthetic standard that sanctions deviations from youth (Hurd Clarke & Korotchenko, 2010; Jones, 2004). This ideal is algorithmically mediated through social networks that amplify the visibility of conformist and aspirational content (Schwarz, 2021; Statista, 2023). Thus, influencers and brands become vectors of an affective capitalism that monetizes body insecurity (Elias & Gill, 2018; Shao & Yin, 2025).

In the context of neoliberal postfeminism, the literature highlights the tension between ‘free choice’ and normative coercion: women are presented as active agents in beauty routines, but this agency is often internalized as a moral obligation of self-care (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2004). This individual empowerment is tantamount to a privatization of ageing, in which the response to social pressures is redirected towards self-optimization at the expense of a collective and critical approach to ageism (Beauvoir, 1949; Calasanti, 2016; Raisborough, 2019).

Marketing and media communications research also emphasizes the role of parasocial influence in shaping consumer behavior. Recent studies indicate that trust in the message source - be it a brand, a practitioner or an influencer - significantly modulates attitudes towards anti-aging products and purchase intention (Reinikainen, 2019; Chipidza et al., 2015; Ng & Indran, 2022). From this perspective, trust becomes a mediating variable between media exposure and consumer behavior, articulating an important axis in understanding the mechanisms of older women’s influence in digital ecosystems.

In terms of research methodology in the field, there is a shift from descriptive studies towards critical, qualitative and participatory approaches that seek to capture women’s lived experiences and the meanings they attribute to their own ageing (Heggenstaller et al, 2018; Clarke & Griffin, 2008). There has been a proliferation of thematic analyses, case studies and mixed methods that attempt to map the complexity of the interplay between structural (age, gender, socio-economic status) and agentic (self-perception, resilience, coping) dimensions.

According to the theory of cultural aestheticization (Featherstone, 1982; Twigg, 2013), social media functions not only as a space of representation, but as an algorithmic system of governance of visibility, in which aging bodies are aesthetically marginalized, made invisible, or turned into inspirational exceptions. Bucher (2018) and Cotter (2019) have shown that algorithmic logic favors filtered, youthful, and perfectible images, perpetuating an almost untouchable aesthetic ideal. This aesthetic is part of a visual hegemony that operates according to a Foucauldian model of soft discipline - in which the body simultaneously becomes the subject of admiration and the object of correction (Foucault, 1977; Rose, 1999).

Aesthetic habitus - constituted as an embodied schema of bodily tastes and practices - is shaped by social class, but also by the algorithmic logic of platforms that reproduce the visibility of dominant norms. Algorithmic aesthetics (Eckert, 2000) thus become a vector for legitimizing standardized bodies, while other forms of ageing are marginalized. Social representations and visibility are algorithmically coded and hierarchized, amplifying the polarization between ‘aging gracefully’ and ‘combating aging’.

Through this conceptual architecture, the study aims to reveal the mechanisms through which structural inequalities intersect with personal choices in a symbolic field marked by the tension between authenticity, aesthetic pressure and scientific legitimacy.

Applying the theory of structured agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), this study conceptualizes women not as passive receivers of media discourses, but as reflexive agents, simultaneously grounded in their past experiences, in the projectivity of the future and in the contextuality of the present. The capacity to resist or reinvent hegemonic bodily norms depends on the critical consciousness, symbolic resources and interpretative tools available.

In the contemporary neoliberal context, women's agency is often re-signified in terms of 'responsible choice' and 'self-optimization' (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009). This regulated agency involves the internalization of imperatives of continuous bodily performance, masked through discourses of empowerment, wellbeing or authenticity (Elias & Gill, 2018). Thus, recourse to anti-aging products and practices is no longer perceived as external pressure, but as the free choice of a 'vigilant' and 'proactive self' - which, in effect, naturalizes bodily surveillance and sanctions non-compliance (Bordo, 1993).

Trust in the source of the anti-aging message becomes a central element in the decision-making equation. According to the theory of parasocial influence (Horton & Wohl, 1956) and the probabilistic message elaboration model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), receivers are more likely to internalize aesthetic content when the sender is perceived as authentic, similar, or expert. In the social media context, influencers who combine personal storytelling with signals of credibility (e.g., testimonials, medical affiliation, consistent branding) become epistemic nodes of affective authority (Reinikainen, 2019; Abidin, 2016). This 'trust economy' profoundly affects the intentionality of consumption behavior, especially in the sphere of anti-aging products, which involve symbolic, financial, and identity risks (Ng & Indran, 2022).

Discourses on ageing are marked by the tension between scientific rationality and emotional influence strategies used by influencers and brands. In this context, source credibility becomes an important variable in the decision-making process. Perceived credibility - influenced by digital aesthetics, gender positioning, age of perceived influence and message aesthetics - intersects with expectations of product effectiveness. Thus, trust in the source of the digital message functions as an interpretive anchor in assessing the risks and benefits of anti-aging treatments (Ohanian, 1990; Cotter, 2019).

Finally, the conceptual framework integrates the theory of capitals (Bourdieu, 1986) to explain differences in receptivity and participation in anti-aging discourse. Cultural capital (formal education, reflexive competences), economic capital (access to products and procedures) and digital capital (technological literacy, positioning in the network ecosystem) determine not only access to discourse, but also the ability to interrogate, redefine or reject it (Van Dijk, 2020; Shao & Yin, 2025). These forms of capital are not randomly distributed, but are stratified along the axes of gender, age, professional status and class - determining a social geography of performative ageing (Van den Bogaert, Ceuterick & Bracke, 2018; Honelová, 2024).

Adopting Bourdieu's perspective (1986), we investigate how economic capital (financial resources available to purchase anti-aging products), cultural capital (level of education, scientific and aesthetic literacy), and social capital (networks of support and influence, algorithmic exposure through personal networks) mediate the reception and internalization of anti-aging discourses. These forms of capital, intersected with age, professional status and digital positioning, define differentiated aesthetic habitus that structure bodily practices and consumption decisions.

In line with Van Dijk (2020), digital capital is seen as a resource structured along four axes: material access, digital skills, diversity of use, and value derived from digital interaction. Women with high levels of digital capital tend to exhibit sophisticated forms of critical engagement with anti-aging messages, while those with limited access may remain excluded from these conversations or uncritically internalize dominant norms. Seifert et al. (2018) emphasize that digital exclusion is not just a problem of technological infrastructure, but one of symbolic relevance and socio-cultural adaptation.

Thus, the proposed theoretical framework allows to understand the use of anti-aging products as the result of an interdependent dynamic between digitally mediated normative pressures, personal decision-making capabilities anchored in trust in sources, and structural constraints related to access to capital. This approach offers a comprehensive lens on how women navigate the symbolic, commercial, and aesthetic landscape of aging in the algorithmic age.

Methodology

The present study is based on a quantitative cross-sectional design, using a questionnaire designed to examine how Romanian women over 49 interact with anti-aging discourses in the digital environment, as well as the trust they place in different sources of information (influencers, brands, experts). The research specifically looks at the relationships between the frequency of exposure to anti-aging content, the mode of interaction (viewing, reactions, distribution), the perception of the realism of the messages and the trust in the sources, all of which are analyzed in correlation with the decision to use anti-aging products or procedures.

The questionnaire was administered online, using a non-probability, convenience and snowball sampling strategy. Respondents were recruited from an online community targeting women over 49 active on platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp. In total, 110 women completed the questionnaire in full. The age range was 49-80 years, with a mean of 61.19 years and a standard deviation of 7.14 years, which confirms the suitability of the sample for studying socio-cultural processes of ageing in the digital age.

The data collection instrument included structured and open-ended questions, subsequently coded into variables relevant for the proposed analysis. Data were processed using SPSS software and contingency table analysis was applied to identify relationships between variables.

The instrument was composed of 36 questions, distributed into seven thematic sections, each corresponding to a set of theoretically grounded research questions. For the

present article, the analysis focuses on a strategic selection of questions that reflect the relationships between exposure to digital content, perceptions of content, and trust in sources – all in relation to the use of anti-aging products.

All variables are categorical and have been coded in SPSS for two-dimensional analysis with percentage reporting by rows and columns.

The research design is oriented towards conceptual exploration and mapping, not causal hypothesis testing. Methodological limitations include: lack of statistical representativeness of the sample (urban and educational bias), possible self-selection effect and limited access to offline subgroups. However, the profile of the participants – urban, educated, digitally active – allows an in-depth exploration of the interplay between cultural and digital capital and anti-aging discourse, providing a valuable contribution to the literature.

Data analysis was complemented with a sociological approach, which contextualized the results in relation to gender norms and social structures specific to Romanian society.

Results

Analyzing the potential *relation between anti-aging product use and societal norms* we want to find out whether there is an association between conforming to beauty norms (by using products) and perceived social pressure. In other words, is frequent use associated with strong social messages?

Table 1 provides a detailed insight into the intersection between verbalized social pressure and anti-aging product adoption. This analysis highlights how interpersonal messages can shape individual decisions, reflecting the dynamics between cultural influence and personal agency in the context of aesthetic norms.

Of all respondents, 56 (51%) use anti-aging products “daily”, 24 (22%) “a few times a week”, 20 (18%) “occasionally” and 10 (9%) “never”. In terms of social messages, 25 (23%) say that they have been told “often” that women should maintain their beauty regardless of age, 48 (43.6%) “sometimes”, 36 (33%) “never” and 1 (1%) “something else”. The distribution of responses according to frequency of product use reveals a strong relationship. Of those who use products ‘daily’, 15 (27%) report messages ‘often’, 27 (48%) ‘sometimes’, 13 (23%) ‘never’ and 1 (2%) ‘other’. For “several times a week”, 8 (33%) say “often”, 11 (46%) “sometimes” and 5 (21%) “never”. In the “occasionally” category, 2 (10%) say “often”, 7 (35%) “sometimes” and 11 (55%) “never”. Of those who use products “never”, 3 (30%) say “sometimes” and 7 (70%) “never”. The combined percentage of respondents who receive messages (“often” + “sometimes”) is 75% for “daily”, 79% for “a few times a week”, 45% for “occasionally” and 30% for “never”.

These results indicate a positive association between the frequency of social messages about beauty maintenance and regular use of anti-aging products, with greater strength among daily and weekly users. Women who use products ‘daily’ show the highest percentage of exposure to ‘often’ messages (27%) and a combined high percentage of frequent messages (75%), indicating that direct social pressure plays a significant role in the

consistent adoption of these products. From a social constructionist perspective Eckert (2000) this relationship reflects how gender norms are reinforced through interpersonal interactions, transforming societal expectations into individual practices. The messages ‘often’ - perhaps originating from family, social or professional circles - seem to reinforce the idea that beauty is an ongoing female responsibility, aligning with neoliberal responsibility theory Elias & Gill (2018). This pressure may motivate daily product use as a strategy to conform to imposed aesthetic standards, especially among women who internalize these messages as relevant to their identity.

Table 1. Use of anti-ageing products and societal norms

		Have you been told to stay beautiful?				Total
		Other	Yes, often	Yes, sometimes	No, never	
How often do you use products	Several times a week	0	8	11	5	24
	Never	0	0	3	7	10
	Occasional	0	2	7	11	20
	Daily	1	15	27	13	56
Total		1	25	48	36	110

Women who use products “a few times a week” show a similar combined percentage of frequent messaging (79%), but with a higher proportion of “often” (33%) than “daily” (27%) responses. This distribution suggests that while social messaging is equally present, it can lead to more moderate use, possibly due to a negotiation between acceptance of norms and practical limitations (e.g. In contrast, ‘occasional’ users show a significantly lower proportion of frequent messages (45%) and the highest rate of ‘never’ (55%), indicating a detachment from social pressure that correlates with less intense use. Women who “never” use products have the lowest rate of frequent messaging (30%) and a clear majority of “never” (70%), suggesting a resistance to imposed aesthetic norms aligned with ageism theory Twigg (2004). For these respondents, the absence of direct social messaging may reduce the relevance of anti-aging products, allowing a rejection of responsibility to counteract aging.

The ‘everyday’ category also includes the only ‘something else’ response (2%), which, although unique, indicates a diversity of experiences that do not fit into common patterns. The high percentage of ‘sometimes’ in all categories (44% of the total) reflects widespread exposure to social messages, but of varying intensity, allowing for a range of responses - from conformity to indifference. Sociologically, these variations underscore the influence of the immediate social environment as a determinant of behavior. Women frequently exposed to the messages tend to adopt the products more regularly, suggesting an internalization of norms linking beauty to feminine value, in line with Bourdieu’s social capital theory (1986). The social networks that convey these messages act as a pressure mechanism, especially for daily users, who appear to respond to explicit expectations with concrete actions.

In a Romanian context, where ageing is often stigmatized and access to products can be influenced by economic factors, the relationship between messaging and frequent

use highlights a tension between cultural pressure and individual capacity to act. The high percentage of daily use (51%) combined with exposure to messaging (75% for 'daily') suggests that direct social discourse amplifies the influence of digital narratives, reinforcing global aesthetic norms. However, the significant percentage of 'never' among non-users (70%) indicates a possible resistance to these pressures, either for practical reasons or as a challenge to the idea that ageing requires intervention.

The implications of these results are relevant for understanding how social norms translate into individual practices. Frequent messages stimulate regular use, reflecting a vulnerability to interpersonal expectations, while their absence correlates with a detachment from such behaviors. This contrast underscores the need to explore the specific sources of the messages (e.g. family, friends) and the factors that mediate product adoption (e.g. accessibility, personal attitude). Future research could investigate how the content of messages – positive or critical – influences the decision to use anti-aging products, providing a more nuanced picture of the impact of societal norms.

The purpose of the analysis between *confidence in sources* and *frequency of product use* is to test whether there is a link between the sources that respondents trust and their product use behavior, or whether trust in medical experts increases the use of anti-aging products.

To answer the question, we focus on the main sources of trust with a sufficient number of respondents: doctors or experts (72), ordinary people (23), brands (brands) (5) and influencers over 50 (4). The other categories have samples too small to be statistically relevant. This analysis highlights how information sources shape individual decisions, reflecting the intersection between social influence and personal agency in the context of aesthetic norms.

Out of the total respondents, 72 (66%) trust "doctors or experts", 23 (21%) "ordinary people", 5 (5%) "brands", 4 (4%) "influencers over 50", 3 (3%) "someone else", and 1% each in "personal experiences", "me, my common sense, my realism" and "specialists in the field". In terms of frequency of use of anti-ageing products, 56 (51%) use them "daily", 24 (22%) "a few times a week", 20 (19%) "occasionally" and 10 (9%) "never". The distribution of responses by source of trust reveals significant variations. Of those who trust 'doctors or experts', 42 (58%) use products daily, 14 (19%) a few times a week, 11 (15%) occasionally and 5 (7%) never. For "regular people", 7 (30%) say daily, 6 (26%) a few times a week, 6 (26%) occasionally and 4 (17%) never. In the 'brands' category, all 5 use products daily. Of those who trust "influencers over 50", 2 (50%) say daily and 2 (50%) a few times a week. For "in someone else", 2 (67%) use a few times a week and 1 (33%) occasionally. Single respondent categories ('personal experiences', 'common sense', 'specialists') indicate occasionally, never and occasionally respectively.

These results (Table 2) suggest a possible relationship between reliance on sources perceived as authoritative or commercial and the frequent use of anti-aging products, with variations observed across source types. Women who trust "doctors or experts" - the majority category - show the highest rate of daily use (58%) and a combined rate of frequent use (daily + a few times a week) of 78%, reflecting the influence of professional authority on behavior. From the perspective of social constructionism Eckert (2000), this trend can

be attributed to the legitimacy accorded to medical experts in constructing perceptions of aging as a process requiring specialized intervention. Physicians' recommendations, perceived as science-based, seem to encourage a consistent uptake of products, aligning with neoliberal logic Elias & Gill (2018) that promotes individual responsibility for maintaining health and physical appearance. However, the 7% who never use products suggests that trust in experts does not automatically translate into action, possibly due to financial barriers or a preference for non-commercial approaches.

Table 2. Trust in sources and frequency of product use

		How often do you use products				Total
		Several times a week	Never	Occasional	Daily	
Who do you trust for advice	Personal experience	0	0	1	0	1
	someone else	2	0	1	0	3
	in influencers over 50	2	0	0	2	4
	in brands	0	0	0	5	5
	in doctors or experts	14	5	11	42	72
	in me, my common sense, my realism	0	1	0	0	1
	in ordinary people	6	4	6	7	23
	specialists in the field	0	0	1	0	1
Total		24	10	20	56	110

Women who trust “brands” show universal daily use (100%), although the small sample (5 respondents) limits generalizability. This association can be explained by the influence of marketing, which, according to neoliberal responsibility theory Elias & Gill (2018), positions brands as accessible and effective solutions for ‘managing’ ageing. Trust in brands suggests an internalization of commercial discourse, in which products are seen as indispensable for conforming to aesthetic standards. Similarly, ‘influencers over 50’ inspire frequent usage (50% daily, 50% a few times a week), reflecting the power of authentic representation in social media. These influencers, perceived as age-relevant role models for respondents, may facilitate a personal identification that motivates product use, aligning with constructionist narratives Eckert (2000) about ‘successful’ ageing.

In contrast, women who rely on ‘regular people’ show more moderate use (30% daily, 52% frequently) and a higher percentage of non-use (17%), suggesting a less coercive influence of informal advice. This result indicates a more practical or skeptical approach, possibly influenced by shared experiences that do not necessarily promote commercial products. Bourdieu’s social capital theory explains this dynamic: informal social networks provide diverse resources but lack the normative authority of experts or brands, leaving more room for individual decisions. Small sample categories (e.g. “in someone else”, “personal experiences”) suggest varied preferences, but do not allow firm conclusions.

Sociologically, these findings emphasize the role of trusted sources as mediators of aesthetic norms. Trust in doctors and brands correlates with heavy use, reflecting an alignment with the professional and commercial discourse that dominates the anti-aging

space. In a Romanian context, where access to experts and products may be limited by economic factors, this association highlights a polarization between women influenced by authority and those who rely on more accessible but less prescriptive sources. The high percentage of daily use overall (51%) indicates a deep penetration of anti-aging products mediated by trusted sources.

The implications of these results are relevant for understanding how social influence shapes aging-related behaviors. Trust in doctors and brands incentivizes frequent use, suggesting vulnerability to authoritative messages, while informal sources leave room for skepticism or independence. Future research could explore the impact of affordability and the type of products recommended by these sources on uptake.

The data partially support the hypothesis that trust in medical experts is associated with increased use of anti-aging products. Respondents who trust doctors or experts show high daily use (58.3%) and frequent use (78%), indicating a clear positive association. The percentage of non-users is also low (7%).

Comparison with other sources of trust shows brand trust (brands) and influencers over 50 register impressive percentages of daily (100% and 50%) and frequent (100% for both) use, but the small samples (5 and 4 respondents) limit the generalizability of these results. In contrast, those relying on regular people have lower daily (30%) and frequent (56%) use, with a higher percentage of non-users (17%), suggesting a weaker influence on behavior.

Although reliance on medical experts is associated with frequent use, other sources such as brands and influencers appear to have a potentially greater impact in some cases, although data are insufficient to draw definitive conclusions.

The results suggest that trust in medical experts is associated with increased use of anti-ageing products. However, the analysis suggests that trust in brands or influencers may also influence use to a significant extent, although small sample sizes require caution in interpretation.

The analysis of the relationship between *frequency of exposure to anti-aging content* and *perceived pressure on women to maintain youth compared to men* was conducted to investigate how the intensity of contact with digital discourse influences awareness of gender norms by addressing the fourth research question.

Of the total of 110 female respondents, 37 (34%) encounter anti-aging content daily, 21 (19%) a few times a week, 39 (36%) occasionally, 12 (11%) rarely and 1 (1%) never. The perception of pressure is distributed as follows: 43 (39%) “much more” for women, 42 (38%) “a little more”, 8 (7%) “don’t know” and 17 (16%) consider the pressure similar or higher for men. In the ‘daily’ category, 15 (41%) perceive ‘much more’ pressure on women, 12 (32%) ‘a bit more’, 3 (8%) ‘don’t know’ and 7 (19%) ‘similar’. For ‘several times a week’, 14 (67%) indicate ‘a lot more’, 5 (24%) ‘a little more’ and 2 (10%) ‘similar’. In “occasionally”, 9 (23%) say “a lot more”, 21 (54%) “a little more”, 4 (10%) “don’t know” and 5 (13%) other answers. For ‘rarely’, 5 (42%) say ‘a lot more’, 4 (33%) ‘a little more’, 1 (8%) ‘don’t know’ and 2 (17%) ‘similar’. The only respondent “never” considers the pressure similar. The overall percentage perceiving more pressure on women is 73% (daily), 91% (several times a week), 77% (occasionally) and 75% (rarely).

The results presented in Table 3 suggest that frequent exposure to anti-aging content may be associated with heightened perceptions of pressure on women, with a notable observation in the “a few times a week” category (91%). From a social constructionist perspective Eckert (2000), repeated exposure to anti-aging narratives in social media reinforces gender norms that associate women’s value with physical appearance, which explains the high percentage of pressure awareness among those exposed frequently. In contrast, daily exposure (73%) shows a higher proportion of ‘similar’ responses (19%), possibly due to a normalization of messages that dilutes the perception of gender difference.

Table 3. Frequency of exposure and perceived pressure on women

		Perceived pressure on women to maintain youth compared to men						Total
		Yes, much more	Yes, a bit more	I don't know	No, men face much more pressure	No, men face slightly more pressure	No, the pressure is similar	
Frequency of exposure to anti-aging content	Several times a week	14	5	0	0	0	2	21
	Never	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
	Occasional	9	21	4	1	2	2	39
	Rarely	5	4	1	0	0	2	12
	Daily	15	12	3	0	0	7	37
Total		43	42	8	1	2	14	110

Neoliberal theory Elias & Gill (2018) says that constant exposure to anti-aging content places responsibility on the individual, intensifying perceived pressure. Occasionally exposed women, with a high proportion of “a little bit more” (54%), may reflect a more nuanced sensitivity, influenced by intermittent contact that allows for critical reflection. In a Romanian context, where aesthetic norms are strongly influenced by the media, these data emphasize the role of social media as an amplifier of gender inequalities.

The analysis of the relationship between *the mode of engagement with anti-aging content* and *the perception of its realism* was conducted to explore how active or passive interaction with anti-aging discourse influences its interpretation by Romanian women aged 49-80, addressing the third research question of the study: “How do women interpret anti-aging messages?”. This analysis allows a deeper understanding of how active or passive engagement mediates receptivity to narratives about ageing, providing clues about the processes of internalization and negotiation of aesthetic norms.

Of all respondents, 46 (42%) say they only view anti-aging content without interacting, 40 (36%) like or react to posts, 9 (8%) comment or share, 9 (8%) save content for later and 6 (6%) ignore it completely. In terms of perception of realism, 21 (19%) consider the content “yes, useful and realistic”, 65 (59%) “somewhat, but sometimes it is exaggerated”, 14 (13%) “no, it idealizes youth and distorts reality” and 10 (10%) “don’t

know". The distribution of answers according to the mode of involvement reveals significant differences. Of those who appreciate or react to the postings, 10 (25%) perceive the content as realistic, 26 (65%) as "somewhat exaggerated", 3 (8%) as distorting reality and 1 (3%) as don't know. Among those who comment or share, 4 (44%) see it as realistic and 5 (56%) as 'somewhat exaggerated', with no responses indicating distortion or uncertainty. For those who only visualize, 2 (4%) say "realistic", 28 (61%) "somewhat exaggerated", 10 (22%) "distorts reality" and 6 (13%) "don't know". Of those who ignore the content, 1 (17%) see it as realistic, 1 (17%) as 'somewhat exaggerated', 1 (17%) as 'distorting' and 3 (50%) as 'don't know'. Finally, of those who save, 4 (44%) perceive the content as realistic and 5 (56%) as "somewhat exaggerated".

These results suggest a potential correlation between the level of active engagement and a positive perception of the realism of anti-aging content (Table 4). Women who actively interact - by liking/reacting, commenting/sharing or rescuing - tend to view the content as either realistic or only partially exaggerated, whereas those who adopt a passive approach (viewing) or ignore it show more skepticism, perceiving the content as distorting reality or expressing uncertainty. From a social constructionist perspective Eckert (2000), this difference can be attributed to how active engagement reflects an alignment with dominant narratives promoted by social media. Women who like, comment on or save content appear to more readily accept anti-aging messages as relevant or useful to their lived reality, possibly because they choose to interact with posts that resonate with their own values or experiences. The high percentages of perceived realism among those who comment/share (44.4%) and save (44%) suggest that these actions are not just passive reactions but deliberate acts of content validation, whereby respondents contribute to the perpetuation of discourse in their social networks or keep it as a personal resource.

Table 4. How to engage with anti-ageing content and its perceived realism

		Perception of content realism				Total
		Yes, it is useful and realistic	I don't know	No, it idealizes youth and distorts reality	Somewhat, but sometimes it is exaggerated	
The mode of engagement with anti-aging content	Appreciate/react to posts	10	1	3	26	40
	Comment/Share	4	0	0	5	9
	Just visualize, no interaction	2	6	10	28	46
	Ignore	1	3	1	1	6
	Save for later	4	0	0	5	9
Total		21	10	14	65	110

In contrast, women who only visualize without interaction show the lowest proportion of perceived realism (4%) and the highest proportion of skepticism (22% "distort reality"), indicating a critical distancing from the promoted messages. This attitude can be explained by ageism theory Twigg (2004), which emphasizes how stereotypes about ageing – such as the idealization of youth – are rejected by some people as unrealistic or

irrelevant to their experience. Passive viewing might reflect an unavoidable exposure to anti-ageing content without an emotional or practical investment in its messages, allowing for a more objective and often more critical evaluation. The fact that 60.9% of these respondents consider the content ‘somewhat exaggerated’ suggests a recognition of realistic elements combined with an awareness of commercial or cultural exaggerations, indicating a subtle negotiation between acceptance and rejection.

Women who ignore the content show high uncertainty (50% “don’t know”), which may reflect a complete detachment from the anti-aging discourse, either due to lack of interest or as a form of resistance to imposed norms. In a neoliberal framework Elias & Gill (2018), active involvement (appraisals, comments, rescue) can be interpreted as an acceptance of individual responsibility to ‘manage’ ageing, whereas passive viewing and ignoring suggests either indifference or a challenge to the idea that ageing should be countered. The high percentage of ‘somewhat exaggerated’ in all categories (59% of the total) indicates a widespread perception that anti-ageing discourse contains elements of truth but is amplified by unrealistic ideals, reflecting the combined influence of personal experience and media pressures.

Sociologically, these findings emphasize the role of individual agency in interpreting digital content. Active engagement appears to be associated with a greater internalization of aesthetic norms, with women choosing to interact with content that confirms or supports their concerns about aging. This alignment may be influenced by social and temporal capital, according to Bourdieu (1986), as women who have the time and resources to actively engage (e.g., retirees or those with a personal interest) tend to view content as realistic or useful. In contrast, the passivity and skepticism observed among viewers suggests a distancing that may be motivated by an awareness of ageist stereotypes or a perceived lack of relevance. In a Romanian context, where ageing is often stigmatized, the mixed perception of realism (the majority ‘somewhat exaggerated’) reflects a tension between accepting global norms of beauty and recognizing their limitations in relation to local realities.

The implications of these results are relevant for understanding how social media shape perceptions of aging. Active engagement, associated with a more positive view of realism, suggests that women who interact with anti-aging content contribute to its perpetuation, either through validation (likes) or dissemination (shares). On the other hand, the skepticism of passive viewers indicates a potential resistance to imposed norms, which could be further explored to develop alternative narratives about aging. Future research could investigate whether this difference in perception also translates into a different impact on behavior, such as the use of anti-aging products, or whether it is influenced by additional factors, such as personal attitudes towards aging or levels of digital literacy.

Analyzing the relationship between *perceived pressure on women to maintain youth compared to men and the experience of receiving societal messages that women should maintain their beauty regardless of age* was undertaken to explore how external societal norms influence awareness of gender inequalities related to aging, addressing the fourth research question of the study, “How do societal norms influence perceptions of aging?”

Crosstabulations provide a detailed picture of the intersection between perceived pressure and direct social messages, highlighting how interpersonal experiences contribute to the formation of attitudes towards aesthetic norms associated with ageing.

Of the total respondents, 43 (39%) believe that women are “much more” pressured than men to maintain their youth, 42 (38%) “a bit more”, 8 (7%) “don’t know”, 14 (13%) think that the pressure is similar between genders, and 3 (3%) attribute more pressure to men (1 “much more”, 2 “a bit more”). In terms of social messages, 25 (23%) say they have “often” been told that women should maintain their beauty regardless of age, 48 (44%) “sometimes”, 36 (33%) “never” and 1 (1%) indicate “something else”. The distribution of responses according to perceived pressure reveals interesting patterns. Of those who perceive ‘much more’ pressure on women, 15 (35%) report messages ‘often’, 12 (28%) ‘sometimes’, 15 (35%) ‘never’ and 1 (2%) ‘something else’. For those who indicate “a bit more”, 8 (19%) say “often”, 21 (50%) “sometimes” and 13 (31%) “never”. In the “don’t know” category, 6 (75%) say “sometimes” and 2 (25%) “never”. Of those who consider the pressure similar, 2 (14%) say “often”, 7 (50%) “sometimes” and 5 (36%) “never”. In the sub-groups that attribute more pressure to men, responses are limited: 1 “sometimes” for “a lot more pressure” and 1 “sometimes” plus 1 “never” for “a little more”.

Table 5. Perceptions of pressure on women to stay young and social messages about staying beautiful

		Social messages about maintaining beauty				Total
		Other	Yes, often	Yes, sometimes	No, never	
Perceptions of pressure on women to maintain youth	Yes, much more	1	15	12	15	43
	Yes, a bit more	0	8	21	13	42
	I don't know	0	0	6	2	8
	No, men face much more pressure	0	0	1	0	1
	No, men face slightly more pressure	0	0	1	1	2
	No, the pressure is similar	0	2	7	5	14
Total		1	25	48	36	110

These results suggest a possible association between the frequency of social messages about maintaining beauty and the perception of greater pressure on women to maintain youth, with a notable trend among those who report messages ‘often’ (Table 5). The combined percentage of perceived greater pressure on women (“a lot more” + “a little more”) is 77% overall, but varies by social messaging experience: 92% of those who receive messages “often” (23 of 25), 69% of those with messages “sometimes” (33 of 48), and 78% of those who say “never” (28 of 36). From a social constructionist perspective Eckert (2000), this relationship reflects how gender norms are constructed and reinforced through direct social interactions, not just media narratives. Women who frequently receive messages about the need to maintain beauty - whether from family, friends, or the community - more intensely internalize the idea that aging is a disproportionately feminine problem, which amplifies their perceptions of societal pressure. The high percentage of

“often” (35%) among those who perceive “much more” pressure suggests that these direct messages act as a catalyst, reinforcing gender stereotypes and aesthetic norms that associate women’s value with physical appearance.

However, the important proportion of female respondents who have never received such messages (33% of the total) and yet perceive greater pressure on women (78% in this category) indicates that the source of awareness is not limited to explicit interpersonal interactions. This result can be explained by the influence of the anti-aging discourse in social media, which, according to neoliberal responsibility theory Elias & Gill (2018), shifts the responsibility for maintaining youth onto the individual, regardless of the direct messages received. Women in the ‘never’ category could infer pressure from observations of the wider cultural environment - advertisements, influencers or the behaviors of others - without the need for explicit verbalization from close others. In contrast, the lower percentage perceiving pressure among those with ‘sometimes’ messages (69%) suggests a more moderate sensitivity, possibly due to the intermittent nature of the messages, which allows for a more nuanced reflection on gender differences.

Women who consider pressure similar between genders (13% of the total) show a balanced distribution between “sometimes” (50%) and “never” (36%), with a small proportion of “often” (14%), which may indicate a resistance to traditional gender norms or a more egalitarian perception of ageing. This attitude aligns with ageism theory Twigg (2004), which suggests that people exposed to less rigid stereotypes may challenge the idea that ageing is an exclusively female problem. However, the small number of female respondents attributing greater pressure to men (3 out of 110) and their association with sporadic or absent messages limits the interpretation in this sense, suggesting that such perceptions are rather exceptions influenced by individual contexts.

Sociologically, these findings emphasize the combined role of the direct and mediated social environment in shaping perceptions of aesthetic pressure. Frequent social messages (“often”) seem to act as an amplifier of gender norms, reinforcing the idea that women are subject to stricter standards than men, a phenomenon that reflects a deep internalization of cultural expectations. In a Romanian context, where ageing is often associated with loss of social status, especially for women, this association suggests a continuity between traditional and modern pressures mediated by social media. The high percentage of “sometimes” in all categories (44% of the total) indicates a widespread exposure to such messages, but with varying intensity, allowing for a diversity of responses– from acceptance to critical reflection.

The implications of these results are significant for understanding how societal norms influence perceptions of aging. Women who receive frequent messages tend to perceive greater pressure, suggesting that direct social interactions play a crucial role in perpetuating gender inequalities, complementing the influence of digital discourse. However, the awareness of pressure even in the absence of explicit messages underscores the power of implicit cultural narratives, which can be internalized through media exposure or observation of social behaviors. In a neoliberal framework Elias & Gill (2018), this dynamic reflects a dual pressure on women - interpersonal and mediated - that positions them as primarily responsible for counteracting ageing. Future research could explore the

specific sources of these messages (family, friends, peers) and their impact on behaviors, such as the use of anti-aging products, to better understand the mechanisms by which societal norms are transformed into individual practices.

The analysis of the relationship between *the perception of the realism of anti-aging content* and *its impact on self-image* was conducted to explore how the interpretation of digital messages influences the attitudes and personal feelings of Romanian women aged 49-80 towards the aging process, addressing the third research question of the study: “How do women interpret and internalize anti-aging messages?”. The crosstabulation provides a detailed insight into how the appraisal of content realism shapes its emotional and psychological effects, highlighting the intersection between media narratives and individual identity construction in the context of ageing.

Of all respondents, 21 (19%) consider anti-ageing content “yes, useful and realistic”, 65 (59%) “somewhat, but sometimes it is exaggerated”, 14 (13%) “no, it idealizes youth and distorts reality” and 10 (9.1%) “don’t know”. In terms of the impact on self-image, 57 (52%) say they feel “more positive about ageing”, 14 (13%) “more pressured to maintain their youth”, 38 (35%) say “it does not affect them” and 1 (1%) indicate “other”. The distribution of responses according to perceived realism reveals significant differences. Of those who consider the content realistic, 18 (88%) report a positive impact on their self-image and 3 (14%) say it does not affect them, with no respondents indicating pressure or other effects. In the ‘don’t know’ category, 2 (20%) feel more positive, 7 (70%) are not affected and 1 (10%) indicates ‘other’. For those who perceive the content as distorting reality, 3 (21%) report a positive impact, 3 (21%) pressure and 8 (57%) indifference. Finally, of those who find the content “somewhat exaggerated”, 34 (52%) say it makes them feel more positive, 11 (17%) more pressured and 20 (31%) are not affected.

Table 6. The perceived realism of anti-aging content and its impact on self-image

		Impact on self-image				Total
		Other	It makes me feel more positive about aging	Makes me feel more pressure to maintain my youth	It doesn't affect me	
Perceived realism of anti-aging content	Yes, it is useful and realistic	0	18	0	3	21
	I don't know	1	2	0	7	10
	No, it idealizes youth and distorts reality	0	3	3	8	14
	Somewhat, but sometimes it is exaggerated	0	34	11	20	65
Total		1	57	14	38	110

These results suggest a possible relationship between the perceived realism of anti-ageing content and its impact on self-image, with a notable trend towards positive effects among those who consider it realistic or partially realistic (Table 6). Women who evaluate the content as ‘useful and realistic’ show an overwhelmingly positive response (86%), indicating that aligning the messages with their lived reality - either through practical advice or authentic representations – can act as an empowerment factor, reinforcing an

optimistic attitude towards ageing. From the perspective of social constructionism Eckert (2000), this positive effect can be attributed to the ability of realistic content to reflect recognizable experiences, providing women with a framework through which to reaffirm their identity and counter dominant narratives that associate ageing with decline. The complete absence of pressure in this category suggests that perceived realism neutralizes unrealistic expectations, reducing the sense of inadequacy or obligation imposed by aesthetic standards.

In contrast, women who perceive the content as “idealizing youth and distorting reality” show a more balanced distribution of impact: only 21% report a positive effect, while 21% feel pressured and 57% remain indifferent. This variation reflects a tension between rejecting content as unrealistic and its subtle influence on self-image. Ageism theory Twigg (2004) provides a framework for understanding this result: content that glorifies youth and ignores the realities of ageing may generate pressure among some women, who feel inadequate in the face of unattainable standards, while others choose to detach themselves completely, displaying indifference as a form of resistance to imposed norms. The relatively high percentage of indifference (57%) suggests that, for many of these respondents, the distorting content fails to connect with their personal experience and thus loses its emotional relevance.

The “somewhat, but sometimes it is exaggerated” category, which represents the majority of respondents (59.1%), presents a mixed picture: 52% report a positive impact, 17% pressure and 31% indifference. This distribution indicates a complex negotiation between partial acceptance and criticism of anti-aging messages. The women in this group seem to recognize useful or realistic elements in the content, which explains the predominant positive effect, but they are also aware of its exaggerations, which generate pressure or indifference depending on the degree of internalization. In a neoliberal context Elias & Gill (2018), the pressure reported by 17% may be linked to the individual responsibility imposed by the anti-aging discourse, which promotes the idea that women must act to “correct” the signs of ageing, especially when the content exaggerates the benefits of products or procedures. However, the majority positive effect (52%) suggests that many respondents are able to extract motivational aspects from the content, reinterpreting it in a way that supports their self-image.

The “don’t know” category highlights an uncertainty that translates into a predominant lack of impact (70% “doesn’t affect me”), which may indicate either a reduced exposure to the content or a deliberate detachment from its evaluation. This indifference could reflect a lack of emotional involvement or a difficulty in judging the realism of the messages, which limits their influence on the image of itself. Sociologically, this variation emphasizes the role of individual perception in mediating the effects of digital discourse. According to Bourdieu’s (1986) social capital theory, women who find the content realistic or partially realistic may have social or temporal resources that allow them to integrate it positively into their lives, whereas those who reject it as distorting may have a life experience that makes them more skeptical of the ideals promoted.

In a Romanian context, where ageing is often stigmatized, these results suggest that the perceived realism of anti-aging content can counter ageist norms, offering women

a way to positively redefine their relationship with the ageing process. The high percentage of positive impact (52% of the total) indicates a capacity to adapt and reinterpret the messages, while the presence of pressure (13%) and indifference (35%) reflects a diversity of responses influenced by the degree of alignment with aesthetic norms. The implications of these findings are relevant for the development of more inclusive narratives in social media: content perceived as realistic has the potential to support a healthy self-image, while exaggerations risk perpetuating unnecessary pressure. Future research could explore the specific factors contributing to the positive effect (e.g. type of content - practical tips vs. advertisements) and how personal attitudes towards ageing modulate these responses.

The analysis of the relationship between *personal attitudes towards the ageing process* and the *impact of anti-ageing content on self-image* was conducted to investigate how the individual perspective on ageing mediates the emotional and psychological effects of digital discourse, addressing the third research question of the study, “How do women interpret and internalize anti-ageing messages?”. The data highlight the influence of pre-existing attitudes on receptivity to content promoted on social media platforms. This analysis provides a deeper understanding of how personal beliefs shape responses to aesthetic norms and narratives about ageing, highlighting the diversity of individual experiences.

Of the total respondents, 65 (60%) consider ageing “a challenge, but I try to keep fit”, 41 (37%) “a natural process that I accept”, 2 (2%) “a negative aspect that I actively try to counteract”, 1 (1%) “don’t know” and 1 (1%) “something else”. In terms of the impact of anti-ageing content on their self-image, 57 (52%) say it makes them feel “more positive about ageing”, 14 (13%) “more pressured to maintain their youth”, 38 (35%) say it “does not affect them” and 1 (1%) indicate “other”. The distribution of responses according to attitudes towards ageing reveals significant differences. Of those who see ageing as a challenge, 39 (60%) report a positive impact, 11 (17%) pressure, 14 (22%) indifference and 1 (2%) “other”. For those who accept ageing as a natural process, 16 (39%) feel more positive, 2 (5%) more pressured and 23 (56%) are not affected. In the “negative aspect” category, 1 (50%) indicate a positive effect and 1 (50%) indifference. The only ‘don’t know’ respondent reports a positive impact and the ‘other’ respondent indicates ‘other’.

These results suggest that personal attitudes towards ageing may play a significant role in how anti-ageing content is internalized, potentially influencing the direction and intensity of its impact on self-image (Table 7). Women who view aging as “a challenge, but I try to keep myself in shape” - the majority category (59%) - show the greatest positive receptivity to the content, with 60% reporting feeling more positive. From a social constructionist perspective Eckert (2000), this reaction can be attributed to the compatibility between their proactive attitude and anti-ageing messages that promote practical solutions, such as products or care routines. These women seem to reinterpret the content as a motivational resource, turning narratives about youth into a tool to support their efforts to cope with ageing. However, the proportion of 17% who feel pressure suggests that, for some, the discourse amplifies expectations about staying fit, aligning with neoliberal logic Elias & Gill (2018) that shifts responsibility for ageing onto the

individual. The indifference reported by 22% indicates selective acceptance, where content is perceived as useful but not essential to self-image.

In contrast, women who accept aging as “a natural process” show a strong tendency towards indifference (56%), with only 39% reporting a positive impact and 5% pressure. This distribution indicates a subtle resistance to the norms imposed by the anti-ageing discourse, in line with ageism theory Twigg (2004). For these respondents, the natural acceptance of aging appears to function as a shield against aesthetic pressures, reducing the relevance of messages promoting active intervention. The positive effect reported by 39% suggests that when content resonates with their perspective - for example, by promoting health or self-acceptance - it can contribute to an improved self-image. The low percentage of pressure (5%) emphasizes that this group is less vulnerable to unrealistic standards, indicating an emotional autonomy in relation to media narratives.

Table 7. Attitudes towards ageing and the impact of anti-ageing content on self-image

		The impact of anti-ageing content on self-image				Total
		Other	It makes me feel more positive about aging	Makes me feel more pressure to maintain my youth	It doesn't affect me	
Attitudes towards the ageing process	Other	0	0	1	0	1
	I don't know	0	1	0	0	1
	A challenge, but I'm trying to keep fit	1	39	11	14	65
	A negative aspect that I actively try to counteract	0	1	0	1	2
	A natural process that I accept	0	16	2	23	41
Total		1	57	14	38	110

The category “negative aspect that I try to counteract”, although small (2 respondents), provides an interesting insight: one reports a positive effect, the other indifference. This division suggests that, even in the case of a hostile attitude towards ageing, anti-ageing content may be perceived as useful by some women, possibly by offering concrete solutions, while others consider it irrelevant to their personal struggle. Respondents in “don't know” and “otherwise” (1 each) show individual responses that do not allow for generalizations, but indicate a diversity of reactions that is worth exploring in larger samples.

Sociologically, these findings highlight the role of personal attitudes as a filter through which digital content is processed. Women who approach ageing as a challenge seem to find in anti-ageing discourse a source of agency, aligning with Bourdieu's (1986) social capital theory, where personal resources (time, energy, interest) facilitate a positive reinterpretation of messages. In contrast, those who accept the natural process manifest a detachment that protects them from pressures, reflecting a negotiation of the aesthetic norms imposed by contemporary culture. In a Romanian context, where ageing is often

associated with loss of social status, the difference between these groups emphasizes a tension between conforming to global standards of beauty and asserting an identity based on acceptance. The high percentage of positive impact overall (52%) suggests that, despite variations, anti-aging content has the potential to support a healthy self-image, especially when filtered through a proactive or realistic attitude.

The implications of these results are relevant for understanding how digital discourse interacts with individual attitudes. Women who see ageing as a challenge are more receptive to anti-ageing messages but also risk additional pressure, whereas those who accept it naturally tend to be immune to its negative influence. This contrast highlights the need for more diverse narratives in social media that respond to both perspectives - promoting practical solutions for those who are proactive and self-acceptance for those who refuse intervention. Future research could explore the specific factors that determine the positive effect (e.g. the type of content or its source) and how life experiences influence the formation of these attitudes, providing a more nuanced picture of the impact of anti-ageing discourse.

Analysis of the relationship between *frequency of social media use* and *frequency of exposure to anti-ageing content* was conducted to explore how the intensity of digital engagement influences contact with anti-ageing discourse, addressing the second research question of the study, "How often and in what forms do women encounter anti-ageing content?". The data provide a detailed picture of the link between online behavior and exposure to messages about aging promoted on digital platforms. This analysis allows a deeper understanding of how social media use mediates access to aesthetic narratives, highlighting the influence of technology on perceptions and experiences of ageing.

Of the total respondents, 68 (62%) use social media "several times a day", 34 (31%) are "always online", 6 (6%) "once a day", 1 (1%) "a few times a week" and 1 (1%) "rarely". In terms of exposure to anti-aging content, 37 (33.6%) report "daily", 21 (19%) "several times a week", 39 (36%) "occasionally", 12 (11%) "rarely" and 1 (1%) "never". The distribution of responses according to frequency of social media use reveals a clear correlation. Of those who use social media "several times a day", 22 (32%) encounter content daily, 14 (21%) several times a week, 21 (31%) occasionally, 10 (15%) rarely and 1 (2%) never. For those 'always online', 15 (44%) report daily exposure, 5 (15%) several times a week, 13 (38%) occasionally and 1 (3%) rarely. In the "once a day" category, 2 (33%) say several times a week, 3 (50%) occasionally and 1 (17%) rarely. The only respondent who uses social media "a few times a week" indicates occasional exposure, and the respondent who uses it "rarely" also reports "occasionally". The combined percentage of frequent exposure ("daily" + "a few times a week") is 53% for "several times a day", 59% for "connected all the time" and 33% for "once a day".

These results (Table 8) suggest a possible relationship between the frequency of social media use and exposure to anti-aging content, with a notable trend towards daily exposure among women who are permanently connected (44%) compared to those who use the platforms several times a day (32%). From a social constructionist perspective Eckert (2000), this correlation can be attributed to the role of social media as a primary space for constructing and disseminating narratives about aging and beauty. Women who

are permanently connected or frequently use the platforms are more exposed to algorithms that promote anti-aging content - advertisements, influencers' posts or articles - which increases the likelihood of daily encounters with such messages. The high percentage of frequent exposure among heavy users (59% for "permanently connected" and 53% for "several times a day") reflects the pervasiveness of anti-aging discourse in digital streams, amplified by neoliberal logics Elias & Gill (2018) that transform aging into a domain of individual intervention, accessible through the consumption of products and services promoted online.

Table 8. Frequency of social media use and exposure to anti-aging content

		Exposure to anti-aging content					Total
		Several times a week	Never	Occasional	Rarely	Daily	
Frequency of social media use	Several times a week	0	0	1	0	0	1
	Several times a day	14	1	21	10	22	68
	Once a day	2	0	3	1	0	6
	Rarely	0	0	1	0	0	1
	I am constantly connected to social media	5	0	13	1	15	34
Total		21	1	39	12	37	110

Women who use social media less frequently ('once a day', 'a few times a week' or 'rarely') show lower exposure, with a predominance of 'occasionally' responses (50% for 'once a day', 100% for the other two categories) and no daily exposure. This trend suggests that sporadic use limits contact with anti-aging content, either by reducing the time spent online or by intentionally avoiding streams saturated with such messages. The single case of "never" (1 respondent out of "several times a day") may indicate a conscious selection of content or exposure to platforms that do not prioritize anti-aging topics, although it is an exception that does not allow for generalizations. The high percentage of 'occasionally' across all categories (36% of the total) emphasizes that even for less frequent users, anti-ageing content remains an unavoidable presence, reflecting its deep penetration in the digital landscape.

Sociologically, these findings highlight the influence of social media use as a structural factor in shaping exposure to aesthetic norms. Permanently connected women, with a higher percentage of daily exposure (44%), are likely to be more integrated into digital networks where anti-aging discourse is ubiquitous, placing them in a position of greater vulnerability to aesthetic pressures. Bourdieu's (1986) temporal capital theory provides a framework for understanding this dynamic: heavy social media use requires time and availability, resources that digitally active women invest, thus increasing their exposure to messages promoting youth as an ideal. Conversely, sporadic users with less

exposure may have more control over the content they consume or may be less targeted by targeting algorithms, which reduces their contact with these narratives.

In a Romanian context, where access to technology and digital literacy vary across demographic groups, the relationship between frequent use and daily exposure emphasizes the role of social media as an amplifier of global beauty norms. Women who use platforms intensively are more likely to internalize pressure to counteract aging, aligning with ageism theory Twigg (2004), which highlights the stigmatization of aging in mediatized cultures. However, the significant proportion of occasional exposure even among frequent users (31% for 'several times a day' and 38% for 'always online') suggests that not all exposure is intentional or constant, reflecting a saturation of anti-aging content that inevitably permeates digital streams regardless of frequency of use.

The implications of these findings are significant for understanding how technology mediates the experience of aging. Frequent use of social media increases exposure to anti-aging discourse, which may amplify both aesthetic pressures and opportunities for information or motivation, depending on individual interpretation. Women who are permanently connected or active daily are more exposed to these messages, which raises questions about their impact on self-image and consumption behavior. Conversely, sporadic use limits exposure, providing a possible shield against imposed norms. Future research could explore how the type of platform (e.g. Instagram vs. Facebook) or the nature of the content (advertisements vs. personal posts) influences this exposure and whether personal attitudes towards ageing modulate its effects.

Conclusions

The contingency table analyses conducted in this study suggest, based on a small sample of 110 respondents, potential relationships between anti-aging consumption behaviors, perceptions of social pressure and media content, trust in sources, and personal attitudes towards aging. Without implying a causal direction, the resulting distributions suggest socio-cultural configurations that may be relevant, within the study's limitations, for understanding how discourses about age and beauty are internalized and negotiated by Romanian women aged 49 to 80.

First, the association between frequent use of anti-aging products and verbal exposure to social messages about beauty maintenance indicates an intertwining between explicit normative pressure and everyday aesthetic practices. The responses show that increased frequency of use (daily or several times a week) corresponds to a higher level of exposure to messages such as "women should maintain their beauty regardless of age". This observation supports the exploration of the hypothesis that gender norms and neoliberal accountability (Gill, 2007) may be reinforced through direct social interactions, aligning with the constructionist perspective on the production of social realities (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Second, the frequency of product use varies substantially according to the identified trusted source of beauty recommendations. The highest frequencies of use are found among individuals who derive their guidance from sources considered

“authoritative” - such as doctors or experts - demonstrating that scientific and medical discourse legitimizes everyday aesthetic behaviors. This alignment with institutional authority underscores the role of professionals in perpetuating norms of bodily management (Foucault, 1977; Lupton, 1995), while reliance on informal or non-institutionalized sources correlates with lower or absent use, indicating the existence of microcultures of resistance or skepticism.

On the gender pressure dimension, the frequency of exposure to anti-aging content appears to be associated with the perceived intensity of pressure on women. The proportion of respondents perceiving the pressure as “much greater” for women increases in the categories with frequent exposure (“daily” or “several times a week”). This distribution shows a gradual internalization of media messages as sources of naturalization of gender differences in body evaluation (Bartky, 1990). At the same time, the frequency of messages received appears as a factor intensifying the awareness of gender norms, reinforcing the idea that direct social interactions are as relevant as mediated exposure in shaping perceptions of aesthetic pressure.

At the level of engagement, the analysis suggests that interpreting anti-aging content as realistic is more frequent among those who actively interact (like/share/save), whereas passivity (view only) is associated with an increased level of skepticism or uncertainty. This differentiation suggests that active engagement contributes to the validation and circulation of aesthetic norms, while passivity allows for critical distancing. In the same sense, the relationship between perception of realism and impact on self-image suggests that a positive perception of realism is associated with a positive impact on self-image, whereas a perception of youth idealization correlates with pressure or indifference. This distribution indicates the thesis that the acceptance of media content as ‘useful’ can function as an identity-reinforcing mechanism, but also as a vector of pressure when messages are perceived as unrealistic (Woodward, 2008).

Finally, personal attitudes towards ageing is a key filter of the impact of media content. Women who see ageing as a challenge that requires keeping fit show the most positive responses towards self-image, whereas natural acceptance of ageing is associated with a higher degree of indifference towards media content. These results demonstrate the existence of differentiated strategies for negotiating anti-aging discourse, where the agentive dimension is informed by pre-existing identity positioning (Giddens, 1991).

Based on this analysis, we conclude that aesthetic pressure and consumption behaviors associated with anti-aging are not isolated phenomena, but the result of a collusion between explicit social messages, sources of authority, digital engagement, and personal attitudes. This encourages an intersectional reading of anti-aging discourse, where age, gender, neoliberal accountability and algorithmic aesthetics converge to produce subtle but effective forms of social conformity.

This study contributes to exploring, within the constraints of a non-representative sample, how anti-aging discourse may circulate, be internalized, and shaped by mature Romanian women in the digital media ecosystem, focusing on potential relationships between explicit social norms, individual agency, and algorithmic media influence.

On a theoretical level, the research extends the corpus of literature on ageism and the aestheticization of age (Sontag, 1972; Calasanti, 2016) by integrating the framework of neoliberal responsibility (Gill, 2007) in the analysis of everyday aesthetic consumption behaviors. The study highlights how women not only internalize the imperatives of perpetual youth, but also negotiate them through active or passive engagement with digital content, depending on their cognitive, social and symbolic resources, thus aligning with Bourdieu's approaches to social and temporal capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Moreover, the articulation between sources of trust (experts, influencers, brands) and the frequency of use of aesthetic products provides an innovative empirical framework for analyzing 'aesthetic authoritarianism', i.e. how epistemic hierarchies influence bodily choices in the neoliberal visual regime.

The original contribution lies also in the methodological way of operationalizing the dynamics of aesthetic pressure through the use of crosstab analysis applied to a sample underrepresented in Western literature: Romanian women aged between 49 and 80 years. This approach allows us to document socially distributed behavioral and perceptual patterns, without imposing a deterministic or causal perspective, but emphasizing the meaningful distribution of experiences according to the degree of exposure, confidence and personal attitude. By avoiding statistical correlations and emphasizing descriptive intersections, the research offers an interpretative reading of the phenomenon, consistent with the applied constructivist methodology.

At a practical level, the results have direct implications for media literacy, public policy design and socio-cultural interventions targeting older women's mental health, self-esteem and digital inclusion. Findings show the need for a differentiated approach in public communication campaigns: anti-aging messages perceived as realistic have a positive effect on self-image, whereas those perceived as distorting or prescriptive may amplify aesthetic pressure and self-rejection. Thus, an ethical review of anti-aging discourse in the media space is proposed, with a focus on the inclusion of authentic, non-idealized narratives and the recognition of the diversity of the female experience of aging.

The study's findings highlight the need for inclusive communication campaigns that challenge idealized anti-aging discourses and promote realistic representations of aging. In the Romanian context, these campaigns could be spearheaded by a collaboration between public health institutions, such as the Ministry of Health, and non-governmental organizations focused on women's empowerment and media literacy. These entities could develop targeted initiatives, such as social media campaigns featuring diverse women over 50 sharing authentic aging experiences, to counter the pressure to "stay young" (noted by 77% of respondents perceiving higher pressure on women, question 20). To ensure cultural relevance, campaigns should incorporate local media platforms like Facebook and Instagram, widely used by the study's urban, educated respondents (62% use social media multiple times daily, question 7), and leverage testimonials from Romanian influencers over 50, such as doctors or public figures like Adina Alberts (mentioned in open-ended responses, question 30.1). Content should emphasize affordable, accessible self-care practices, addressing the economic realities of Romanian women, where 28% of

respondents reported incomes below 3000 RON, thus reducing reliance on costly anti-aging products.

Furthermore, revising anti-aging discourses requires collaboration with Romanian media regulators, such as the National Audiovisual Council (CNA), to establish guidelines for ethical advertising that avoid ageist stereotypes. Educational programs in schools and community centers could enhance media literacy, teaching women to critically evaluate anti-aging content (59% viewed content as “somewhat exaggerated,” question 15). These efforts should be informed by the study’s qualitative insights, such as respondents’ desire for “more realistic portrayals”, and could include workshops led by local universities or cultural institutions like the Romanian Academy. To maximize impact, campaigns should be evaluated through longitudinal studies to assess changes in perceptions of aging, ensuring alignment with Romania’s socio-cultural context, including its urban-rural divide and gender norms. These targeted, multi-stakeholder initiatives would amplify the study’s practical impact, fostering a cultural shift toward embracing natural aging.

In addition, from a digital content development perspective, research indicates that the influence of influencers over 50 can be a channel for positive intervention, helping to construct more realistic role models that are closer to the experiences of mature audiences. Our data on the role of doctors and brands as trusted sources also open a debate on the aesthetic medicalization of age, inviting a reassessment of the positioning of the expert in relation to the ageing and beauty narrative.

In conclusion, our study proposes a reconceptualization of aesthetic pressure as a transmediatized and intersubjective phenomenon, mediated by both algorithms and immediate social networks, where female agency manifests itself in hybrid forms of conformity, resistance and reinterpretation. By anchoring it in a Romanian context, the paper contributes to the decolonization of the sociology of aging, bringing local voices and experiences to the forefront in a global discourse dominated by Western models.

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