

Research Article

Filtering Out Ageism: Unveiling Instagram's Reinforcement of Negative Stereotypes of Ageing

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Article Info	Abstract
Article History	This study examines the depiction of ageism on Instagram, one of the most popular social media platforms. With over one billion active users, Instagram is a powerful medium for shaping societal attitudes toward ageing and older adults. Through a review of existing literature, this study explores the prevalence and nature of ageist content on Instagram, its impact on users, particularly older adults, and the role of Instagram's algorithms in promoting ageist content. The study also investigates the potential for Instagram to promote positive representations of ageing and countering ageist stereotypes. This study adopted a qualitative approach to find the data through hashtags and keywords. The findings suggest that ageist content, particularly prevalent on Instagram and often around age-related physical changes, can contribute to negative self-perceptions of ageing among older adults. Instagram's algorithms have also been found to promote ageist content, reinforcing negative stereotypes about ageing and older adults. However, Instagram also has the potential to challenge ageist stereotypes through sharing of positive ageing experiences and counter-narratives. Overall, this study provides insights into the depiction of ageism on Instagram and highlights the need for strategies to address and combat ageism on social media platforms.
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1. Introduction

The ageing process has historically been characterized by a linear progression from birth to childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and eventually old age, with mortality marking the end of the life span for individuals fortunate enough to reach old age. This is an elementary circulation of everyone's life. The term ageism was introduced Butler (1969), referred to discrimination against people purely because they are 'old' (Kydd & Fleming, 2015). Age discrimination, however, has a different focus. Butler (1975, p. 48) defined ageism as "a process of systematic stereotyping and discrimination against people because they are old, just as

racism and sexism accomplish this for colour and gender". From that time, this has become the classic definition of ageism which is still used to a wide scope today.

At present, there are several definitions of ageism, as it is formally defined as "an attitude, action, or institutional structure which subordinates a person or group because of age or any assignment of roles in society purely on the basis of age" (Traxler, 1980, p 4). While according to the World Health Organization (WHO), ageism is the stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination towards people based on age (Officer & de la Fuente-Núñez, 2018). Ageism can be described as a stereotypic and often negative perception of older adults. Nevertheless, it is to be noted for its definition that ageism can also be aimed at younger age groups.

Apparently, the way ageism is used to describe older people and young people is depicted as both younger adults and older people having a lower position in the power structure of society (Heikkinen & Krekula, 2008). However, ageism towards older people is qualitatively different as it involves deterioration and death rather than potential developmental youths (Iversen, Larsen, & Solem, 2009). Like racism and sexism, ageism seems to appear on many levels of communication but rather goes unnoticed as it is most of the time subconsciously accepted by society.

With the prominent use of social media nowadays, ageism is highly prevalent on social media platforms. However, unlike other forms of discrimination, including sexism and racism, ageism is perceived as socially accepted and usually unchallenged because of its largely implicit and subconscious nature. This phenomenon clarifies how language and media often echo and reinforce these stereotypes, which cause ageist depictions to become the norm in society. This research highlights how ageism stereotypes are shown on social media, specifically Instagram.

Social media platforms have become integral to modern communication and profoundly influence societal attitudes and behaviours. As one of the most prominent social media platforms, Instagram has gained immense popularity, attracting a diverse user base exceeding one billion individuals. However, behind the captivating visuals and user-generated content, algorithms play a crucial role in shaping users' experiences and interactions on the platform.

Algorithms, in the context of social media, refer to complex computational processes that analyze vast amounts of data to make decisions about the content presentation, user recommendations, and platform interactions. The algorithmic systems employed by Instagram determine the visibility of posts, the order of

content in users' feeds, and the suggestions provided to users. These algorithms can shape users' perceptions, preferences, and engagement on the platform.

However, Iversen, Larsen, & Solem, (2009) argued that ageism is not always negative; sometimes, it is perceived as a positive stereotype. Several studies have provided examples of positive discrimination, positive stereotypes, and prejudice (ex. Bytheway, 1995, Palmore, 1999, Minichiello et al., Cuddy & Fiske, 2002). Thus, this study will also consider positive stereotypes of ageism that appear on Instagram.

Ageism, as defined by Butler (1975), refers to the systematic stereotyping and discrimination against individuals based on their age, comparable to how racism and sexism operate on the grounds of race and gender. In the context of this study, it is essential to explore the role of ideology in shaping ageist attitudes and practices. Ideology can be understood in various ways, including as a system of belief specific to a particular group or class, as a set of illusory beliefs or 'false consciousness' that contrasts with scientific knowledge or truth, and as the general production of meanings and ideas (Fiske, 1990: 165-66). This understanding highlights the significance of ideology in society, as it influences individual attitudes and behaviours. While it acknowledges that ideology can be based on illusory beliefs and 'false consciousness,' it nevertheless permeates various societal practices, including ageism.

While scholars have extensively studied racism and sexism, ageism is now increasingly recognized as an overarching ideology within society, perpetuating detrimental effects on older individuals. For instance, scholars such as Higgs & Gilleard (2020) and North et al. (2012) have shed light on the ideological underpinnings of ageism and its impact on various aspects of older people's lives. They argue that ageism operates as a system of beliefs, stereotypes, and discrimination, marginalizing older adults and hindering their access to opportunities and resources.

As ageism is always associated with older people, it cuts across the life course and stems from the perception that someone might be too old or young to be or do something. However, ageism is seen as more detrimental towards older people and has appeared and depicted in many forms of media such as on television in advertisements, films, cartoons, and soap operas; printed media such as greeting cards as well as in humours and daily discourses of the society.

Nowadays, with the prominent use of social media networking sites, people depict ageism in many different ways, such as in product marketing by using representations of older adults. On Instagram, the

scenario can be observed and appears in pictures and texts, hashtags (#), and in substitution for particular things.

Given that as the background, many ideologies construct how people act as the general production of meanings and ideas, which also implies the social constructionism of ageism. As Gramsci (1971) highlighted, ideology is not located in an individual actor or site but rather permeates the whole fabric of societies or communities and results in normalized naturalized views and behaviour. As proposed by Fiske (cited in Ghaderinezhad, 2015), our words are never neutral. Hence, ideology plays a critical role in shaping or framing the language we use in written or oral form. Therefore, ageism is depicted and is socially constructed in the language used by social media users.

The study aims to explore the depiction of ageism on Instagram and its impact on users, particularly older adults. The study aims to identify the prevalence and nature of ageist content on the platform and the perceptions and responses of older adult users to such content. Additionally, the study seeks to examine the role of Instagram's algorithms in spreading ageist content and the potential for the platform to promote positive representations of ageing and countering ageist stereotypes. Ultimately, the study aims to inform strategies for addressing and combating ageism on Instagram and other social media platforms.

To achieve the aims of the study, the analysis of the data will be based on the following research questions:

RQ1: How are ageism stereotypes depicted in the captions and hashtags on Instagram?

RQ2: What are the prevalent sentiments expressed towards aged people and the topic of aging in captions and conversations on Instagram, and how do these sentiments contribute to the portrayal of ageism on the platform?

2. Literature Review

The term 'age' is unclear for most researchers who agree that defining age is difficult (Kydd & Fleming, 2015). Throughout history, old has been viewed as 65 years old for men and 60 years old for women. However, the concept of ageism also can be defined as positive or negative stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination against older people because of their chronological age (Iversen et al., 2009). The fact that significant impact of mass media on reproducing collective discourse, behavior, and attitude outlines has

encouraged many researchers to examine the portrayal of aging and older people in traditional media, particularly broadcasting and printing (Lee, Carpenter, & Meyers, 2007; Prieler, Kohlbacher, Hagiwara, & Arima, 2015; Ylänne, Williams, & Wadleigh, 2009).

However, social media networking sites like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter have become a more widespread web-based environment nowadays. Additionally, young people mostly adopt these platforms (Sloan et al. 2015) for their communication space. As of 2020, Instagram has been reported to have more than 1 billion monthly active users and more than 500 million active users daily, while more than 50 billion photos are shared daily (Chen, 2020; Systrom, 2020). Like other social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, Instagram utilizes hashtags to identify the content of interest (Dorfman, Vaca, Mahmood, Fine, & Schierle, 2017). Hashtag is a significant function of Instagram, which allows users to describe their post and link users with related interest (Small, 2011).

2.1 Ageism Representations on Social Media

Research on social perceptions of older people declares that older people tend to be associated with negative stereotypes such as loneliness, mental incompetence, unattractiveness, ill-health, and senility (North & Fiske, 2012). Besides that, older people have been seen and treated with pettiness, fragileness, helplessness, incomplete, and even not socially valued (Cuddy, Norton, & Fiske, 2005; Macia, Lahmam, Baali, Boëtsch, & Chapuis-Lucciani, 2009). Abrams, Russell, Vauclair, & Swift, (2011) presented the evidence in recent research by the Royal Society for public health; it was found that one in four 18-34 years old believes that being unhappy and feeling depressed in old age is normal and that older people can never be regarded as attractive.

Apart from that, older people also have been viewed as suspicious, conservative, intolerant, moody, pessimistic, and unadaptable on social media regarding their emotional aspects (Arnold-Cathalifaud, Thumala, Urquiza, & Ojeda, 2008; Musaiger & D'Souza, 2009). In general, younger people on social media usually hold less positive perceptions towards older people than older people do toward each other (Abrams, et al., 2011).

The role of Instagram's algorithms in the spread of ageist content has also been studied. A study by Zhao et al. (2021) found that Instagram's algorithms promoted ageist content through its recommendation system and user engagement metrics, reinforcing negative stereotypes about ageing and older adults.

Despite the prevalence of ageist content on Instagram, there is also potential for the platform to promote positive representations of ageing and counter ageist stereotypes. For example, a study by Qiu et al. (2020) found that Instagram could be used to challenge ageist stereotypes through the sharing of positive ageing experiences and counter-narratives.

While Instagram has emerged as a popular platform for content creation and consumption, it has also been criticized for promoting ageist content and perpetuating negative attitudes towards ageing and older adults. Further research is needed to better understand the impact of ageism on Instagram users and to develop strategies for addressing and combatting ageism on the platform.

3. Methodology

Our research design is based on a qualitative research method that employs discourse analysis (DA) to examine the depictions of ageism and people's perceptions regarding ageing and aged people in their communications on Instagram.

3.1 Data Collection

The data collected for this study were obtained from Instagram through a systematic keyword search utilizing specific hashtags such as #oldpeople, #aged, #oldpeopleproblems, and #oldpeoplememes. By employing these hashtags, we aimed to capture relevant content related to ageism and portrayals of ageing on the platform. As our study aims to look at the depictions of stereotypes, we selected the positive and negative representations of older people. The captions and hashtags representing aged people and ageing are randomly taken as we collect the data.

In order to explore the sentiment of ageing and older people in their communications, we ran through the comments on other posts, which resulted from the previous keywords search. For ethical considerations, we have excluded their usernames on Instagram, either in the posts or the comments they made in the conversations, which serve their anonymity. However, all the captions in the posts and comments are taken as they are to secure originality.

3.2 Discourse Analysis

In order to find the answers to our research questions, we employ Discourse Analysis (DA) in the captions and the conversations taken from Instagram based on the keywords search. As an ideological

analysis of language and discourse is a widely practised scholarly and critical endeavour in the humanities, and the social sciences (Van Dijk, 1995), Discourse Analysis (DA) is beneficial for the study.

Discourse analysis (DA) covers a range of theoretical approaches and techniques for reading written, oral, visual, and other data, which are 'characterized by a common interest in de-mystifying ideologies and power [relations] through systematic and transparent' and examination of the use of language in specific contexts (Makita et al.,2019). Therefore, we approached DA as a method as it is a critical stance towards analyzing how social problems, in this case, how ageism is depicted and 'constructed and presented in a broader intertextual and socio-political (con-)text' (Siiner, 2017).

For the study, we analyzed the captions, hashtags, and the conversations which form communication on the knowledge of ageism and how it is produced and reproduced to identify the theme for discourses of ageing which generally have contributed to the social constructionism of the reality for ageing. After we analyzed how the theme of ageing is represented on Instagram, the categories of discourses were developed for their interpretation of meanings.

4. Findings And Discussion

The data collected for this study and the findings will be discussed regarding captions, hashtags, and comments concerning the ageing discourse.

4.1 Discourses of Negative Representations of Ageing on Instagram

Based on our analysis of the negative representations in the captions and hashtags on Instagram, we found a few discourses were repeated frequently. The discourses were coded into a few categories: decay, emotional problems, and physical decline.

4.1.1 Discourse of decay

- a. *"Went hiking today, and now my back is broken." #oldpeopleproblems*
- b. *"Leave it to sleeping on a pillow wrong for nature to really manifest your age...! 🤖 I've had an extremely stiff/strained neck for over a week and it's finally starting to feel a bit bitter. I seriously thought I had some sort of condition, but no, it's just called "getting old".*
- c. *#alwaystired*

- d. "Tired of being tired 🥱👉 this quarantine made me realize how lazy I become, and now I get so easily tired 😩👉
#oldpeopleproblems #imyouth #tiredflex
- e. "Having old broken bones really is an annoyance. Braiding all day yesterday made my hand swell up. Getting old is really becoming a problem! "
oldpeopleproblems #icebabyice # brokenhand #foltsfarmfail # ouch
- f. "Laying around because while my face may say I'm 23 my back says I'm 50"
#oldpeopleproblems #almost30 #thirtyflirtyandthriving

4.1.2 Discourse of emotion problems

- a. "My special thoughts go to the elderly people who suffer from loneliness and isolation at this time of crisis."
#senility #ill-health #mobility #Mentalincompetence #

4.1.3 Discourse of physical decline

- a. #wrinkles
- b. "Did I forget my glasses were on my head and step into the shower? Yes. Yes I did." #oldpeopleproblems

The findings resulted in the study showing that the depiction of ageism naturally occurs on Instagram and is consistent with the literature, as in Western culture, ageing is often associated with decline and disengagement (Peel, Holland, & Murray, 2018). Instagram users relate their physical decline and health deterioration to older people. This association is completely ageist as they deny their condition but rather put the situation onto other people's situation, especially older people.

The findings also confirmed the dominant social representations of ageing in the discourse of emotional problems. Users on Instagram always associate old people with 'loneliness' and 'isolation'. According to the paper by Peel, Holland, & Murray (2018), ageing is a time of dependency, social isolation, and

fragility. They also clarified that these negative meanings had maintained currency over time, across generations, and remain stable in current common-sense understandings, despite the diversification of experiences of ageing in the 21st century. Thus, it is observable how users on Instagram display a sense of ageism.

According to social representation theory, social representations shape and define what it means to age and age successfully (Peel, Holland, & Murray, 2018). Henceforth, for this study, the negative representation of older people has created a schema of older people's decay and suffering from emotional problems and physical decline. According to Peel, Holland, and Murray (2018), we create, maintain, and resist these social representations in our everyday social interactions. The same process also applies to the social representations of aged people and ageing.

4. 1.4 Perceptions and Sentiments of Aged People

Based on the comments by people on Instagram related to aged people, we identified several negative perceptions within their discourses when talking about older people. The sentiments of ageism are analyzed based on different discourses.

As in Figure 1, The photo depicts a couple engaging in an affectionate gesture, with one individual leaning toward the other in a manner commonly associated with expressions of intimacy. Such displays of affection are prevalent on Instagram, as individuals often share similar images within their posts.. However, someone commented, "WoW! That gesture is not nice for that age. 😞".

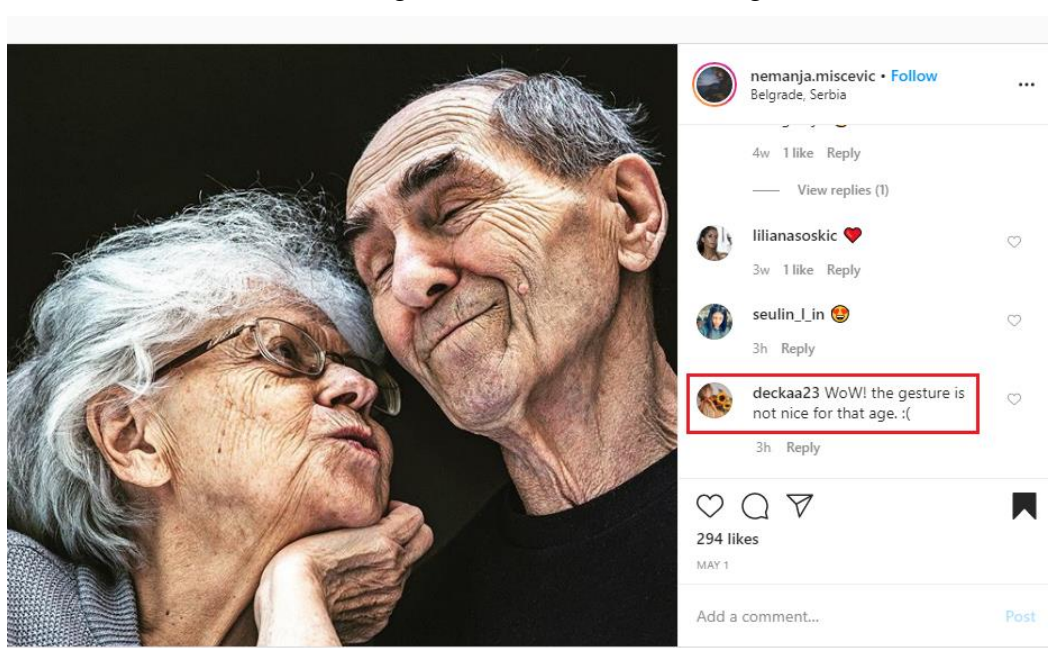
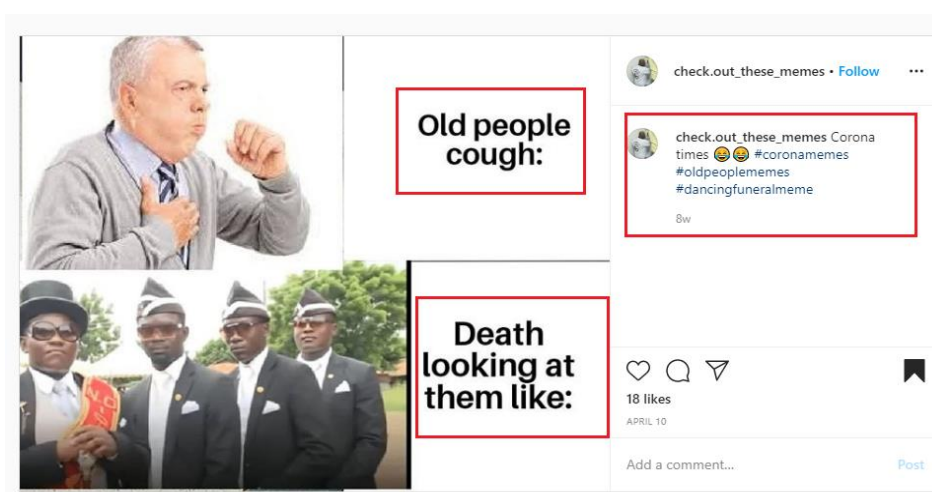


Figure 1. A mother wants to kiss her husband, and the husband looks very happy. The photo was screen-shotted on Instagram.

It is unfairly justified as "not nice" for an old couple, which would be fine for young people. The user clearly stated "for this age" which refers to the couple's age. The depiction of ageism is clear in that sense. Besides, this user used the emoji "😞" to represent sadness. Furthermore, the word "WoW!" with an exclamation mark (!), as we usually use it for something that surprises us, shows that the user did not expect the



expressions of love portrayed by the couple. Based on the discourse used, it can be concluded that the user has negative sentiments toward older people and has set a certain schema for older people to act.

Figure 2. A man is coughing, and others are waiting to bury him. The photo screen-shotted on Instagram.

Figure 2 is taken from a public account. Considering the Covid-19 pandemic, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus outbreak to the world in late January 2020 (Yeo, Kaushal, & Yeo, 2020). However, the representation of old people coughing and the fierce-looking men representing 'death' as in the post, especially during this outbreak, is completely ageist. Clearly, the post depicts ageism, even if it is considered sarcasm.

The post also uses an emoji of laughing, which reflects that the cough from older people is dangerous. The World Health Organisation has clearly mentioned that "all people" regardless of age, can be infected as in "Human-to-human transmission is possible for everyone, and this new virus could infect people of all ages" (WHO, 2020). However, many people believe that only older people are infected, even though it is proven that the virus can also infect children, adults, older people, and others of any age.

The text of *'Death looking at them like'* highlights crude distinctions of 'other people' towards old people. It is a way to categorize or distinguish old people as 'other category' from us and associate particular things such as 'death' only with old people. According to Peel et al. (2018), our sense of self is protected and held safe by representing 'old' as other, distancing ourselves, and associating death, decline, and fragility with something distinct from ourselves.



Figure 3. A man has a beard razor in his hands, cutting another man's beard. The photo screenshotted on Instagram.

Another sentiment of ageism can be seen as negative by humiliating a person considered as aged. In Figure 3, a comment appears rude as the user assumes the old man will carelessly cut the customer's head instead of the hair. The use of a question mark (?) and an exclamation mark (!) stress the serious concern of the situation. The statement *'He might cut his nick'* can be categorized as the discourse of physical decline, which substitutes negative representations of old people.

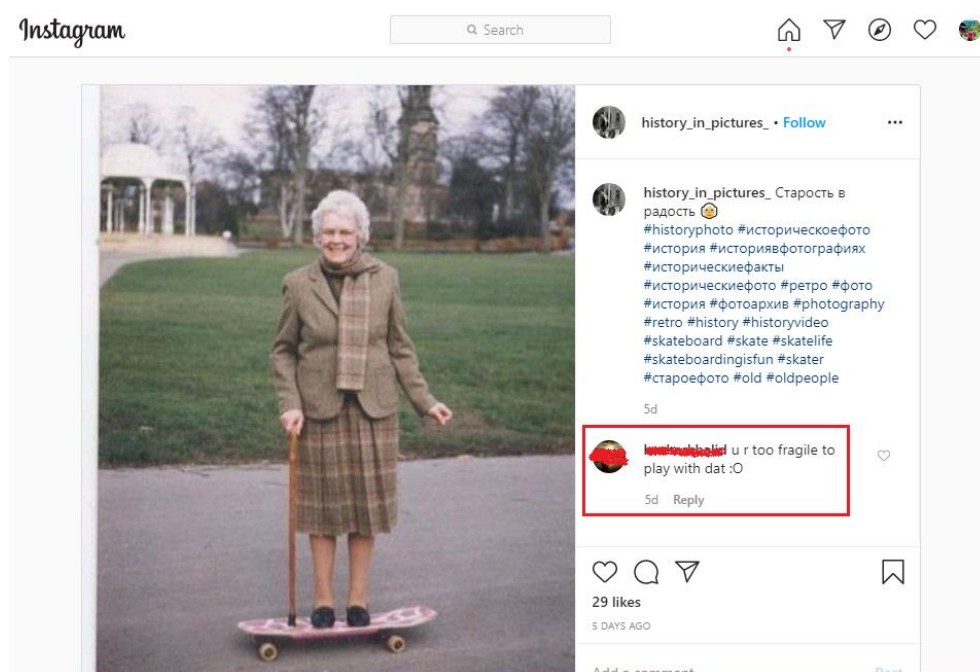


Figure 4. A woman smiles on a scooter. The photo was screenshotted on Instagram.

Moreover, we all agree that playing any sport is very important no matter how old a person is. Exercise has countless benefits for all ages, including a healthier heart, stronger bones, and, most importantly, improved flexibility. Activities for older people, in particular, have even more benefits, like it reduces the risk of chronic disease, lowering the chance of injury, and many more.

However, in Figure 4, a user commented, "*u r too fragile to play with dat :O*" for the picture of an old woman standing on a skateboard. Ageism can be seen as the user comments on the old woman as '*too fragile*'. This perception towards old people is categorized as the discourse of physical decline as described in the statement that "physical decline included attributes of increasing loss of physical function, disability and frailty and not being able to participate in social activities as this may cause illness and even death" (Kelly et al 2016, p. 7).

In this busy world, we all tend to forget things. Usually, we go to the kitchen to get something or to eat something. Once we arrived there, we forgot why we came to the kitchen. This is because we are all busy, and it does not relate to our own age. In Figure 5, an older man was viewed and set as an example for forgetting. As if only older people forget what they have been told or what they do.



Figure 5. A man is talking, and text is added to the picture. The photo was screenshotted on Instagram.

The inability to retrieve memory is one of the most common causes of forgetting, which can happen to all of us, no matter how old we are. However, the post in Figure 5 mocks an old man as being forgetful, including negative hashtags such as #Old #oldmemory, etc. The depiction of ageism can be analyzed as only old people forgetting things that have been told. The situation of forgetting things that have been told as being portrayed in the picture is completely possible for all people. However, it specifically uses an old man to represent the situation.

4.2 Discourses of Positive Representations of Ageing on Instagram

According to our exploration of Instagram, we have also come across many positive representations and sentiments of aged people and ageing on Instagram from the keywords search. We found a few discourses were repeated frequently in the captions and hashtags on Instagram. The discourses were coded into a few categories: discourse of respect, discourse of motivation, and discourse of positive ageing.

4.2.1 Discourse of respect

a. *#wisewords #howlovelytheyare #goodolddays #*

4.2.2 Discourse of motivation

- a. 854,629 times #ageisjustanumber has been mentioned in hashtags;
- b. # confidence #exercise #Positivethinking #feelingallright

4.2.3 Discourse of positive ageing

- a. #Happyaging #agewell #Wellbeing #care #PositiveAging #ageingawesomely #

The findings in this investigation showed that ageing is also depicted in positive representations. While we were looking for comments on aged people and ageing, we simply noticed that there are lots of positive stereotypes. Based on the review of how images of ageing have been viewed, people who are healthy and stay positive in old age are praised by younger adults and made as prototype examples of staying positive (Edström, 2018). However, Lundgren & Ljuslinder (2011) argue that despite the positive sentiments of ageism, they still consider them problematic. Thus, these positive representations might have a background message.

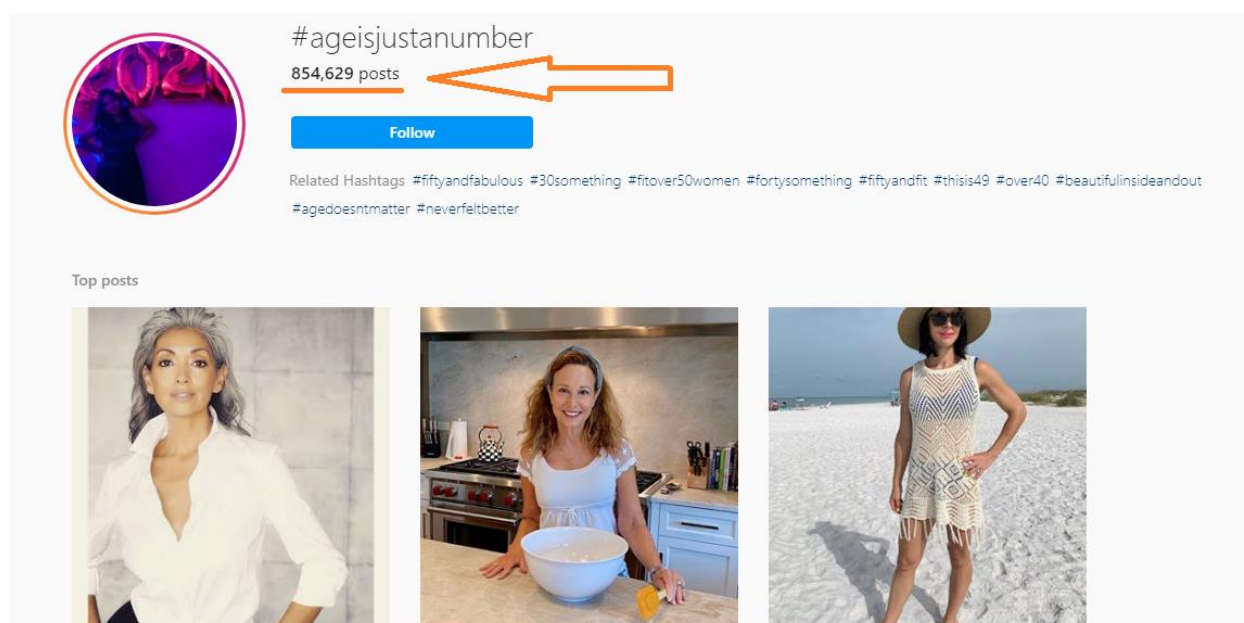


Figure 6. Three women were found through the hashtag use: #ageisjustanumber. The photo was screen-shotted on Instagram.

As we can see in Figure 6, there are 854,629 times #ageisjustanumber found in the keywords search on Instagram, showing that people still consider getting old as harmless. Those who used the hashtag means that they would like to express the fact that age is only a number but nothing else, so they can do what they

wish no matter where they are in their age. This hashtag is usually used in the posted pictures to show and support older people to live normally.



Figure 7. The discourse of motivational photos is brought from Instagram.

Furthermore, Figure 7 portrays the discourse of motivation. As we can see, a positive quote on ageing is posted for the picture: "Aging is an extraordinary process where you become the person you always should have been" - David Bowie, together with the hashtags #happyaging and #Agewell. This kind of post motivates older people to act and embrace their age; it should not be something that can stop their happiness. Furthermore, this motivation was also shown by the younger people to encourage the younger adults to enjoy their life as they should have.

5. Conclusion

The present study was designed to explore the depictions of ageism stereotypes on Instagram. The study has revealed that although ageism is considered overarching discrimination, numerous positive representations still counteract ageism, specifically on Instagram. The investigation of ageism has shown that positive and negative stereotypes are possible, and both can be found on social media. Negative stereotypes such as decay, emotional problems, and physical decline are the most popular. Surprisingly, the most significant finding from this study is that positive representations were more apparent than negative stereotypes. The positive stereotypes examples such as respect, motivation, and staying healthy were the most popular ones.

Previously, many studies have examined the causes and consequences of ageism without a clear definition of the phenomenon. As a consequence of this phenomenon on social media, Instagram in particular, has been characterized by diverging study results that are not easy to compare. Thus, it is quite challenging to find an appropriate framework for ageism. However, this study has raised important questions about the nature of ageism on social media. Future research can be worked further on this phenomenon, especially why people on social media treat this phenomenon in a particular way. Apart from that, as the study only uses certain hashtags to get the findings, future work may focus on other ways to look for findings, such as using languages other than English or focusing on specific cultures, which might produce different results.

Declaration of Competing Interest: The author declares that he has no known competing interests.

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