



# Masculinities and Ageing: Deconstructing Online Representations Among Portuguese Speaking Users

Sofia José Santos<sup>1,2</sup>(✉), Inês Amaral<sup>3,4</sup>, and Maria José Brites<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Faculdade de Economia da Universidade de Coimbra, Coimbra, Portugal

<sup>2</sup> Centro de Estudos Sociais da Universidade de Coimbra, Coimbra, Portugal  
sjs@ces.uc.pt

<sup>3</sup> Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Coimbra, Coimbra, Portugal  
ines.amaral@uc.pt

<sup>4</sup> Centro de Estudos de Comunicação e Sociedade da Universidade do Minho, Braga, Portugal

<sup>5</sup> Universidade Lusófona/CICANT, Porto, Portugal  
mariajosebrites@ulp.pt

**Abstract.** Media and social media perform a pivotal role in the construction of social reality and shared meaning. As social representations, gender and age identities are included in those dynamics, per se and interacting with each other. This article aims to analyse the complexity, non-linearity and hybridity of representations of men and age within today's digital realm. Stemming from an intersectional and feminist approach, this article explores how Twitter users represent older men in their posts, assessing whether these representations promote or hinder respectful ageing relationships and gender equality. How do Portuguese-speaking online users' representations of men and masculinities interact with age and ageism? To put the analysis forward, data were extracted from Twitter and analysed through quantitative and qualitative content analysis. Data showed that intersection between masculinities and age among Portuguese speaking twitter users is low concerning the number of times that "men" and "old" are used in the same tweet text. However, data also showed that when patriarchal discourses intersect with ageism, they tend to perpetuate stereotypes, hindering egalitarian relationships concerning age and gender.

**Keywords:** Masculinities · Ageism · Twitter · Online

## 1 Introduction

Social representations result from broader socialization processes within which the media perform a pivotal role. Within today's media ecosystem, social media have been increasingly used for people to individually express themselves, share experiences, and engage with others while at the same time promoting collective action. Gender and age identities as social representations are included in this social dynamic, both *per se* and through interacting with each other. In fact, representations of gender and age

often go hand in hand, reinforcing or weakening, through an intersectional logic, particular forms of power and, thus, empowering or disempowering specific subjects. As many other forms of discrimination, patriarchy and ageism do not operate detached from each other nor in isolation from other hierarchical social categories [1], such as class or race, but rather intersect with them creating complex variable-geometry positions within wider hierarchical structures through which one moves and is moved, influencing perceptions of oneself and of others. Gender-wise, increasing age has been traditionally perceived as a paramount source of power for men. As men get older, there are a number of characteristics hegemonically attributed to being a “real man” - such as leadership, rationality, experience, protection - that potentially increase. As Hearn clarifies, traditionally “‘maleness’ and ‘age (dness)’” have been “mutually reinforcing and reaffirming as means to power” [2]. However, as notions of masculinity have been openly understood in its complexity, particularly with men performing more and more domestic and caregiving roles and show greater concern and interest in their own physical appearance and health, a linear connection between maleness and agedness might be challenged. The combination of emerging normative frameworks, such as “lookism, and fitnessism, further supported by ideals of consumerism, means that our future understanding and the scope of gendered ageism continues to unfold” [3].

This article understand masculinities as multiple [2, 3], and stems from Hearn’s understanding of ‘the ageing of men’, which does not entail “the chronological process by which men are assumed to become older”, but rather “the ways in which ‘men’ are constructed as meanings through and by reference to ‘age’” [2]. I.e., it includes both the social construction of what it means to be, express and behave like a “real man” but also “the construction of men’s experience through the lens of age” [2].

The study intends to explore, through an intersectional and feminist approach, how online social media users have been representing older men in their posts, shedding light on how these representations promote or hinder gender-equitable and respectful ageing relations. To do so, it seeks to answer the following research question: How do Portuguese-speaking online users’ representations of men and masculinities interact with age and ageism? To put this study forward, data were extracted from Twitter in the form of tweets using Node XL. We collected textual data from Twitter feeds using the search terms ‘homem’ (man, in English) and ‘velho’ (old, in English), focusing on time-lapse 19th august 2019 - 19th November 2019, and deleting accounts with less than 100 followers. We have grouped tweets according to specific categories and selected the three most shared tweets in each category to analyse through content analysis. Understanding ageism and patriarchy as both hierarchical social structures and sociocultural practices based on socially legitimated orders/systems of privilege and discrimination, this article draws attention to the importance of the sociocultural context and the dynamics involved in the creation and reproduction of social reality, including social inequalities, with a particular focus on the digital realm.

## 2 Intersecting Patriarchy and Ageism

Intersectional analysis stems from a central premise “that all social categories (race, gender, class, and more) are experienced in relationship to and constituted by other social

categories” [4], allowing to uproot and understand, in an intersectional perspective, crossing dynamics between identity, agency and power [4]. It “addresses the manner in which racism, patriarchy, class oppression and other discriminatory systems create inequalities that structure the relative positions of women, races, ethnicities, classes and the like” [5]. Although some authors have limited their analyses to the main axis of intersectional study, namely race, gender and class, others have broadened their scope of analysis, introducing new categories and addressing different forms of inequality and hierarchies of power [4], namely age. As Hearn and Melechi state [6], to discuss men and masculinities is to discuss age whether in explicit or implicit terms. In fact, age has been traditionally involved in the social construction of what it means to be a man “both in the distinction of men from young men and boys, and in the construction of particular types of men” [2].

Masculinities and femininities represent a culturally imagined (and discursively and semiotically conveyed) ideal of what it means to be and behave like a boy/man and a girl/woman [7]. As a social construct, masculinities and femininities have been developed based upon shifting realities concerning time and space, but consistently constructed within generalised patriarchal structures, and built upon an essentialist and binary lens [7]. To talk about masculinities and patriarchy does not necessarily mean to talk about men, but rather to map and unveil gender relations, specifically the privileged position of men within a broader and hierarchical gender order [8, 9]. In point of fact, patriarchy represents and reflects the institutionalization of male domination in a gendered hierarchy that is legitimised - and, thus, accepted - by the hegemonic culture [10]. Within the patriarchal system, power dynamics and asymmetric relationships between the different subjects are not only established between men and women but also among men themselves [9]. At the centre of the construction and maintenance of patriarchy lies the concept of “hegemonic masculinity” [9]. Hegemonic masculinity represents a culturally imagined ideal of what it means to be, to express and to behave “like a man”, and goes in line with notions of rationality, leadership, courage, endurance, strength, heteronormativity, and sexual drive [12, 13]. Accordingly, men who adopt traits consistent with the hegemonic ideal of masculinity affirms their alleged superiority over women and men who fall short of this pattern, consolidating their general position of domination [14]. Representing a reference upon which men are identified and categorized in relative terms, hegemonic masculinity is not the standard and most common behaviour of boys and men but it constitutes an ideal that informs and provides guidance to men and boys (and women and girls) concerning behaviours, choices, aspirations, and expectations [7, 14]. Men who adopt traits consistent with the ideal of hegemonic masculinity traditionally affirm their claimed superiority over women, rendering increasingly solid their general position of domination [14]. Likewise, men who have characteristics traditionally understood as “feminine” (such as sensitivity, caring, fear, emotion, and/or passivity), are ridiculed and perceived as inferior, feeling, hence, ostracized, inferior or even rendered insignificant or marginalized [15]. Hegemonic masculinity incorporates, thus, the legitimacy of patriarchy itself [11].

Just as patriarchy is an unequal and oppressive system, so is ageism. Ageism is a system of social oppression and inequality that is based upon the understanding of age as a pivotal signifier concerning subjects, ranking them considering what is conceived

as more and less desired ages [19]. Perceptions and representations of age entail both stable and fluid meanings, combining traditional understandings and dynamic trends, which complexify the frameworks upon which ‘age’ can be perceived and constructed in society. Socialization, social context and political understandings are, thus, implicated in the social construction of ‘age’ [3, 16–19].

Understood as “political and discursive location” and a “cultural and social construct” [19], age “comes with an easily accessible and ready-to-use arsenal of culture-specific beliefs and norms” [19] which are permanently being renegotiated. Representations of *ageing* and *being old* are, thus, a social depiction that is based upon traditional understandings of age, while adapting to the context that structures meaning and that attributes specific significances to be a specific age. Nowadays, age in the West is often considered as a time of a certain decadence, in the sense of losing body and mind abilities and also professional vitality [18]. Taking cue on this understanding, ageism as a form of discrimination put forward on the grounds of age renders older people more vulnerable. In spite of the fact that there are several indicators of positive representations of *ageism* and *getting older* [18], they are seldom able to successfully challenge dominant forms of conceiving to be, express and behave “like a man” as hegemonically understood [2].

## 2.1 Patriarchy, Ageism and Variable Geometry

Ageism and patriarchy are two interacting power structures which, based upon socially constructed imaginaries and symbolic representations, produce and reflect hierarchies and, subsequently, positions and relations of privilege, vulnerability, and discrimination among the different subjects [20]. Whereas ageism discriminates people on the grounds of age, patriarchy privileges men aligned with the ideal of “hegemonic masculinity” [9].

Concerning power, age and masculinities have been traditionally perceived as mutually reinforcing [2] and older men have been recognised “as part of the hegemonic ideology” [23]. However, the implication of age in the construction of maleness (as hegemonically conceived) is not a linear one, and patriarchy and ageism may intersect differently depending on one’s own circumstance, purpose and agenda, leading to differentiated positions of vulnerability or domination. Just like gender is socially “(re)created and (re)organised in different ways by different generations” [22], age defines expectations concerning each person’s gender, reinforcing specific subjects while diminishing others within established dominant hierarchies [6].

Within patriarchy, as men age, characteristics that are hegemonically attributed to men, such as dexterity and physical and sexual strength, for example, might decrease, making specific men see their power (or the perception of their power) to decrease. On the other hand, within patriarchy, as men get closer to seniority, the possibility of satisfactorily fulfilling the expectations of being a safe economic provider and a leader with solid knowledge and experience - attributes that go in line with what is hegemonically perceived as being “a real man” - increases. Also, as nowadays men in the West show greater concern towards their own physical appearance and health [3], existing conceptions on the intersection of age and masculinities might be challenged [2, 3].

As patriarchy and ageism interact with one another, privilege and discrimination involve everyone - men and women, and girls and boys - differently [3, 19]. This highlights the fact that “discourses of gender and ageing have a political character: they define relations between different groups of people, establish a power structure and play a determining role in assigning certain societal spaces to individuals” [24]. In fact, and as Krekula argues, the “construction of a norm and of its deviants represents an issue of power” [21].

### 3 Gender and Ageing on Social Media

The relationship between discourse, and age and gender identity is mutually reinforcing. By means of the construction and dissemination of discourses, gender (and age) performances emerge and are, in turn, discursively rendered legitimate [25]. Within the discursive realm, social media have been increasingly used, on a daily basis, for people to express themselves and engage with others, most times in an individual “disclosure logic” [26]. At the same time, the digital environment is identified as a public space that promotes collective action [27]. Bimber [28] argues that the digital media ecosystem is, in itself, an element of change in the context of collective action and, consequently, an element of change concerning the social representations that shape and reconfigure the ever-changing public space. Chadwick’s [29] theory of media hybridism is consistent with Bimber’s argument which states that the digital allows the “collapse of boundaries between types of media and the processes of adaptation and mutual adjustment between actors involved in power struggles through political communication” [28].

As new media emerge, there is a new space for aggression and resistance and for enhanced new forms of network activism. In fact, the digital revolution is contributing to refocus, or at least to enlarge, the angle and, thus, to reconsider the lens through which one defines and redefines the form society looks at both gender and old people. Discourses that reproduce patriarchal and ageist structures in the new digital ecosystem normalise and generalise collective social representations that often fit as violence, like the usage of hate speech to validate gender-based violence and age stereotypes in distinct dimensions. On the other hand, older citizens might resist to ageism through social media, contesting - by means of discourse or practice - hegemonic narratives of their inability to use technology [30]. Considering intergenerational use of media, new media can be pivotal exploring “the general dynamics of the generation-building processes and the roles played in them by the media” [31]. The digital provides the plurality of geographically dispersed generations a potential for connection, and while ‘generational units’ are still anchored upon their own specific contexts [32], the online environment facilitates the strengthening of ties, including cross-generational ones, and a re-configuration of the generational identity” [33]. At the same time, social media “allow people to gather for social, cultural, and civic purposes, and they help people connect with a world beyond their close friends and family” [34]. Concerning age, Comunello and colleagues point out what they coin as “generational semantics”, which are semantic that “are produced by senior citizens to interpret their own relationship with ICT deals with the perception of both personal abilities and socially expected performances and might be shaped by their own perception of age and ageing” [35]. The digital age allows, hence, the blurring

of barriers between different generations that interact through and with technologies, enhancing the narrowing of intergenerational relationships and new forms of sociability, which are anchored to generational contexts [36].

Digital platforms tend to facilitate also an interesting relation between different generations [36–38]. On one hand, digital literacy skills can reinforce active ageing [39–41] and open more diverse and positive perspectives concerning ageing and the world. On the other hand, there are representations in the digital landscape that give continuity to age stereotypes associated with ageism and patriarchal structures [42].

## 4 Method

Quantitative and qualitative content analyses were used to put forward the proposed study. Computational methods were used to extract data within a medium-specific approach [43]. Data were selected and extracted from Twitter in the form of tweets using the network analysis and visualization software NodeXL. We collected textual data from Twitter feeds using the search terms “homem” and “velho” (in English: “man” and “old”). We went through the data mining process of data cleaning, focusing on time-lapse 19th August 2019 to 19th November 2019, and deleting accounts with less than 100 followers. We have grouped the remaining 4231 tweets from 3621 users according to four specific categories (Table 1).

Through an intersectional and feminist approach, this study aims to explore how online social media users have been representing older men to identify if these representations promote or hinder gender-equitable and respectful ageing relations. Therefore, the research question that guides this study is: How do Portuguese-speaking online users’ representations of men and masculinities interact with age and ageism?

**Table 1.** Codebook used in the analysis.

Category	Description
Intersecting age and masculinities subscribing to patriarchy and/or ageism	Tweets whose message intersects age and masculinities engaging with patriarchal and/or ageist imaginaries
Intersecting age and masculinities not subscribing to patriarchy nor ageism	Tweets whose message intersect age and masculinities, and do not engage with patriarchy and/or ageist imaginaries
Complexity and non-linearity	Tweets whose message intersect age and masculinities and may contest and subscribe to patriarchy and/or contest and subscribe to ageism
Other	Tweets whose message does not relate to any of the above or was unclear

## 5 Results and Discussion

Results show that most of the coded texts (84,58%) fall into the category of ‘Other’ as the majority of the sample tweets included “man” and “old” but did not intersect age and masculinities in their message (Table 2). Most of them refer men and masculinities but whenever the term “old” was used, it was used as an informal/slang interjection. The other categories, although representing a smaller universe concerning the sample (13,6%), are the ones selected to put forward our qualitative analysis. Within these 13,6% which intersected age and masculinities in their messages, 5,29% subscribed to patriarchy and/or ageism, whereas 6,31% did not subscribe to patriarchy and ageism and 2% included messages which may contest and subscribe to patriarchy and/or contest and subscribe to ageism, shedding light on the nonlinearity of the intersection between ageism and patriarchy.

**Table 2.** The number of tweets according to macro selected categories.

Number of category	Category	Number of tweets	Frequency ( $N = 4231$ )
1	Intersecting age and masculinities subscribing to patriarchy and/or ageism	<b>224</b>	<b>5,29%</b>
2	Intersecting age and masculinities not subscribing to patriarchy and/or ageism	<b>267</b>	<b>6,31%</b>
3	Complexity and non-linearity	<b>85</b>	<b>2%</b>
4	Other	<b>3655</b>	<b>84,58%</b>

We grouped tweets according to specific categories (Table 2) and selected the three most shared tweets in each category to analyse through qualitative content analysis in order to unearth social power structures and relations as well as their underpinning imaginaries which are validated and constituted through language as discourse [44]. Within this analytical selection, only four tweets reached more than 100 retweets. These fall into the categories of “Intersecting age and masculinities subscribing to patriarchy and/or ageism” and “Intersecting age and masculinities not subscribing to patriarchy and/or ageism” (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Three most shared tweets within the three selected categories

Category	Tweet	Retweets
1	“Me: I wanted a sugar daddy; any old men. Old man: Hi! Me: <a href="https://t.co/UhlmvOSrBs">https://t.co/UhlmvOSrBs</a> ” [the hyperlink takes the reader to a vine with a young woman running away]	18259
1	Nobody lives on money, man has to have sense. Do you want to parade with a beautiful woman and contribute with nothing? Be selfish and stay with the rich old man, who only has money to offer. If you are not like that, do nothing more than the obligation to help the woman who is with you!	1251
1	My mother has a friend who only has relationships with old men. Her nickname: pussy de Melo nursing home	27
2	Cristiano Ronaldo after turning 30, and playing for the Portugal team:  46 games  47 goals THIS MAN IS JUST LIKE WINE: THE OLDER, THE BETTER!  <a href="https://t.co/fp91KK3Uz7">https://t.co/fp91KK3Uz7</a> [the hyperlink takes the reader to a photo of Cristiano holding a football cup]	226
2	In the approved list, you will find men and women, old and new, single and married, who “only study” and who work, who makes the question before or after, who are rich and poor. The list is heterogeneous. The common point is that everyone studied. So, stop looking at others and do your part	197
2	Older and more experienced men are so good that I have no idea why I keep wasting my time with new blood	47
3	Then the classics return with a single crowd and then you can’t complain about this savagery, a bunch of old bearded men fighting among themselves over the football team, what a shame !!! <a href="https://t.co/cF8VxdLJes">https://t.co/cF8VxdLJes</a> [the hyperlink takes the reader to a video depicting the described scene on a stadium]	6
3	Men will never know what it is like to go out in the street in shorts and have to hear jokes from a bunch of disgusting old men	3
3	I HATE old men, those who are old enough to be my grandfather, who keep looking at me in the middle of the street, and say “pssst”, ah f*** you, do “pssst” to your hand mother f****a <sup>a</sup>	2

<sup>a</sup>This tweet was edited in order to sidestep offensive language.

In terms of representations of men and masculinities and the way these interact with age and ageism, we have identified three main representations (Table 3). The first one represents men as the “sugar daddy” figure, i.e., a rich older man who offers expensive or extravagant gifts to a much younger woman as a repay for her company or sexual favours. The second one is the idea that individual attributes, such as age, gender, class are not relevant and should not be taken into account. The third one represents men as wicked, harassing and violent. Accordingly, men behave this way as they lack empathy and had never been in the woman’s place to understand what it feels like when one’s

being harassed. These representations also go in line with the idea that these attitudes might be reinforced with age. However, if older men are represented as holding these characteristics in a more evident way, they are also represented as ridiculous since older men are understood as less attractive and less strong but, regardless of those ageing traits, they behave as if they continue at their peak concerning maleness.

## 6 Conclusions and Limitations

This study intended to explore, through an intersectional and feminist approach, how online social media users have been representing older men in their posts, with the intent to shed light on how these representations promote or hinder gender-equitable and respectful ageing relations. To do so, it sought to answer the following research question: How do Portuguese-speaking online users' representations of men and masculinities interact with age and ageism? Data showed that intersection between masculinities and age among Portuguese speaking twitter users is low concerning the number of times that "men" and "old" are used in the same tweet text. Also, the tweets whose message intersects masculinity and age tend to be equally divided between those that subscribe to patriarchy and ageism and those that do not subscribe (or even implicitly contest) to these systems of social oppression and inequality, shedding light on the fact that both discourses - discriminatory and equalitarian - circulate in the same proportion.

However, as patriarchy and ageism are embedded and pervasive in today's societies, usage of patriarchal and ageist imaginaries surpasses - concerning absorption and validation - in a more effortless way counter-narratives concerning these two systems or the representations they entail. Also, taking into account the rise of the #metoo or #timesup feminist movements which have opened the floor to public discussions and growing awareness on harmful masculinities, representations concerning patriarchy might be produced in a more conscious way that the ones of ageism, which have not had the same political visibility as patriarchy. Data also show that the interaction between patriarchy and age is not necessarily an interaction that mutually reinforces both systems - patriarchy and ageism. In fact, young women holding a subordinate position within patriarchy, and in face of harassment perpetrated by older men - contest patriarchy by recovering ageist imaginaries as, within ageism, they occupy a privileged position vis-à-vis the dominant normative standards. In this context, older men are constructed as meanings by reference not to age per se, but to age in what concerns hegemonic masculinity. This sheds light on the fact that subaltern subjects in a given system can regain power concerning other subjects who occupy a privileged position within that same system through using the imagery of other oppression systems in which the positions of power are reversed.

The main limitations of this study are related to content analysis and the delimitation of the sample by language. Future research will focus on a critical discourse analysis of tweets and retweets, as well as analysis of co-tag networks in order to identify who are the dominant voices and how do the leading hashtags contribute to the construction of discourses and social representations on masculinities and ageing.

The results of this study show that the patriarchal discourses intersect with ageism, perpetuating stereotypes. However, we note that the interaction between patriarchy and ageism is not mutually reinforcing. Future studies should take connective action logic

[45] as a theoretical framework and consider mixed methodologies. Moreover, future studies should also encompass samples of tweets in different languages.

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