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Why have Grandmothers become our Covid-19 Cheerleaders?

Shir Shimoni

As soon as Covid-19 reached Europe and the US, a flurry of images depicting elderly people began appearing in news reports about the virus. These are gloomy images: wrinkled hands holding a cane, a solitary older woman looking out of a window in a dreary flat, and an old man facing the camera with sad eyes. Photographers for Shutterstock and other image repositories highlighted just how vulnerable our older population is.

However, against these images of frailty and loneliness we are also witnessing another new and parallel trend: the rise of the ‘Granfluencers’.

The granfluencers have been touted as the ultimate comforters during the current crisis. From [Nonna Rosetta in Italy](#), through [Tata in Spain](#) and [Lenuta Moldovan in Romania](#) to [Grandma Pat in California](#), women over 80 have been appearing across social media as well as on television and in major newspapers as they dance, sing, tell jokes and advise the public on how to endure lockdown days. Clips featuring celebrities such as [Dame Judy Dench](#) and [Elaine Page](#) cheering up the public have become viral sensations, with tens of millions of views.

These positive images and clips are heartening precisely because older women are among the most at risk from Covid-19. There is no doubt that large audiences have been extremely moved by the appearance of these 80-something women, often presented as fragile yet jolly.

But just as these cheerful grannies have become household names, endlessly conveying messages of hope and resilience, news reports have started to expose the extent of [the abandonment of the elderly in care homes and their mass deaths across Europe](#).

This is no coincidence. The mushrooming popularity of granfluencers needs to be understood as part of a culture that encourages older people to stay positive and to project that positivity outward no matter what. Positiveness entails many things. It means not depressing others with your unhappiness; it also means being self-reliant and self-sufficient.

As we know from the rise of other self-care and wellness industries, staying positive is now linked to cultivating a healthy lifestyle. If you constantly work on feeling better about yourself, the expectation is that you will actually become better. Thus, striving for positiveness among older people translates into exhibiting health, autonomy, and a sense of entrepreneurship, which are associated, in turn, with making the right personal choices, including transforming hardships into opportunities.

Focusing on personal happiness is, however, intensely individualising. The endless exhortation to cultivate positiveness is meant to remind older people that they are expected to stay focused on their own self-care and to refrain from demanding or even seeking help from others—whether it be the state, their families or friends.

The point is that this exhortation aligns itself neatly with the neoliberal policies and austerity measures that have become the norm in countries like the UK and the US, where vulnerable publics, including [hundreds of thousands of older women](#) of Judi Dench's generation—who constitute the fastest-growing segment of the population—have been left to take care for themselves without pensions or caring institutions to support them. Indeed, as many governments have prioritised profit over people, [attacking the social safety net](#), health and well-being have become personal enterprises where people are compelled to manage their own risks privately.

This is reflected in the way states have dealt with the elderly population during the current crisis, where they were asked to self-isolate, and then often simply abandoned and left to die.

Hence, one of the reasons why the sight of elderly women filmed dancing and singing in their living rooms while urging us to be strong has been embraced by the mainstream is because they make no demands and refrain from challenging the status quo.

Figures like the upbeat granfluencers serve to conceal a defunct and morally bankrupt system, which refuses to acknowledge that vulnerability is part of the human condition.

They help cover-up structural inequalities and how they are produced by ongoing institutional violence.

By deflecting responsibility from the state onto individuals, such positive messages help hide the [criminal negligence of governments](#), which have decimated their social infrastructure, while ignoring past warnings about the likelihood of future pandemics.

If the pandemic has taught us anything, it is that we are all vulnerable, dependent on others for our well-being. It would have been both truer and politically beneficial if the likes of Judi Dench, Nonna Rosetta, Tata and Grandma Pat had exposed their vulnerability and dependency on others. Had they done so, they would have taught us a crucial lesson: [how we must reimagine society in the wake of Covid-19](#).

Shir Shimoni is a second year PhD student in the Department of Culture, Media and Creative Industries at King's College University of London. Her research explores the question of ageing, subjectivity and cultural representation.

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RT @shelasheikh: Another recording with my trusted and most favourite partner-in-crime @RosGray1. This one from a couple of weeks ago. Firs... 1 day ago

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RT @dannyarteruk: and (2/2) one of the most vital things we'll publish: @Anamik1977 & @svanlente's Rethinking 'Diversity' in Publishing rep... 6 day ago

For enquiries about the press: goldsmithspress@gold.ac.uk

Goldsmiths Press

Room 2, 33 Laurie Grove

New Cross

London

SE14 6NW

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