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AGING, AGENCY AND ANTI-AGING DISCOURSES: A MIXED-METHODS STUDY ON ROMANIAN WOMEN 50+ AND THE REVIVAL OF GUSTIAN SOCIOLOGY

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Veronica OANCEA¹

Abstract

In recent decades, old age has increasingly been framed in aesthetic, commercial, and technological discourses. For older women in particular, old age has come to be depicted less and less naturally and more and more as a problem to be addressed or concealed, creating both symbolic exclusion and new markets for “peri-menopausal wellness” or “anti-aging” products. Digital culture intensifies these imperatives within a paradox in which older women become invisible within mainstream publicity while hyper-visible as targets for beauty and health markets. In Romania, these dynamics converge with a distinct post-socialist path. Women aged 50 and above were raised during the period of state socialism, which utilized femininity for demographic objectives while simultaneously limiting consumerism. Following the workshops of 1989, neoliberal principles emphasizing self-optimization, beauty, and digital skills brought forth new contradictions, resulting in many women navigating the tension between traditional caregiving roles and modern expectations for productivity and youthfulness. This article looks at how Romanian women over 50 respond to anti-aging narrative in virtual and corporeal spaces. Based on questionnaire data among respondents in the 50 Plus Community and ethnographic observation at a wellness workshop (“Am curajul să trăiesc!” [“I have the courage to live!”], May 2025), research balances quantitative scope and qualitative depth. It explores how women interpret, oppose, and recast cultural narratives about aging against the background of centennial reflections on Dimitrie Gusti’s first monographic field studies and his methodological spirit revived to respond to twenty-first-century challenges.

Keywords: anti-aging discourse, digital sociology, ethnography, feminist theory, Gusti School, Romanian women, aging.

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Introduction

Throughout recent decades, aging has become increasingly mediated by aesthetic, commercial, and technological discourses. For older-age women, old age is often framed not simply as a natural phase but instead as a problem to be addressed, creating markers of stigma and new markets for anti-aging interventions. Online media exacerbate these processes, making older-age women both absent within mainstream media and hyper-present as objects subject to aesthetic evaluation. In Romania, such complications lie upon a post-socialist development trajectory: older-age women who were socialized within state-socialist collectivist standards and constrained consumption societies now encounter neoliberal mandates for self-optimization, attractiveness, and digital acumen. Through mixed-method research conducted within the 50 Plus Community, this article examines how older-age Romanian women navigate these contradictions within both virtual spaces and community spaces, integrating survey data with ethnography. Using this mixed-modes approach, this investigation confronts how humorous practices, resistive practice, and solidarity practice work to recast the process of aging while situating this research within the centennial history of Dimitrie Gusti's monographic school.

Theoretical Framework

This system has a multi-layered theoretical foundation that integrates feminist cultural theory, digital sociology and community research approach led by the Gustian School.

Feminist perspectives on aging, embodiment, and consumer culture

Feminist theories construct later life as a socially constructed process within intersecting patterns of gendered power relations and entwined with class, ethnicity, and cultural location. By emphasizing ambivalence – instead of collapsing older women into a monolithic category – scholarship highlights complexity: women can be made invisible but hyper-visible, stigmatized but empowered, in a matter of contexts. Binaries between empowerment and decline become difficult to model; ambivalence is placed at the core of later life. Feminist scholarship further requires reflexivity and collaborative inquiry, acknowledging older women's role in producing knowledge. With special relevance in post-socialist contexts like Romania, these findings take on a further dimension since women have to negotiate remnants of collectivist socialization and neoliberal imperatives of competence in self-optimization and digital literacy.

Digital Sociology: Platforms, Exclusion, and Resistance

Digital sociology examines how technical structures impact social inclusion, exposure, and inequalities. Literatures regarding digital divides (van Dijk, 2005) suggest that having access does not guarantee meaningful participation since obstacles persist in skills, content creation, and algorithmic recognition. Design logics are often shaped by ageism in preference for newness, youthfulness, and aesthetic perfection (Bucher, 2018). Meanwhile, scholarship highlights spaces of resistance represented by Sharma's (2017) idea about "digital care publics" where older women transmit knowledge, build solidarity, and redefine digital engagement as mutual caregiving instead of solo competition. These interactions in Romania become more charged due to uneven digitalization and post-socialist exclusion histories such that participation on platforms is both a route to opportunity and a field of symbolic struggle for women older than 50.

The Gustian Tradition and Contemporary Interpretations

Gusti's monographic style featured inclusive community research through team effort among interdisciplinary personnel, extended field research, and ethical dedication to social transformations. It did not push people to data points but instead advocated a "lived sociology" that interfused structural research and depth of daily life. Recent works (Bucur, 2017, 2019) have pointed out that this model continues to be relevant in studies on Romania's persecuted groups, in particular those subject to symbolic exclusion, like women. These works draw on that early precedent not by redoing interwar studies of villagers but by refracting Gusti's precepts within a networked urban community that privileges participation and reflexivity while producing collaborative scholarship.

Synthesis

By bringing together feminist theory, digital sociology, and the participatory spirit typical of the Gustian tradition, this framework elucidates the means by which older Romanian women navigate the gendered, digital, and aesthetic mandates of later life. Furthermore, it locates those negotiations in the broader context of significant socio-economic transformation occurring in post-communist Romania, at the crossroads of increased longevity and higher pensions and cultural hybridity and neoliberal standards for individual optimization.

The following section defines the methodological breadth of the research program by interweaving systematic scans and ethnographic explorations into community arenas.

The Gustian Method: Contemporary Relevance and Reinterpretation

This research was designed in harmony with Gustian method principles, tailored to a modern urban and digital age, and was carried out during the centennial celebration of the Bucharest School's first monographic field research study. Gusti's theoretical approach combined interdisciplinary teams, immersed in field research, and represented an ethical commitment in producing social change, viewing societies as integrated social units with a biological, psychological, economic, and cultural dimension.

In this current research work, the 50 Plus Community is studied as a contemporary social object where symbolic, emotional, digital, and normative relationships intersect. Despite the urban and digital nature, the research retains key features belonging to Gustian principles:

- interdisciplinarity, in partnership with psychologists, doctors, and sociologists;
- participatory research, engaging women 50+ as producers of knowledge;
- participatory observation, facilitated by the researcher's direct involvement in community workshops.

Transformational goal is to redescribe aging as both personal and collective while creating symbolic inclusion. This reading answers both feminist and digital challenges while remaining true to Gusti's spirit: a "lived sociology" that is ethically concerned and socially transformative. Instead of nostalgia, it resuscitates monographic tradition's core proposition – that sociology has no business to merely represent reality but assist in reshaping it in conversation with its public.

Methodology

This research employs a mixed-methods design that integrates quantitative insights from a standardized questionnaire with qualitative insights from ethnographic research. This practice follows contemporary sociological best practice and methodological precepts of the Gustian School, both of which favor multi-sided and multi-faceted treatments of social existence.

Research Methodology

It was developed to include both structural dynamics and everyday lives of Romanian women who are older than 50 and who participate in anti-aging discussion both offline and online. Quantitative data were collected via a structured thematic questionnaire, while qualitative observations were collected from participant observation in May 2025 "Am curajul să trăiesc!" ("I have the courage to live!")

workshop. It allowed for a study not only of how these women think and feel about aging but also how they act and how they negotiate group norms.

It adheres to Creswell and Plano Clark's (2017) approach in mixing the width and statistical sophistication of questionnaire data with the depth and contextual nuance of ethnography. They generate a broader and richer account between them than either approach could achieve in isolation.

The Questionnaire Organization and Thematic Sections

The standardized questionnaire was arranged thematically to identify attitudes to aging, digital use, and opposition to anti-aging rhetoric. It contained questions about demographic background, accessibility to digital media, perception about health, and cultural views about femininity and age. Quantifiable markers were provided by closed questions while a minimal number of open questions urged participants to draw upon subjective experiences.

The design sought to balance depth and breadth: enabling statistical mapping of trends while still having room for distinct voices to be heard. To prevent overloading respondents, the questionnaire was brief and to the point, and pre-testing guaranteed familiarity among women who ranged across digital competencies. Full specifications of the tool are provided in the Appendix.

Ethnographic Fieldwork

The qualitative dimension involved participant observation at the “I have the courage to live!” workshop, an interactive workshop that brought together doctors, psychologists, and community members to discuss vitality, self-care, and emotional well-being. The researcher participated both as observer and facilitator, noting spatial dynamics, interpersonal behaviors, and the emotional atmosphere. Particular attention was given to collective gestures – laughter, tears, applause – as markers of communal meaning and bodily interaction. Such observations echo Gusti's notion of “manifestations of social life” and his call for attentive study of collective behavior.

Ethical Considerations

The research followed the ethical guidelines of the Romanian Sociological Association and the University of Bucharest. All participants provided informed consent and were assured of anonymity and confidentiality, while explicit permission was obtained for ethnographic note-taking at the workshop. Recognizing the vulnerabilities of women over 50 shaped by gendered expectations and age prejudice, the study adopted a participatory and conversational style consistent with feminist and community-based research ethics (Naples, 2013 [2003]).

Reflexivity and Researcher Positionality

As both a founder and a member of the 50 Plus Community, the researcher was a double insider-analyst. This allowed for trusting relationships and access to participants' experiences but brought risks of bias and over-identification. Reflexivity was thus imperative: fieldnotes documented instances where participants' interactions were influenced by the presence of the researcher, pushing at times toward openness and holding back at others in a way to put participants at the forefront. Bias was addressed further through triangulating survey and ethnography data and peer debriefing with supervisors. This practice is consonant with feminist methodological concerns of openness and co-construction and reinterprets Gusti's concept of "lived sociology" ("sociologie trăită") – not observatory detached-from-above, but interactive from-within-the-community analysis.

Data Analysis

It applies Gusti's monographic approach to a digital urban environment by integrating survey studies and ethnographic outreach. Contrary to the student-monographers of the interwar period who studied peasant societies in a detached style, the research observer's insider-analytical position facilitated extraordinary trust and mobility but required constant reflexivity to avoid excessive identification by the observer-subjects. Therefore, the project adheres to Gusti's original fundamentals of interdisciplinarity, collaborative research, and ethical research while redoing them in feminist and digital scholarship contexts.

Research Context and Setting

It was conducted in the 50 Plus Community, an urban program launched in 2018 to empower Romanian midlife and older women. What began small as a support group has grown to include some 400 active members and has a Facebook audience exceeding 500,000 followers. Its cultural workshops, educational programs, and recreational outings serve not only to provide material aid but further act as spaces for reframing notions of age, gender, and self. Caught between urban and virtual reality, this community helps to create digital care publics (Sharma, 2017) that equip older women with the tools to approach technology in a critical way.

The group's mission reflects Romanian cultural trajectories: women raised under state socialism now face neoliberal demands of beauty, optimization, and digital competence. Participants' testimonies often described the community as a space of empowerment and affiliation: "Here I found not just activity but a group of women who know what it means to be 55 and invisible." Workshops such as "Am

curajul să trăiesc!” (“I have the courage to live!”) were perceived as transformative spaces fostering solidarity and enabling a reconceptualization of later life.

Quantitative Component: Survey Design and Administration

The quantitative aspect of this research involved the development and distribution of a 36-question thematic questionnaire for the purpose of probing Romanian women’s experiences and perceptions of aging, beauty standards and online engagement. The instrument was informed by a comprehensive literature review of anti-aging culture, online inclusivity, and gendered experiences of getting older (Sontag, 1972; Gullette, 2004; Lingel, 2021).

Sampling and Data Acquisition

Between February and April 2025, this survey was administered both online through the networks of the 50 Plus Community and personally at workshops, despite participants’ differing digital accessibility. A total number of 112 returned questionnaires was accepted after data cleaning, and these came from 103 participants. Women were between 50-78 years old (mean age 61.4); they were primarily urban, highly educated, and socially active; a large number were retired professionals (43%) or semi-retired shopkeepers (21%). Though not nationally representative, this sample provides a faithful representation of a new demographic of urban, digitally active older women consistent with global trends in older citizens’ growing use of the Internet (Pew Research Center, 2023).

Thematic Coding of Open-Ended Responses

When completing qualitative probes, qualitative questions were coded thematically by inductive procedures according to a thematic analysis framework by Braun and Clarke (2006). Some of the emerged themes included:

- Strategies for resistance (e.g., “I stopped dyeing my hair and feel freer than ever.”)
- Negotiation and ambivalence (e.g., “I love cream use, yet it doesn’t make me younger – I feel more confident, though.”)
- Digital concerns (e.g., “I don’t post much because people will judge me based on how I look.”)

These themes constituted essential frameworks for connecting the quantitative results to the ethnographic results that appear in the following section.

Qualitative Component: Ethnographic Observation

Ethnographic observation regarding “Am curajul să trăiesc!” (“I have the courage to live!”) workshop showed how aging was re-signified collectively in interaction. Four dynamics were central:

- imagery of freedom, renewal, and release used to characterize later life;
- embodied solidarity in common laughter, weeping, and expressions of concern;
- storylines of rebellion, such as embracing graying or self-love without embarrassment;
- negotiation of competence, in which medical authority was accorded respect but supported by peer knowledge.

These dynamics indicate that the workshop was operating less as a location for instruction about health and more as a community meeting space, where rituals, humor, and emotional interactions reshaped how aging was considered. One participant summed it up this way: “It’s not about health information. It’s about courage. I felt I was not alone.”

Ethical Considerations

All the respondents were informed of the aims and extent of the inquiry and gave their consent for the use of their answers anonymously. The research also adhered to ethical protocols regarding confidentiality, voluntary response and respect for respondents.

Special consideration was afforded to the emotional sensitivity associated with matters of aging, health and self-perception. During focus group dialogues, the investigator employed active listening techniques and abstained from making interventions that could influence the narratives of participants. Committed to feminist and participatory ethical principles (Naples, 2013 [2003]), the study acknowledged the power dynamics present in the interaction between researcher and participant while emphasizing the safety and autonomy of the respondents.

The investigator was also cognizant of the need to avoid perpetuating societal norms related to “successful aging” or favoring certain narratives of empowerment over others. This ethical stance aligns with Dimitrie Gusti’s assertion regarding the sociologist’s ethical responsibility to honor the lived experiences of the individuals under study.

Methodological Reflections

The combined use of survey data and ethnographic immersion is informed by the Gustian idea of “total social observation” as it has been transposed into a city and digital age. This methodological practice combines statistical generalizability with experientially oriented depth, enabling the investigator to examine contradictions, performative axes and social complexities that may be obscured by research using a single methodological design.

As both an insider, being the founder of the 50 Plus Community, and a researcher, the author occupied a dual positionality that facilitated trust while simultaneously

requiring a high degree of reflexivity. The fieldnotes encompassed reflections on the extent to which her presence affected the dialogues, with certain members addressing her as a peer rather than merely as an observer.

This methodological choice is grounded in feminist method’s expectations for situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988) and for participatory action. In giving equal attention to numerically measurable attitudes and experientially informed knowledge, the research facilitates a multidimensional, participatory understanding of how Romanian women aged over 50 internalize, reject, or redefine anti-aging discourse.

Findings – Part I: Quantitative and Thematic Analysis

The survey captured the demographic profile, digital practices, and attitudes toward aging among 103 women aged 50-78 (mean age 61.4). The majority were urban, educated, and socially active, reflecting the community’s profile of digitally connected midlife and older women. While not nationally representative, the sample aligns with broader global trends in later-life digital engagement (Pew Research Center, 2023).

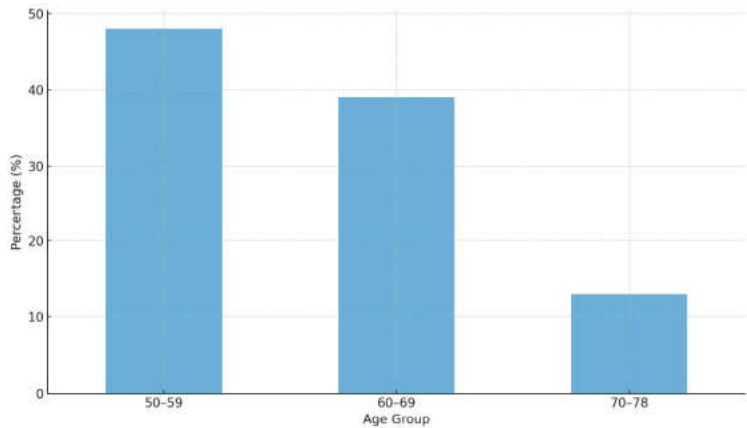


Figure 1. Age Distribution of Participants

Attitudes toward Aging

Responses showed ambivalence. Most women denied or refused stories of decline, proclaiming freedom and authenticity but still reporting fears about visibility, ill-health, and social stigmatization. Thus, while 68% linked older age to “greater wisdom”, 52% listed “loss of social recognition” too. This ambivalence shows that later life can be experienced as both empowered and vulnerable.

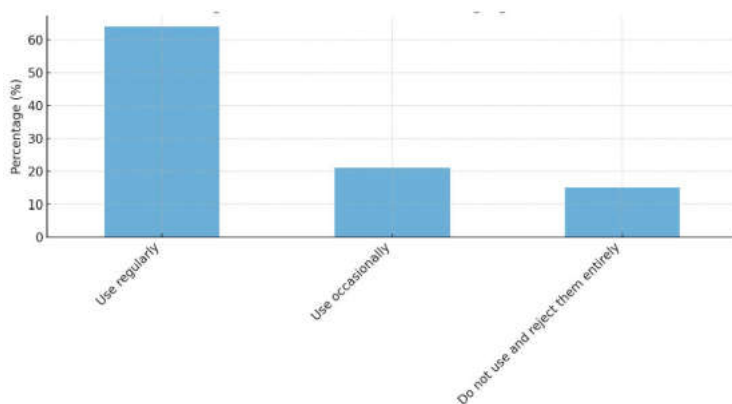


Figure 2. Attitudes Toward Anti-Aging Products

Digital Access and Practices

While 92% reported everyday use of digital technology, only a third (34%) employed virtual spaces beyond minimal functionalities out of fears regarding judgment and beautification imperatives. This illustrates van Dijk's (2005) "second-order exclusion" concept, wherein use fails to translate into symbolic inclusion. Respondents primarily utilized but did not produce or upload content, consequently entrenching peripheral status upon digital spaces.

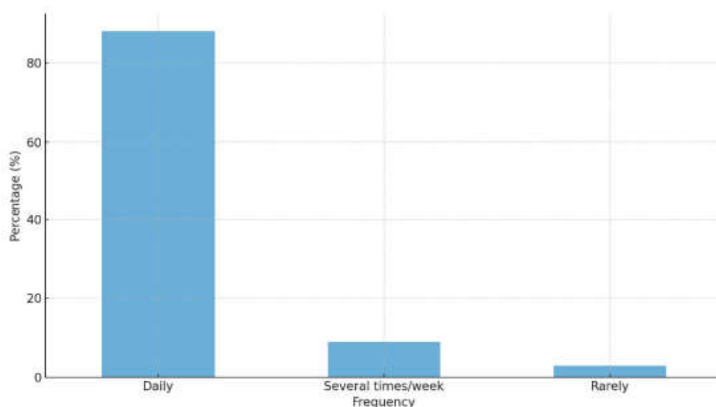


Figure 3. Internet Usage Frequency

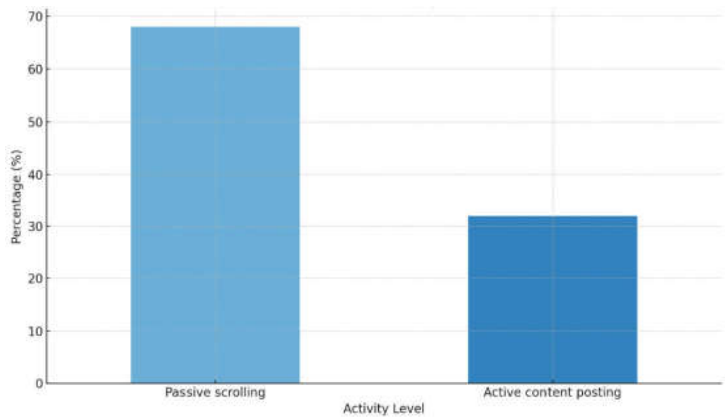


Figure 4. Social Media Engagement Patterns

Education, Work, and Digital Capital

Corresponding educational background to digital use confidence: 71% of highly educated women reported feeling “digitally competent” compared to only 39% who completed secondary education. Retirees’ employment status was also a determinant of use, if they were semi-retired shopkeepers rather than professionals. These results reflect the highly skewed nature of older women’s digital capital.

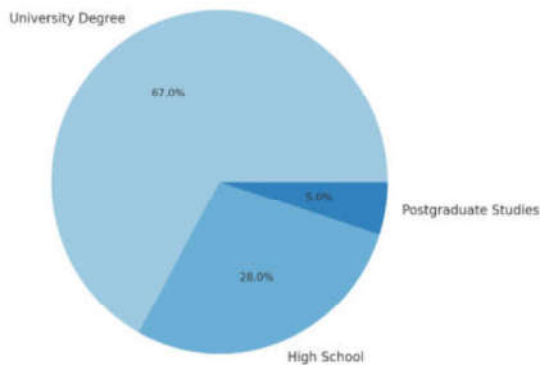


Figure 5. Education Levels

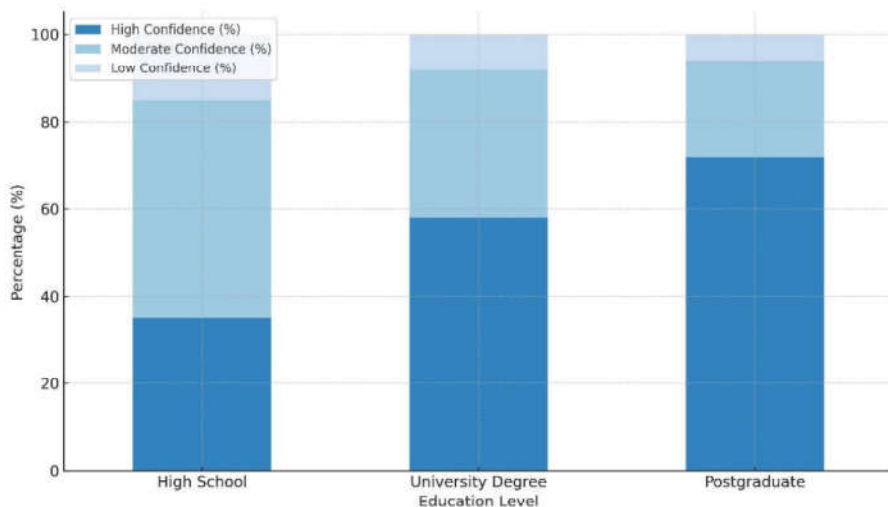


Figure 6. Correlation Between Education and Digital Confidence

Opposition to Anti-Aging Narratives

A large number of participants (59%) reported a conscious choice to reject cosmetic surgery or use computerized filters. They labeled decisions like “letting hair go gray” or “posting unretouched photos” as expressions of self-acceptance and subtle rebellion. However, 44% reported feeling pressured to maintain a youthful appearance in virtual settings, portraying a simultaneous presence of counter-narratives alongside vulnerability to mainstream norms.

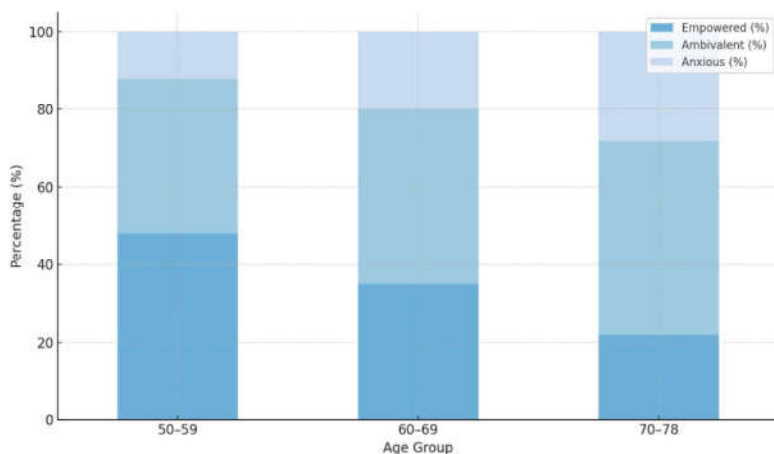


Figure 7. Emotional Self-Perception by Age Group

Three key dynamics become apparent here: (1) aging is felt ambivalently – as liberating but stigmatized; (2) digital divides become divisions between page views and engagement rather than between having or lacking access; and (3) women internalize everyday practices of resistance against anti-aging imperatives but remain precarious in response to neoliberal aesthetics of work and beauty.

Part II: Results - Ethnography Findings

Ethnographic observation while visiting the “Am curajul să trăiesc!” (“I have the courage to live!”) wellness workshop in May 2025 revealed how aging was not only a topic of discussion but was instead redrawn amidst interactive collaboration. In the presence of approximately 60 women and doctors, a heterosocial space was developed in which institutional authority intersected with knowledge grounded in experience. With a double function of observer and facilitator running across the affective and symbolic registers of the workshop, a reflexive methodology was needed in order to negotiate a balance between empathetic engagement and analytical distancing.



Figure 8. “Am curajul să trăiesc!” (“I have the courage to live!”) Workshop

Linguistic Constructs and Symbolic Frameworks

Respondents often used metaphors such as “renewal”, “liberation”, and “lifting a burden” to describe the aging process. These words reflect attempts to redeploy later life as a time of freedom and authenticity rather than dwelling on deficiency.

Embodied Solid

Non-verbal rites – laughing, crying, embracing, and holding hands – created what Hochschild (1990) refers to as an “affective economy”, whereby emotions circulated to generate solidarity. Such bodily expressions transformed the workshop into a site of communal resilience, where coping was enacted communally rather than privately.

Stories of Resistance

Accounts glorified everyday moments of noncompliance against anti-ageing imperatives: embracing gray hair, reducing cosmetic practice, or treating self-care as a priority without regret. Such choices detail how women re-signify cultural narratives, producing everyday micro-practices of resistance.

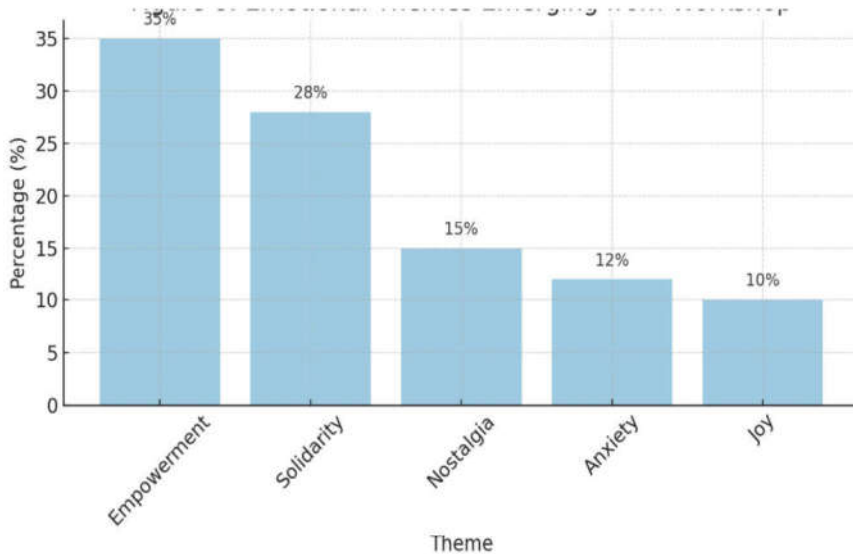


Figure 9. Emotional Themes Emerging from Workshop

Negotiating Expertise

Medical authority was both valued and tested. While participants valued professional opinion, they did exchange peer knowledge and alternative practices. Through such interactions, authority is democratized in community contexts, paralleling a feminist approach to co-produced knowledge.

Ethnographic findings reveal that aging was experienced as a performative and communal workshop enacted between linguistic practice, affective emotion, and corporeal practice. Rather than operating mainly as a health education workshop, it served as a site of symbolism in which older women reimagined aging against

a background of resilience, care, and solidarity. Ritualistic communal practice and affective relations here worked against neoliberal pedagogy about self-optimization and aesthetic control.

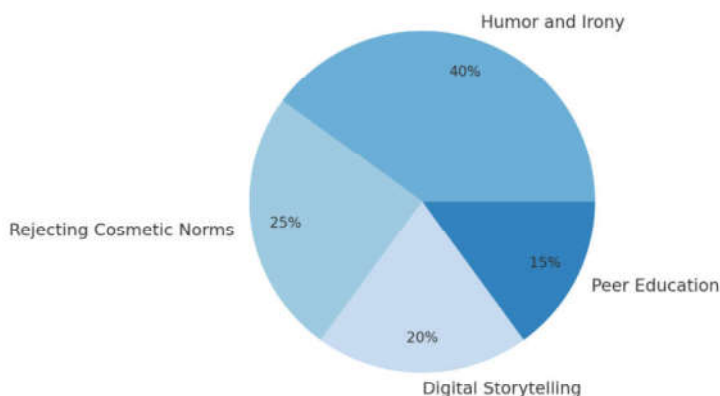


Figure 10. Types of Resistance Strategies Observed

Discussion and Sociological Implications

They indicate variations that foster a richer discussion on current theories regarding aging. Susan Sontag's (1972) proposition regarding a "double standard of aging" continues to be highly influential; however, we introduce variations to this concept. Instead of considering aging as a baldly negative phenomenon, participants showed variations between feelings of pride and vulnerability and ambivalence regarding their social situation. This suggests that the double standard is not a rigid cultural imperative, but a variable phenomenon constructed both personally and socially.

Margaret Gullette's (2004) assertion regarding cultural invisibility is only partially verified. Women have actually felt a sense of marginalization, particularly in work and family contexts. But others experienced moments of hyper-visibility, particularly in cyberspace where their age was open to intense judgment and comment. Here then, visibility emerges double-edged: it means both recognition and vulnerability to judgment and criticism. By illustrating this, this finding refutes Gullette's binarization of visibility versus non-visibility because older women can be both marginalized focal points at once in mutually constraining ways.

The idea of postfeminist sensibility, developed by Rosalind Gill (2011), that places a special emphasis on aesthetic work, is partly represented in participants' accounts of beauty routines and virtual self-presentations. However, research identifies deliberate rejections too – the women who chose non-use of filters, embraced graying hair, or did not upload "perfect" selfies. These decisions indicate

paradoxes in the postfeminist model: empowerment can't be fully summed up in self-curating, but can be equally realized in the direct rejection of aesthetic mandates. The results extend further theories about later life subjectivity (Gilleard, & Higgs, 2000) because they indicate not only the autonomy and imagination inherent within "the third age" but a global "fourth age anxiety" as well. Empowered women continued to be predictive of decline and sickness fears. This makes the third/fourth age split less a cutting boundary but a tension-filled continuum lived simultaneously.

Overall, the findings suggest that existing theories capture important dynamics but tend to overstate singular narratives: decline, invisibility, or aesthetic discipline. The lived experiences of Romanian women aged 50+ reveal more hybrid positions, marked by contradiction and negotiation. Rather than fitting neatly into Western-centric models, their accounts reflect the post-socialist context where collectivist legacies intersect with neoliberal imperatives, generating subjectivities that are both resistant and vulnerable.

Aging as a Contested and Negotiated Identity

Survey results reflect a deep ambivalence about aging that is affected by both structural limits and individual agency. Many women criticized dominant discourses of decline while at the same time feeling trapped by the cultural imperatives that favor youth, visibility and output. In one focus group, a participant stated: "I want my hair to go gray, but I still color it. Society isn't yet prepared to receive me old." In another focus group, a participant reflected: "At 60, I'm more free than ever, yet I gaze at wrinkles in Zoom meetings."

Such paradoxes are reflected in Gilleard and Higgs's (2000) account of the third age as a sphere of consumption and identity work and yet imply a "fourth age anxiety" – a brewing fear of exclusion and decline beneath the discourses of enabled successful aging. Although Sontag's (1972) argument regarding the "double standard of aging" persists, our findings introduce greater complexity to it: women moved readily among pride, ambivalence and vulnerability and therefore imply post-socialist identities that resist binary dualisms of empowerment and decline.

Gullette's (2004) hypothesis concerning older women's invisibility was validated only in part. While some participants reported feeling erased in professional or family settings, others described experiences of hyper-visibility – on Zoom, during medical appointments, or in public interactions – in which their age became extremely monitored. Hence, visibility itself became ambivalent: simultaneously recognition and observation.

Embodied Resistance and Collective Re-Signification

The ethnographic study discovers that women challenged dominant discourses not solely by explicit critique but also through emotional, bodily and social practices. Media like humor, narrative and mutual recognition formed counter-narratives of online perfection and neoliberal self-management. The workshop “Am curajul să trăiesc!” (“I have the courage to live!”) became a space for what Butler (2021) identifies as resignification, where the concept of aging was resignified through repeated performances. Even if those practices did not spark structural revolutions, they became symbolic, reconceptualizing getting older as a common and aesthetic process, not as a personal failure.

Emotional resilience was viewed as a core aspect, grounded in communal rather than individual mechanisms. Laughter as a group expression, group rituals and shared stories acted as emotional resources that strengthened solidarity. This aligns with Hochschild’s (1990) concept of “emotional labor”, yet the emotional focus was inward, toward community maintenance. In doing so, resilience surfaced more as a group resource rather than individual characteristic, upheld by peer support and mutual validation.

Feminist scholarship related to care (Tronto, 1993; Kittay, 1999) points out the political dimensions inherent in relationality, where sustaining actions and reciprocity offset individualism of the neoliberal kind. The members of the 50 Plus Community achieve this dynamic quite elegantly, reconceptualizing age as a shared experience that is shaped by care and symbolic inclusion. This further means that resilience should be conceptualized not just as individual adaptability but also as a quality that emanates from community-based affective economies.

Digital Ambivalence and Algorithmic Exclusion

The majority of respondents are connected online, yet Internet use is restricted by platform design, cultural protocols and perceived online capital. Women positioned themselves both as peripheral and noticeable – present in online spaces but rarely at the center. In one’s words: “Facebook is like looking at a party from outside. I exist, yet not invited at all.” This is also a case of van Dijk’s (2005) second-order exclusion, in that technical access doesn’t translate into symbolic participation. Algorithms favoring youth and photogenic perfection often render older women on the peripheries of visibility.

The digital engagement, however, was not totally passive. While members registered their frustration at their inclusion in the class of “non-digital” they also practiced new modes of self-representation. Gill’s (2011) postfeminist sensibility – that interrelated power and aesthetic labor – was evident; yet many women actively refused it in not posting “perfect” images or using filters. Those refusals actually transformed the spaces, recasting them from sites of exclusion into complex sites of resistance.

Table 1. Barriers and Solutions for Digital Inclusion of Older Women

Barrier	Description	Proposed Solution
Second-level digital divide	Limited confidence and cultural legitimacy despite access to devices and Internet.	Tailored digital literacy programs emphasizing creativity and self-expression.
Algorithmic invisibility	Social media platforms prioritize youth-centric, viral content over narratives of maturity.	Advocacy for platform reforms to value diverse age-related content.
Fear of judgment and ridicule	Concerns about being criticized for self-presentation online.	Community-based support groups fostering safe spaces for digital expression.
Aesthetic pressures	Persistent societal expectation for older women to conceal signs of aging.	Campaigns promoting body positivity and age diversity in media representations.

Policy and Implementation Considerations

Such findings suggest a number of policy and intervention formulation routes beyond technical fixes to include social and cultural change.

1. Digital literacy as empowerment. Campaigns targeting women over 50 should go beyond instruction in technical competencies to fostering critical awareness about online appearance, data use, and algorithmic control. Such initiatives would facilitate not only navigation across a range of digital spaces but further enhance women's capacity to shape their own digital selves and resist exclusionary definitions of beauty. This implies that digital literacy should be understood not only as an adaptation device, but also as a facilitator of agency and participation.

2. Participatory design in platforms and health programs. Including women over 50 in advisory panels, focus groups, and user-testing ensures that their perspectives shape digital infrastructures and wellness initiatives from the outset. Without such involvement, interventions risk reinforcing symbolic exclusion. The broader implication here is that participation itself is a form of recognition: policy must see older women as co-designers of social and technological environments, not as passive beneficiaries.

3. Promotion of innovation based on community activity. Initiatives such as the 50 Plus Community become experimental spaces in which empowerment, mutual learning among age-peers, and intergenerational solidarity become cultivated. Government agencies and non-government agencies can reinforce such sustainability by financing such initiatives, collaborative arrangements with institutions, and recognition in policy designs. It implies that local societies need to be viewed as social innovation laboratories, which redefine aging as a societal asset rather than a problem to be resolved.

4. Representation and awareness of culture. Policy should also address the symbolic aspects of aging. State campaigns, school curricula, and workplace programs can diversify public images of later life, criticizing myths of invisibility or decline. This would involve a change in aging policy from a narrow concentration on dependency and care to a recognition of older women as bearers of knowledge, carers, and creative producers.

Taken together, these recommendations point to a comprehensive policy response that synthesizes digital equity, participatory design, community resilience, and cultural validation. By adopting this approach, Romania may harmonize with wider European active aging initiatives, while still addressing its own post-socialist legacies in relation to gender, technology, and caregiving.

Table 2: Policy Recommendations for Supporting Women 50+

Domain	Recommendation
Public Health	Shift communication from “successful aging” ideals to inclusive narratives of adaptive resilience.
Digital Literacy	Integrate critical thinking and creative self-expression into training for older adults.
Urban Community Spaces	Design intergenerational programs that foster socialization, learning and aesthetic diversity.
Research and Policy	Engage women 50+ as co-creators of research and policymaking processes, not passive subjects.
Media Representation	Encourage age-positive portrayals of mature women in advertising, entertainment and online platforms.

Limitations of the Study

Like any research investigation, this work has limitations that shape interpretation of findings. The sample was mostly urban-educated women who were part of the 50 Plus Community; rural and lower socio-economic groups may have encountered differing barriers and opportunities within digital engagement and this only constrains generalizability.

Double role of founder/investigator required both advantages of trustworthiness and disadvantages of over-identification. Reflexive tactics – systematic fieldnotes, triangulation between ethnography and survey, and feedback from supervisors – helped to minimize bias but could not completely eliminate influence of prior relationships. Independent researchers’ subsequent comparative work would further corroborate.

A second limitation relates to how fast technology and culture shift. The results freeze practice at a certain point in 2025 but will likely change; research conducted over extended periods will be important.

A further limitation is that a focus on celebrating participants' voices might have suppressed silences or internal divisions; empowerment is not equal or unanimous. They neither challenge research findings but draw attention to existing inclusive research. They also reinforce Gusti's finding that sociology has to integrate structural mapping and daily life while acknowledging representational positionality and partiality in any representation.

Conclusion

This study has examined how Romanian women aged 50+ negotiate aging, digital participation, and anti-aging discourses through a combination of survey and ethnographic data. Rather than passive recipients of stigma or wellness imperatives, participants demonstrated resilience, reflexivity, and collective agency. They contested beauty norms, experimented with digital practices, and cultivated rituals of solidarity that re-signified later life as a space of renewal, knowledge, and belonging.

One important finding concerns the group nature of resilience. While much literature treats resilience as an individual psychological characteristic, these women found strength in mutual support among peers, use of humor, common stories, and mutual validation. Such practices served as emotional resources and thus generate what can be termed as collective resilience. This account unsettles prevailing paradigms concerning "successful aging" and diverts attention from individual self-optimization to community-bound caregiving and empowering strategies.

The results also bring existing theories into conflict. Sontag's "double standard" does not apply universally: women freely oscillated between pride, vulnerability, and ambivalence. Gullette's "cultural invisibility" was negated by hyper-visibility on the Internet, where age signs were examined rather than disregarded. Gill's postfeminist consciousness was congruent with imperatives to conduct aesthetic work, but participants also performed intentional refusals – as accepting gray hair, rejecting filters, or refusing to post "perfect" selfies. Gilleard and Higgs's third/fourth age divide seemed less a sharp boundary than a spectrum of concurrent empowerment and worry. Overall, these tensions indicate that feminist and aging theories need contextual rethinking in application to post-socialist societies. From a policy point of view, this research advocates for extending programs of digital literacy beyond technical competence to algorithmic awareness and narrative inclusion. It argues in favor of participatory design in both platform and program development on health, and institutional sanction for community initiatives such as the 50 Plus Community. More generally, it underscores the pressing need to diversify later life's cultural representation in a move beyond a deficit-based

perspective to a celebration and appreciation of older women as a valuable source of knowledge, caregiving capacity and innovative inputs.

In summary, this work reexamines Dimitrie Gusti's monographic sociological ethos in the twenty-first century. One hundred years after his pioneering monographic field research, the need to combine structural mapping and lived experiences continues paramount. By utilizing this inclusive and collaborative approach within a networked women's community, this research confirms that monographic methodology's core continues to act as a methodological compass: not only a nostalgic recollection of yesteryears, but a template for scrutinizing and cooperatively shaping social realities typical to late modernity.

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