Social Media and Age-Based Stereotypes: The Reinforcement or Alleviation of Ageism

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Abstract: The rapid reduction of late-life mortality rates and the drastic decline of global fertility rates have given rise to the aging population in many countries. Simultaneously, the digital revolution significantly increases the participation of digital technologies in people's daily lives. These two changes have amplified many existing problems. The social phenomenon of ageism has entered a new stage of alteration gradually, both in terms of its nature and significance. Therefore, the main purpose of this article is to investigate the current situation of age discrimination and to give an argumentative overview of how ageism is strengthened and alleviated after the prevalence of social media in people's lives. Based on the characteristics of social media, a logical discussion of whether these features would contribute to the alleviation or deterioration of ageism will be included in the third part of the article. Also, a few suggestions will be given in the article to assist in the mitigation of ageism via utilizing social media platforms. Advises are given mainly from the perspective of the government, which is related to legislation and educational reforms.

Keywords: Ageism, Social Media, The Elderly, Age-Based Stereotypes

1. Introduction

The aging population has been the most common feature of post-industrial society. The unceasing advancement of modern technology and improved healthcare conditions give rise to a sharp increase in average life expectancy, especially in more industrialized developed countries. Statistically, the world average number of years a person could live has risen from approximately 32.0 years in 1900 to a figure of about 73.2 years in 2023. For those modernized regions such as Europe, Oceania, and America, the life expectancy even arrived at 80 years. Contemporary discourse often insists on the idea that the driving cause of the aging population is the decline of late-life mortality, although according to Restrepo et al., the most noticeable contribution to an aging population is made by the diminishing fertility rate [1]. For the past 70 years, due to a wide range of reasons such as the empowerment of women, the decline in infant mortality rate, and acceptance of child-centeredness, the global fertility rate has decreased from 5 births per woman originally to a figure below 2.5 births in 2023 [2]. Consequently, these two changes are gradually triggering certain alternations in the current demographic distribution.

This remarkable boost in both the number and the proportion of older people in society indicates positive societal developments, though inevitably accompanied by the reinforcement of some existing problems. Concerns about the impact of persisting ageist practices on the health of older adults have

been frequently raised and consequently discussed both by the general public and the academic community nowadays. However, considering the unprecedented pace at which society has been evolving, there is also more room for discussion about the topic of ageism. Under the ongoing trend of the 3rd Industrial Revolution, primarily driven by the pervasive emergence of digital technologies, it is always possible for ageism to undergo numerous transformations and experience either augmentation or mitigation [3].

Therefore, this article will provide a dialectical view of the extent to which the introduction of digital technology, narrowing down to social media platforms, could change the current ageist situation. The article will include an account of the prevalence of ageism, a simplified literature review of some existing age-based stereotypes, and also the impact of ageism on older people as well as society as a whole. More importantly, arguments about ways that social media could promote or resist ageism will be given in the third section. Furthermore, the implications of this study will be mentioned in the discussion and conclusion part.

2. The Prevalence, Overview and Influence of Ageism

2.1. Ageism as a Form of Discrimination

Several definitions of ageism have existed since it was first recognized and named by Butler [4]. Despite subtle differences between these definitions, consistency is found when the nature of ageism is discussed. To be more specific, ageism has long been regarded as a manifestation of discrimination, prejudice, and stereotypical impressions towards people because of their age [5]. It usually involves mistaken or one-sided judgments towards an individual based on negative age perceptions — overemphasized and over-generalized characteristics of aging [6]. This indicates people's tendency to neglect the complexity of humanity and the existence of personal differences when dealing with older people. According to the World Health Organization, ageism is an institutional, systematic, and widely pervading phenomenon that has been incorporated into the structure of society, triggering a significant impact on social composition [7]. Its normalized and recessive nature, however, makes ageism the least noticeable form of discrimination compared with others related to gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status [8].

Victims of ageism are often thought to be the elderly. However, according to Heikkinen and Krekula, age discrimination is a deliberate practice that is often applied to both younger adults and older people — those who occupy a relatively low position in the power structure of the social system [9]. However, because the young are often regarded as having developmental potential and embracing more opportunities, such discrimination towards the young is usually qualitatively different from that experienced by older people [10]. Therefore, stereotypes towards the elderly tend to have a more detrimental impact on their social position and demographic status.

The fact that ageism is "institutional and systematic" means that ageist practices are currently underpinning the operation of every social institution, predominantly, the media. Several studies have already observed the presence of ageism in industries such as printed advertisements, popular magazines, Instagram, and Twitter, as well as the majority of digital platforms [11]. The deeply rooted ageist practices, consisting of exclusion, disregard, and dehumanization of the elderly, are thus transmitted by the mass media. Cognitively speaking, individuals who are exposed to age-based stereotypes tend to internalize such discriminatory ideas by forming a knowledge structure in their long-term memory, which gradually converts prejudice into their personal beliefs time after time [12]. This is the process of formation of stereotypes among individuals under the influence of social institutions.

2.2. Influence of Ageism

Older people are prone to be influenced by ageism, both psychologically and physically, due to their tendency to internalize negative age perceptions [13]. Not only do age-based stereotypes influence younger people, but also older people themselves, who are usually susceptible to external pressures, show the tendency of self-stereotyping. Palmore once recognized the subtle interrelationship between negative ageist attitudes and stereotypes [5]. Stereotypes are strongly correlated with the formation of negative attitudes. Negative attitudes, conversely, fortify the internalization of stereotypes. The logical repercussion is universally applicable to every individual, including the elderly themselves.

The detrimental physical effects of ageism on the elderly are evident. Precious studies have indicated several medical problems experienced by the elderly resulting from the interiorization of ageist views. For instance, the fact that ageism provokes negative self-evaluation will add to cardiovascular pressure and cause additional stress, at the same time leading to a higher possibility of suffering from Alzheimer's Disease, accompanied by detrimental effects on cognitive functions and behavioral performance [14]. Regarding the aspect of psychological impacts, Levy et al. launched a related project in 1999, aiming to investigate the relationship between self-stereotyping and the willingness to survive. The research implies that participants who accept positive age-based stereotypes manifested a stronger will to live than those who stereotype themselves negatively [15]. To summarize, it is highly possible for ageism to induce adverse effects on the health condition of the elderly, as well as prompting pessimistic life attitudes.

Ageism's overwhelming effect on society is mainly exhibited in the form of the marginalization of the elderly. To be more specific, age-based stereotypes tend to hinder the elderly's access to resources and opportunities, thus leading to their isolated and underprivileged position in society [16]. Empirical evidence could be found in the study of Derby, who realized disregard for the elderly in the area of medicine. According to Derby, cases of misdiagnosis and negligence of older people's medical needs happen frequently among physicians [17]. Also, researchers recognize the potential mistreatment of old people when engaging in a medical consultation, as doctors tend to provide less detailed explanations and are usually less sympathetic and attentive when talking with patients older than 65 years old [18]. Additionally, as previously mentioned, older people are often stereotyped as "incompetent", they are usually experiencing inequality in the job market as well [19]. Nelson observed the phenomenon of discrimination towards older employees in the workplace. A variety of negative age-based stereotypes including decreasing mental and physical abilities and low training potential ultimately result in older people's relatively subordinate position in the job application process [20]. To sum up, the two pieces of evidence underscore the loss of power of the elderly due to the impact of universally accepted ageist attitudes.

3. Social Media's Alleviation or Deterioration of Ageism

This section concentrates on the investigation of whether social media would assist in the alleviation or provoke the reinforcement of ageism. Based on the characteristics of social media, the author would consider both sides of the argument and aim to ultimately present an evaluative assessment of social media as a medium for either deterioration or improvement of the current ageist situation.

3.1. The Negative Impacts

3.1.1. Programmability

It is never too deterministic or exaggerated to claim that social media runs effectively based on algorithms. The rudimentary nature of social media is not merely a widely accessible platform that promotes social interaction between content creators, but also a two-way channel that supports the

communication between programmers and users [21]. This means that the manipulative ability that could guide the flow of online discussions, is possessed by both the site designer who creates the underlying algorithm, and social media users who create the actual content. Such empowerment of the programmer, according to Rosales and Fernández-Ardèvol, may lead to the problem of strengthening ageism [11]. When programmers are developing the underlying logic of their algorithms, their personal experience and subjective value tend to interplay with the presumably rational, value-free process of programming.

Ageist practices could be easily embedded in the algorithm during the development and training process. Kleinberg et al. once described the process of designing an algorithm into four summarized steps. They suggest that the primary steps of constructing a valid database for and adjusting the output of the algorithm highly demand human involvement. These stages shape how the algorithm functions and hence decide the extent to which the algorithm is biased. To be more specific, if the algorithm is trained with a biased dataset, then the output generated would inevitably be biased. As the majority of programmers tend to be young and highly skilled males, there is a potential that these young people would fail to realize the problem of ageism pervading social media platforms [22]. It is also possible for ageist content to be subconsciously added to the dataset of the algorithm, which would have a leading effect on public opinion. Therefore, in this specific analysis that takes into account the mechanism-based nature of social media platforms, it may be falsehood to consider social media as a tool that mitigates ageism effectively.

3.1.2. Institution of Ideology Transmission

Social media platform facilitates the transmission of ageist ideology. Such discriminatory and hegemonic views of ageism peculiarly coincide with the theory advocated by Gramsci [23]. He suggested that rather than describing it as a conceptual product held by one individual, it is more sensible to view ageist ideology as a prerequisite for the construction and functioning of the social system. In other words, ageism has been justified and even naturalized as a part of human behavior. As a medium of social interactions and human activity, social media also plays a noticeable role in enhancing cultural hegemony and reinforcing ageism. Concrete evidence is found in the work of Mahmood, concerning his clear identification of ageist comments posted on Instagram that stereotype older people and show disapproval towards the so-called "inappropriate behavior" [24]. From this example, it is clear that social media has empowered its users the ability to fabricate media content (through posting comments in this case), thus reflecting public opinion. As long as ageism exists as a part of hegemonic value, it will be ceaselessly transmitted by social institutions, including social media. Just like what Thretham et al. have acknowledged, social media produce and reproduce ageism [25].

Consequently, ageism adds to the uneven distribution of power on social media platforms. One of the most typical examples of an under-represented group regarding the use of social media is undoubtedly the elderly [26]. Spreading ideologies that legitimate older people's low participation in social media activities, for example, suggesting that the elderly are naturally disinterested in using social media platforms, results in a situation where the elderly barely have any opportunity to voice their own opinions, interests, and preferences online. Accessibility to digital platforms among the elderly is, therefore, particularly low, as according to the statistics unveiled by Statista in February 2024, senior netizens who are above the age of 65 only accounted for no more than 5% of the total population, and only 6% of the netizens are between the age of 55-64 [27]. To summarize, the elderly's restricted access to social media increasingly makes the process of destigmatization more difficult. As they are under-represented on social media platforms, it is highly possible for ageist views to persist rather than decline.

3.2.   The Positive Impacts

When considering the positive outlooks of eliminating ageism via utilizing social media platforms, it is sensible to consider the presence of human agency. According to Coole, human agency refers to the capacity of an active individual to bring about changes [28]. Referring to the theory of Uricchio again, social media could bridge the two-way interaction between social media users and the algorithmic mechanisms [21]. Hence, it may be too deterministic to say that human opinion and behaviors are wholly shaped by structural forces, such as the inner mechanism of social media platforms or the hegemonic ideological systems underpinning the structure of society. Because individuals are given a chance to be actively engaged in the process of media content creation, more diversity and openness would hopefully be observed on social media platforms.

The problem of ageism will be mitigated if ideas are diversified to a certain extent. Breaking out from the stereotype of "incompetent", Li has discovered an interesting phenomenon in social media platforms in China. He discloses that social media platforms have provided the elderly with multitudinous opportunities to represent themselves in more diversified ways. The emergence of such information which is rich in multimedia content, originality, and catchy title style could attract more people's attention [26]. Consequently, by providing a valid account of what older people are actually like, one-sided and prejudicial opinions towards the old would be discouraged. In addition, concerning Mahmood's investigation of ageism on Instagram, several hashtags such as #Happyaging, #agewell, and #ageisjustannumber are used by aging bloggers to demonstrate the positive aspects of aging [24]. They tend to eliminate stereotypical age perceptions by emphasizing their current lifestyle and denying the universality of "vulnerability", "incompetence" and "impaired" among the elderly. It is also possible for these social media users to gain respect and appreciation from younger people, who see them as ideals and genuinely approve of their current lifestyle and attitudes towards life.

Social media, according to Trentham et al., accommodates multidirectional communication between diverse audience bases [25]. Therefore, the creation of anti-ageism content would be transmitted by social media and gain attention from different people, who may be nurtured under completely different cultural contexts. Such content manifests the potential of breaking stereotypes of the elderly and promoting acceptance of unbiased and anti-ageist views.

4.   Discussion

Social media's potential in mitigating ageism's influence could be seen, in terms of acting as an influential tool for people to actively engage in the process of resisting the penetration of age-based stereotypes into the functioning of society. The prospecting outcome of utilizing social media as a way to combat ageism is wider acceptance of anti-ageism beliefs, which would consequently lead to presumably better health conditions for older adults, higher social position, and stronger power of the elderly. However, challenges still exist objectively, which undeniably create numerous obstacles to hinder the pursuit of age equality. Therefore, this article will provide a few concrete suggestions concerning how to bring about positive changes to the current ageist society.

One of the feasible solutions to alleviating ageism is legislation. According to the World Health Organization, there are many ways through which the government could reduce the influence of ageism by introducing new, supportive policies or establishing new laws [29]. For instance, to reduce the transmission of ageist practices via social media platforms, policies could be implemented that supervise the process of programming, standardizing the process of training the algorithm from scratch to prevent ageist data from being accidentally embedded into the operation of algorithms designed for major social media platforms.

Future interventions could also take into account the education sector. As Del Carmen Requena et al. have advocated in a journal article, the education system should be aware of its role as an institution

that transmits egalitarian ideas and prevents the spread of ageist practices and opinions [29]. Considering the role of social media in education, such as providing access to a wide range of information and opinions and facilitating the development of social networks, social media's latent function to assist education should be recognized and further utilized as another irresistible force to undermine the influence of ageist ideologies on the general public.

5. Conclusion

The implication of this study is primarily putting a name to the subtle role of social media in both the alleviation and deterioration of ageism. In an era when an aging population and digital revolution are taking place at the same time, it is particularly important for individuals to make smart use of modern technology. The negative impacts of social media on age equality that are highlighted in the article are therefore crucial for the sake of raising public awareness about the underlying ageist attitudes transmitted by these platforms. On the flip side, emphasizing the positive contribution of social media in resisting ageism could precipitate a series of favorable outcomes, such as older people's higher participation in online activities and more diverse ways of self-presentation. In summary, the main goal of the article is to assist the diminution of ageism and also encourage reevaluation of the identity of the elderly in a more rationalistic way.

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