

Facebook as a Site for Negative Age Stereotypes

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Ageism has been found to exist throughout a wide variety of societal institutions. Whether it also exists in social networking sites has not been previously considered. To explore this possibility, we conducted a content analysis of each publicly accessible Facebook group that concentrated on older individuals. The site “Descriptions” of the 84 groups, with a total of 25,489 members, were analyzed. The mean age category of the group creators was 20–29; all were younger than 60 years. Consistent with our hypothesis, the Descriptions of all but one of these groups focused on negative age stereotypes. Among these Descriptions, 74% excoriated older individuals, 27% infantilized them, and 37% advocated banning them from public activities, such as shopping. Facebook has the potential to break down barriers between generations; in practice, it may have erected new ones.

Key Words: *Ageism, Age stereotypes, Intergenerational relationships, Attitudes & perception toward aging/aged, Social media*

A benefit of Facebook, according to its cofounder and chief executive officer, is that it “leads to a better understanding of the lives and perspectives of others” (Zuckerberg, 2012). In this study, we considered whether this extends to the way older individuals are perceived. Specifically, we examined the nature of age stereotypes appearing on publicly accessible Facebook group sites.

Although age stereotypes in the context of social networking sites have not been previously examined, we expected negative age stereotypes to predominate for a number of reasons. First, these stereotypes prevail in a wide array of other contexts (Butler, 2006; Levy, 2009). Second, younger individuals tend to hold a prevalence of negative age stereotypes (Kite, Stockdale, Whitley, & Johnson, 2005; North & Fiske, 2012) and participate in Facebook activities at considerably higher rates than older individuals (Inside Facebook, 2011). Third, as exposure to media increases, stereotypes, including age stereotypes, tend to become more negative (Donlon, Ashman, & Levy, 2005; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002). Fourth, according to social identity theory, negative stereotypes about the out-group (in this case, older individuals) generate a positive social identity for the in-group (in this case, younger Facebook users; Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

The fifth reason we expected negative age stereotypes to predominate relates to Facebook’s Community Standards that serves as the official and public guide to acceptable content for all its online pages:

Facebook does not tolerate hate speech. Please grant each other mutual respect when you communicate here. While we encourage the discussion of ideas, institutions, events and practices, it is a serious violation of our terms to single out individuals

based on race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, sex, gender, sexual orientation, disability or disease. (Facebook, 2012)

Notably, “age” is exempted from this list, suggesting that Facebook administrators do not protect the representation of older individuals in the same way they state other groups are protected. Taking this and the other four reasons into account, we predicted that a majority of Facebook groups about the old would focus on negative age stereotypes.

Methods

The content analysis on which we based this study was applied to the information provided by Facebook group creators following the label “Description” that introduced the sites. The study sample consisted of all Facebook groups that met the following criteria: Descriptions about individuals aged 60 years or older, “open membership” (i.e., anyone with a Facebook account could view all content), and not created for commercial purposes. The 84 groups that met these criteria were identified between July 2011 and January 2012 via the Facebook search engine, using the following search words: “old,” “elderly,” and “aged,” as well as all synonyms of these words listed in *Roget’s 21st Century Thesaurus* (Thesaurus.com website, 2011). This resulted in 75 words, or phrases, used for the search; they ranged from “senior citizen,” “retired,” and “experienced” to “decrepit,” “senile,” and “over the hill.”

To create the age stereotype-based categories, we selected 20 groups from the larger sample using randomly generated numbers. An inter-generational panel then listed all major content themes in the Facebook group Descriptions. Compared with the full cohort of 84 groups, our random sample of 20 was not significantly different with regard to the demographic characteristics of the creators and members (all $p > .10$). Among the categories that were generated, six were listed by all members of the panel. They comprised (a) excoriating the old, (b) infantilizing the old, (c) banning the old from public activities, (d) nursing homes, (e) cognitive debilitation, and (f) physical debilitation.

The images of older individuals presented in the 84 Descriptions were assessed by two independent raters on a 3-point age stereotype negativity scale, with possible values of 0 = positive, 1 = neutral, and 2 = negative. The raters were instructed

to give a score based on their overall impression of the Description. This scale had been previously found to be valid and reliable (Levy & Langer, 1994).

Using publicly available information in the Facebook profiles of the creators and members, the raters then identified the age, race, sex, and geographical location of all group creators, as well as the age and sex of all group members if there were 20 or fewer, or a subset of group members if there were more than 20 (i.e., the first and last 10 group members to post a comment on the group “wall”). Age was estimated in 10-year increments (e.g., 20–29 years). When age was not stated explicitly, it was inferred from profile page data (e.g., year of graduation from a school). Finally, the raters determined whether the images of aging presented in the group Descriptions fit the six categories that were previously defined. Inter-rater reliability of coding was high ($\kappa = 0.96$).

Results

As predicted, a majority of Facebook group Descriptions about the old focused on negative age stereotypes. This was the case with all but one of our 84 groups. The single exception stated, “Old men with long grey beards are so wise” (<http://facebook.com/group.php?gid=349897736643>); this group was dedicated to a fictional character (i.e., Gandalf, from *Lord of the Rings*, by J. R. R. Tolkien).

The majority of the Descriptions, 74% of the total, was categorized as excoriating the old. As an illustration of this category:

Old people do not contribute to modern society at all. Their single and only meaning is to nag and to [expletive deleted] moan. Therefore, any OAP [Old Age Pensioner] that pass (sic) the age of 69 should immediately face a fire (sic) squad. (<http://facebook.com/group.php?gid=52644366512>)

In addition, 41% of the Descriptions referred to physical debilitation, 27% to cognitive debilitation, and 13% to both forms of debilitation. For example, the following Description was categorized as presenting cognitive and physical debilitation:

Old people are a pain in the [expletive deleted] as far as I’m concerned and they are a burden on society. I hate everything about them, from their hair nets in the rain to their white Velcro sneakers. They are cheap, they smell like [expletive deleted] ... they are senile, they complain about everything, they

couldn't hear a dumptruck.... (<http://facebook.com/group.php?gid=2215670570>)

In 37% of the groups, the creators advocated banning older individuals from various types of public activities. Among the banning groups, driving was the activity most frequently targeted (35%). A rationale given for such a ban was that "Seniors driving around in their brand new hatchbacks are possibly the greatest threat to our security as a population—yes, that includes terrorism" (<http://facebook.com/group.php?gid=25264420650>). Shopping was the next most frequently mentioned activity that was proposed for banning (23%). A justification offered for the restriction began, "They [older shoppers] smell of wee, they park badly in the carpark resulting in a (sic) wasted and exceptionally valuable parking spaces..." This Description concluded, "Either age-check them at the door or implement a volunteer euthanasia programme. I'd happily volunteer to top one of them" (<http://facebook.com/group.php?gid=5937815833>). ("Top" means kill, in British slang.)

Infantilization of the old appeared in 26% of the Descriptions. In these cases, emphasis was placed on the dependency perceived as a consequence of debilitation. A Description compared the older individual to "a smaller, younger child . . . who cannot stand up for themselves (sic)" (<http://facebook.com/group.php?gid=2361292561>). The debilitation that was presented in the infantilization category tended to be diffuse, rather than specifically cognitive or physical. For instance, "I hope there are many of us who are aware that life after 60 need (sic) protection" (<http://facebook.com/group.php?gid=103017373713>).

Nursing homes were mentioned in 10% of the Descriptions. All but one of these Descriptions were also categorized as infantilizing. The stereotypes about older individuals, in these cases, were not confined to those in nursing homes; they tended to encompass the old in general. According to one such Description, "Some of the elderly are too frail to speak up for themselves," and went on to generalize: "It is up to us to speak for the elderly" (<http://facebook.com/group.php?gid=2214785092>).

The mean age category of the group creators was 20–29; all were younger than 60. Creators were identified as living on five continents: 51% from North America, 32% from Europe, 8% from Asia, 8% from Australia, 1% from Africa. All Descriptions were in English. Sixty-five percent

of the creators were men. The tendency to create groups categorized as excoriating or as infantilizing was not significantly associated with the age, race, sex, or location of the creator. The ratios of excoriating to infantilizing Descriptions for creators younger than 30 and those aged 30–59 were 2.75 and 2.80, respectively.

The 84 groups had a total of 25,489 members. As in the case of creators, the mean age category of members was 20–29, all were younger than 60, and their likelihood of joining the groups categorized as excoriating or as infantilizing did not significantly vary between men and women nor by age. There was a significant correlation between both mean age category of members and creators (Spearman's $\rho = 0.60$; $p < .001$) and between gender of members and creators ($r = 0.38$, $p = .005$).

Discussion

Consistent with our hypothesis, negative age stereotypes were the focus of an overwhelming majority (i.e., 98.8%) of Facebook group Descriptions about older individuals. The negative age stereotypes that were found in these Descriptions related to debilitation, which appeared in two contrasting forms: First, in the Descriptions categorized as excoriating, the young were presented as disadvantaged by debilitation of the old; second, in the Descriptions categorized as infantilizing, the old were presented as disadvantaged by debilitation that reduced them to a state of helplessness. There was very little overlap between these categories (only two groups were categorized as both excoriating and infantilizing), which suggests they represented independent ways of conceptualizing negative age stereotypes.

Insofar as societal-based age stereotypes are internalized from childhood onwards (Levy, 2009), there should be some degree of uniformity among the images about the old that are carried over to Facebook. This is consistent with our finding that the likelihood of forming and joining the groups categorized as excoriating and infantilizing did not vary according to demographic characteristics, including gender. However, the uniformity that we found was greater than might be expected. That is, in other contexts there is a significant difference between the views that men and women hold of older individuals (Barrett & von Rohr, 2008). In this study, the lack of significant gender differences suggests that preexisting differences were transcended by the Facebook context.

The structure of Facebook groups may have influenced the frequency and content of the negative age stereotypes that were found. A stereotype has been defined as “An exaggerated belief associated with a category” (Allport, 1958, p. 191). However, the representative examples of negative age stereotypes drawn from Descriptions, included earlier in this article, raise the possibility that presentations of beliefs, or stereotypes, occur in varying degrees of exaggeration—depending on the setting in which they operate. Exaggerated imagery in the negative age stereotypes of the Descriptions may have occurred because the prospect of having followers, or group members, provided creators with a sense of legitimacy that facilitated exaggeration. Also, the absence of face-to-face communication with followers may have produced a sense of anonymity, which has been shown to remove the fear of consequences and to result in more extreme thinking (Christopherson, 2007; Sia, Tan, & Wei, 2002).

Further, the Description format, which is an integral part of Facebook group sites, is compatible with exaggeration because it encourages a message that is brief and aimed at attracting attention. A nuanced presentation of varying age stereotypes is unlikely in this format, although it has been shown that young adults tend to hold positive as well as negative age stereotypes (Hummert, 1990).

Exaggerated imagery in the negative age stereotypes may be additionally facilitated by the opportunity to form an in-group (around the site), which leads to “the ‘depersonalization’ and ‘dehumanization’ of the outgroup” (Tajfel, 1982, p. 21). The creators and members may not have perceived the imagery of negative age stereotypes as exaggerated if it had become the norm within the Facebook context.

A limitation of this study is that the 75 search words used to locate the sites could not have exhausted all positive and negative possibilities; there may have been untapped sites related to both valences. In addition, these search words were only in English, which precluded access to sites in other languages; however, 7% of the sites included were created by individuals living in countries which did not have English as the official language.

It is unlikely that elders looking for groups that might contribute to their empowerment would find viable prospects among those considered here. They would probably be living independently in the community, as drivers and shoppers—the very individuals that were frequently targeted in the Facebook Descriptions. Alternatively, the old were

presented as incapable of living independently. The conflict of both characterizations with successful aging may have generated a sense of alienation from Facebook and discouraged older individuals from creating online groups that advocate for their age cohort and, by this example, contradict assumptions underlying the negative age stereotypes. Future research could illuminate the effect of these stereotypes on the relationship (or its absence) of older individuals to Facebook.

The Community Standards of Facebook is flawed by excluding elders from its list of groups protected from hate speech (Facebook, 2012); one year after the sites for this study were selected, 80% were still online. Also problematic is the protection given to the included groups because the Community Standards proposes, “Please grant each other mutual respect when you communicate here” (Facebook, 2012), but this is based on two false assumptions: First, that respect will be generated by simply requesting it; second, that mutuality of respect is the issue, even though the hate speech is likely to be unilateral. Because Facebook is a corporation built on social relationships, it has a responsibility to ensure these relationships are not injurious—to those directly involved or to those indirectly affected by them. Accordingly, there is a need for Facebook not only to recognize that older individuals are at risk of being targeted, but also to provide a buffer against the promotion of negative age stereotypes.

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