A critical examination of ageism in memes and the role of meme factories

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Abstract

Memes and meme factories are increasingly the new fronts for ageism online. To address the lack of studies exploring memetic expressions of ageism, this study utilized multimodal discourse analysis to analyze 98 image macros from five meme factories in Singapore. Expressions of ageism were consistently found in how the meme visually and discursively portrayed older adults, and three ageist themes of infantilization, barbarization, and fetishization were identified. Memes that infantilized older adults often portrayed them as immature and illiterate despite their age and emphasized their dependence on others. Memes that barbarized older adults portrayed them as being uncultured or having inferior cultural tastes, while memes that fetishized older adults positioned them as an object of sexual fetish. The intersections of ageism with sexism, classism, and racism were also noted. Practical implications of these findings were discussed, and several recommendations were offered for meme factories to reduce visual ageism. (148 words)

A Critical Examination of Ageism in Memes and the Role of Meme Factories

One burgeoning yet often-overlooked nefarious use of memes is the perpetuation of ageism in memes. For example, ageist tropes like ‘Ok Boomer’ have been commonly used to mock older adults in memes since 2015 (Romano, 2019), and memes referring to the COVID-19 pandemic as ‘Boomer Removers’ also became viral in many countries since 2020 (Lichtenstein, 2021). Despite the growing prevalence of ageist memes, however, memetic expressions of ageism are severely underexplored, especially in contrast with the numerous studies that have been done on other forms of social discrimination such as sexism and racism in memes (Al-Natour, 2020; Harlow et al., 2020; Shifman and Lemish, 2011; Topinka, 2017).

Memetic expressions of ageism constitute a form of visual ageism, which refers to the 'social practice of visually underrepresenting older people or misrepresenting them in a prejudiced way' (Loos and Ivan, 2018: p.164). It is particularly worrisome as memes can often mask the offensiveness of ageism with its silly and fun nature, allowing ageism to fester almost unfettered online. Compounded by the fact that ageism is often overlooked and unchallenged in society (Chasteen et al., 2020), the propagation of ageist memes may be an emerging societal fault line that widens intergenerational divides, create social tension, and exacerbate in-group and out-group differences between the young and the old (Meisner, 2020). Young meme consumers can potentially internalize the ageist discourse and entrench these negative stereotypes in society through the creation or dissemination of these visual media. Older adults may also be affected by the rise of ageist memes online as more of them join social media platforms.

Another growing concern is the possible commodification of ageist discourses by meme factories. This study defines meme factories as entities whose primary function is to

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1 produce or aggregate content such as images, videos, or texts with the aim of it being
2 circulated, replicated, or transformed by internet users. While memes were initially
3 conceptualized as decentralized digital artifacts created and propagated organically by
4 individual internet users (Shifman, 2013), the more centralized and institutionalized
5 production of memes by meme factories now consolidates some discursive power of memes
6 into the hands of these meme factories. Meme factories with large follower counts now wield
7 significant power in the constructing and shaping of internet discourse (Abidin, 2020) With
8 their high reach and propensity for producing viral content, ageist memes produced and
9 disseminated by meme factories can quickly propagate ageist sentiments online.

10 Given the deleterious impacts of unchecked memetic ageism, as well as the power of
11 meme factories to amplify and potentially profit from such ageist discourse, this paper seeks
12 to address the lack of studies exploring memetic expressions of ageism online. Specifically,
13 we ask how memes produced by meme factories discuss older adults and whether those
14 portrayals can be considered ageist.

Literature Review

Understanding Ageism

17 First introduced by Butler as ‘prejudice by one age group toward other age groups’
18 (Butler, 1969: p.243), ageism has since been expanded to incorporate ideas of systematic age
19 discrimination through institutional practices, negative attitudes and stereotypes perpetrated
20 against older adults, self-directed ageism, and even positive ageism that could place unsought
21 expectations on older adults (Palmore, 1999). Despite being one of the big three ‘isms’
22 alongside sexism and racism, ageism is often overlooked and unchallenged in society
23 (Chasteen et al., 2020). There are lesser social sanctions against people who demonstrate

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1 ageist attitudes or behaviors towards older adults as compared to acts of sexism or racism that
2 usually evoke strong backlash (Iversen et al., 2009). The relatively lower prominence of
3 ageism as a critical social issue has unfortunately allowed ageism to lurk and propagate
4 within most societies.

5 When directed at older adults, ageism has consistently been found to negatively
6 impact their health, leading to poorer health outcomes such as having higher risks of chronic
7 diseases, depression, and a lower quality of life (Allen, 2016). A recently published
8 systematic review by Chang et al. (2020) elucidated several pathways, such as older adults
9 becoming increasingly disengaged from society due to lower self-efficacy and sense of
10 purpose after experiencing age discrimination. According to Levy et al. (2012), older adults
11 that believed in more negative age stereotypes were also assessed to experience greater
12 memory loss over time. A possible explanation is that these negative age stereotypes could
13 lead to the adoption of poorer lifestyle or diet choices, which in turn affects their health (Gu
14 et al., 2016).

15 **Visual Ageism**

16 As important shapers and mirrors of societal values and opinions, media
17 representations of older adults can offer a lens through which the social construction and
18 maintenance of ageism can be examined (Minichiello et al., 2000). One useful concept that
19 can help guide the examination of ageism in media is visual ageism. Defined as the ‘social
20 practice of visually underrepresenting older people or misrepresenting them in a prejudiced
21 way’ (Loos and Ivan, 2018: p.164), visual ageism comprises seemingly innocuous yet
22 insidious expressions of ageism, such as casting of older adults in minor peripheral roles, as
23 well as unrealistic and overly stereotypical portrayals of older adults (Loos and Ivan, 2018).

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1 Past explorations of visual ageism can be broadly categorized into two branches
2 depending on how they contribute to our understanding of how ageism is manifested along
3 the affective, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions. The first branch of studies mainly
4 focuses on examining age-related stereotypes in the media. Largely guided by theoretical
5 perspectives like framing and discourse theories, these studies contribute to our
6 understanding of the affective and cognitive manifestations of ageism by providing empirical
7 evidence on how the media portrays older adults (Ylänne, 2015). A review of such studies
8 found that while negative portrayals of older adults as senile, frail, and lonely have generally
9 decreased, and that positive portrayal of older adults has increased over the decades, growth
10 in positive portrayals was only seen for older adults in relatively good health (Loos and Ivan,
11 2018). The second branch of studies mainly focuses on the visibility of older adults in the
12 media by examining the frequency and saliency at which older adults were represented in the
13 media. The same review by Loos and Ivan (2018) also found that while the representation of
14 older adults in media such as television programs and advertisements has increased over the
15 past decades, the growth in representation was only also observed for older adults in
16 relatively good health.

17 Collectively, these studies suggest that our overall media landscape is progressing
18 towards being more accepting of older adults along all three dimensions of ageism. Negative
19 portrayals of older adults are becoming less prevalent, and the dominant narrative is gradually
20 evolving from one that portrays older adults as frail, inactive, and dependent to one that
21 presents them as healthy, active, and self-reliant (Joyce et al., 2015; Rozanova, 2010). While
22 these findings are encouraging, they also point to the various ways ageism in the media can
23 be reduced.

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First, more effort is needed to improve the representations of older adults that are frail or experiencing chronic health issues as they are less likely to be portrayed in a positive light compared to those at a younger age or in relatively good health (Loos and Ivan, 2018). Second, while the successful aging narrative can encourage older adults to live actively and build positive stereotypes about aging, the overrepresentation of older adults enjoying their golden years can also be ageist – albeit in different ways. It can perpetuate unrealistic expectations of aging and imply that people who are unable to age successfully are somehow failures (Katz, 2009). It can also further marginalize older adults experiencing chronic health issues who would have been excluded from this successful aging narrative (Loos and Ivan, 2018). Third, while past studies of ageism in media have examined media artifacts such as television shows, print advertisements, and news articles (Loos and Ivan, 2018), newer media formats such as memes have received scant scholarly attention in comparison. More explorations can be done on these newer digital artifacts to update the field's understanding of ageism in the media. Hence, while the media has become less ageist over the past decades, further studies are still needed to understand and prevent ageism in the media.

Role of Meme Factories in Memetic Ageism

Memes refer to 'units of popular culture that are circulated, initiated, and transformed by individual internet users, creating a shared cultural experience in the process' (Shifman, 2013: p.367). First introduced by Dawkins in the 1970s, memes are important discursive devices that can be used to construct, negotiate, and challenge the social, cultural, and political meanings and norms (Shifman, 2013). When used for good, memes can be used as a form of coping mechanism to guard against injustices and reclaim control over social narratives (Outley et al., 2020), as well as for female empowerment (Shifman and Lemish, 2011). When used for nefarious purposes, however, memes can also be used as a form of

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1 social discrimination and oppression. For example, memes can be used by groups with more
2 social power to impose oppressive identities on those with lesser social power (Eschler and
3 Menking, 2018). Memes can also be used to reframe offensive acts like sexism and
4 harassment into a form of acceptable humor (Drakett et al., 2018).

5 Recent years have also seen the rise of social media accounts and pages dedicated to
6 the churning of memes in exchange for views or money over recent years (Abidin, 2020).
7 Known as meme factories, these entities whose primary function is to produce or aggregate
8 content were largely borne out of the high demand of memes by internet users and the rising
9 acknowledgment of memes as social contagions that can shape public discourse by marketers
10 (Wells and Horwitz, 2019). As creators and aggregators at the frontier of the digital memetic
11 space centralizing and institutionalizing the production and distribution of memes, these
12 meme factories have many followers who will come across their memes. As a result, they
13 potentially wield immense power in shaping how their followers think of key social, cultural,
14 and political issues through posting memes.

15 As important shapers of social discourse online, however, little is known about the
16 role of meme factories in memetic ageism. On one hand, meme factories could reduce
17 memetic ageism by featuring older adults in their memes and thereby increasing the visual
18 representation of older adults in newer forms of media. They can also facilitate the discussion
19 of important yet hard-to-brooch topics about aging using humor, which can help people of all
20 ages reconcile and be more resilient towards the increased uncertainty and challenges aging
21 can bring (Berk, 2001).

22 On the other hand, memes factories are also well-positioned to become the new front
23 for online ageism for two reasons. First, meme factories can potentially get away with

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1 producing more ageist content due to the playful nature of memes. As a form of fun and silly
2 internet content made in the name of entertainment, memes can mask the offensiveness of
3 ageism with humor and potentially reframe ageist discourse into something socially
4 acceptable. The ability of memes to reframe offensive online behavior into acceptable humor
5 has also been found in the context of sexist memes (Drakett et al., 2018; Harlow et al., 2020).
6 This is worrisome as these meme factories can normalize ageist discourse through their
7 memes and desensitize their large follower base to ageism over time.

8 Second, meme factories may also hold no reservations in producing ageist content as
9 older adults are not key stakeholders in the political economy of memes. Older adults are
10 neither the creators nor the main consumers of memes online and are instead materials that
11 can be made into jokes in exchange for views and revenue by the meme factories. As memes
12 consumers are usually younger internet users (Abidin, 2020), meme factories may not be
13 inherently motivated to ensure that their content will not be construed as offensive to older
14 adults. This is unlike other media formats like television or print which needs to appeal to a
15 wider portion of society. Ethical concerns might arise when meme factories are profiteering
16 off disparaging humor that propagates and entrenches harmful age-related prejudice and
17 stereotypes.

18 Despite the prospect of meme factories becoming the new front for ageism online,
19 there have yet to be any studies that have examined ageism in memes produced by meme
20 factories. As such, this study aims to fill this gap by being the first study to examine how
21 memes produced by meme factories discuss older adults and if the portrayals can be
22 considered ageist.

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To do so, we used the tripartite typology of memetic dimensions proposed by Shifman (2013) as the underlying theoretical framework of the study. Routinely used by studies in the meaning-making of memes (Gal et al., 2016; Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik 2019), the tripartite typology of memetic dimensions posits that memes should be analyzed holistically along three memetic dimensions of *content*, *form*, and *stance*. Content refers to the ideas or ideology conveyed by the meme, while form refers to the 'physical formulation of the message' (Shifman, 2013: p.369) such as the textual, visual, and auditory elements present in the meme. Stance, on the other hand, refers to 'the ways in which addressers position themselves in relation to the text, the linguistic codes, the addressees, and other potential speakers' (Shifman, 2013: p.367). A holistic evaluation of memes based on the visual and textual cues presented in the meme, as well as the connections of the meme to other memes and real-life events, is important when making meaning out of memes given the scarcity of speech acts that inevitably heightens the importance of semiotics and intertextuality in the meaning-making (stance) of image-based memes (Wiggins and Bowers, 2015).

Method

As memes can exist in a myriad of formats, this study will focus on image macros, a type of meme characterized by text overlaid on images. Guided by past studies on image macros (Hakoköngäs et al., 2020; Milner, 2013), this study employed multimodal discourse analysis as our approach to analyzing the image macros. Multimodal discourse analysis is an analytical approach that aims to study cultural artifacts where 'all modes are framed as one field, as one domain' (Kress, 2012: p.38). Rooted in social semiotics, this method of analysis lends itself well to the examination of image macros with its emphasis on how rhetoric is constructed holistically by the artifact (O'Halloran, 2011). As such, the visual and textual

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cues present in the image macro, as well as the connections of the meme to other memes and real-life events, will be considered and emphasized in the analysis.

This study is set in the context of Singapore, a young city-state located in Southeast Asia. As a rapidly aging city-state projected to be the world's fifth oldest and least fertile country by 2050 (United Nations, 2019), ageism is an increasingly pertinent social challenge that Singapore must overcome in the upcoming decades. Despite the rising salience of ageism in Singapore, however, the issue of digital ageism has received scant attention. While there had been one study that examined how older adults in Singapore are discussed on Twitter (Makita et al., 2021), this is the first study to empirically examine how memes in Singapore portray older adults and determine whether these portrayals can be considered ageist.

Like many countries that experienced an escalation of ageism sentiments during the COVID-19 pandemic (Previtali et al., 2020), the global pandemic has also been a prominent source of intergenerational stressor in Singapore. As such, the time frame of this study also lends well to the examination of memetic expressions of ageism against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Collecting the Memes

Given that meme factories with more followers are more influential, this study analyzed the memes produced by local meme factories with the highest number of followers in Singapore. The five meme factories, which all operate through Facebook, are namely SGAG (1.2 million followers till date), Memedef (45.7 thousand followers till date), Kiasu Memes for Singaporean Teens (32.2 thousand followers till date), Diaozui Hotline Memes (19.9 thousand followers till date), and A Better World By Memes (11.9 thousand followers till date). This study will only include image macros written in English or Singlish (an English-based creole language spoken in Singapore), as the top five meme factories identified

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1 predominantly only produce memes written in English or Singlish. A search was conducted
2 using CrowdTangle to retrieve image macros posted from 1 January 2020 to 1 October 2020
3 by the five meme factories that contain one or more of the following keywords in the
4 accompanying text or the superimposed text in the image: elder*, old*, senior*, age*,
5 boomer*, ah gong, ah ma, grandparent*, grandma, grandpa, granny, retiree*. 98 relevant
6 image macros were identified, and they were downloaded for further analysis along with their
7 accompanying post content.

8 Analyzing the image macros

9 The two researchers analyzed each image macro via an iterative three-step process. In
10 the first step, after being familiarized with the memes, the researchers holistically evaluated
11 the memes and did an open coding of the content and meanings of the meme. The researchers
12 also consulted the website 'Know Your Meme' to understand more about the formats and
13 meanings of memes analyzed. Next, the researchers grouped the memes thematically based
14 on their content and message. The categorizations of the memes were not mutually exclusive
15 as each meme can contain more than one theme. Lastly, the researchers explored the
16 rhetorical aspects of the meme, with special attention being given to the wider argumentative
17 context of the meme in relation to the portrayal of older adults, intergenerational relations,
18 and ageism.

19 Results

20 Overall, memes about older adults produced by meme factories were found to be
21 largely ageist. Although there were a handful of memes that seemed to portray older adults as
22 being physically fit, socially active, or even sexually attractive, these were far from the norm.
23 Furthermore, a closer inspection at some of these memes can often reveal the underlying

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cynical attitudes of the creators towards the undesirable effects of aging, or the ironic humor that was employed to depict older adults.

One example is a 'positive' meme about 'Aaron Kwok', a late-middle-aged Hong Kong singer and movie actor. As seen in Figure 1, he was depicted as having black hair, a youthful disposition, and physically fit, as suggested by his portrayal of competently performing a high kick in the meme. However, the accompanying tagline was 'This guy doesn't age or what', which serves to highlight the expectation gap between his expected physical attributes based on his age and how he was portrayed in the meme. This contrast serves to further confirm that the typical older adult is closer to what 'Aaron Kwok' is not. The finding is in line with past studies on visual ageism, which found that older adults are often depicted as weak, frail, and negative (Loos and Ivan, 2018). Furthermore, being a celebrity, 'Aaron Kwok' represents a public figure that is distant from the public, which further emphasized their inherent differences. Another similar meme shown in Figure 2, which highlights how 'Super Granny' can perform extraordinary physical feats, makes the same point – that such levels of physical performance at advanced ages are rare and even newsworthy.

Figure 1. Aaron Kwok fitness meme

Figure 2. Super granny meme

Ageist Visual Portrayals of Older Adults

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In contrast to a couple of these 'positive' memes, most memes were explicitly ageist in the way they visually portrayed older adults in the memes. For example, memes that signified older adults using photographs overwhelmingly feature photographs of them in dull hues, as seen in Figure 3. The lack of visual vibrancy can be observed in their hair, which was often white, and their choice of clothing which was usually plain and single-colored. The lack of vitality was also manifested in their portrayal of older adults as frail, non-ambulant, and having severe body aches in some memes.

Memes that signified older adults using cartoon characters also frequently use Patrick Star, a fictional character from the cartoon *Spongebob* known to be dim-witted, naïve, and ignorant, to signify older adults. One example of such memes can be seen in Figure 4. While the choice of signifier is often highly contextualized to the format of the meme, and that the symbolism behind the objects or symbols in memes may not be a direct reflection of the creator's intention, symbols can still be interpreted by meme consumers to convey meaning even if it was unintended (Foss, 2004). As such, the choice of using Patrick Star as a visual metaphor for older adults may implicitly transfer the negative qualities of Patrick onto older adults, even if it was unintended.

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Figure 3. Grandfather and weather meme **Figure 4.** Drinking fake news memes

Ageist Discursive Portrayals of Older Adults

Another manifestation of ageism could also be observed in the discursive portrayal of older adults in memes. The discursive portrayal of older adults can be broadly categorized under three ageist themes of infantilization of older adults, the barbarization of older adults, and the fetishization of older adults.

The Infantilization of Older Adults. Memes under this theme typically portrayed older adults as lacking in maturity and fundamental knowledge despite their age and emphasized their dependence on others. Such infantilization of older adults can be broadly categorized into two themes, which are namely the portrayal of older adults as illiterate and the portrayal of older adults as engaging in immature behaviors.

Older adults as illiterate. Memes pertaining to this theme often infantilize older adults by portraying them as being illiterate in areas such as information literacy or technological literacy. Figure 5 shows an example of a meme that ridicules older adults for being unable to identify false information on WhatsApp. In this meme, a 'Spongebob' character labeled 'Aunties/Uncles/My parents' is shown to be very frightened by a monster labeled 'WhatsApp messages about how oranges cause cancer'. Besides the first 'Spongebob' character, however, stood another 'Spongebob' character labeled 'Me', representing the young. The second 'Spongebob' character looks at the monster unfazed in contrast with the shocked expression of the first 'Spongebob' character. This meme is problematic as such memes unfairly portray the young as being impervious to fake news and place the blame of spreading fake news squarely on older adults. While existing information literacy research has found that older adults are indeed major purveyors and consumers of fake news in society (Lee,

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2018), studies have also found that children and young adults are also vulnerable to believing and spreading fake news (Loos et al., 2018; Loos and Nijenhuis, 2020).

Another example that infantilizes older adults by portraying them as illiterate can be seen in Figure 6. Set in the context of the World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), the meme mocks older adults as being technologically illiterate. The top panel showed the wrestler 'Undertaker' entering the stage, with the accompanying text: 'Phone shop beng fixing the phone by restarting it' (Beng is a colloquial term referring to young delinquent men). The bottom picture showed another wrestler 'Randy Orton' labeled as 'the old auntie' looking in awe at him. The meme portrayed older women as being technologically illiterate, such that she is unable to tackle a problem that can easily be solved by a simple restart. Hence, she will require help in navigating technologies that have become increasingly ubiquitous in our world, which in this case the help is being provided for by the young.

We also found memes that portray older adults as technologically illiterate to be more likely to single out older women as being technologically illiterate by using female-specific nouns like 'auntie' and 'grandma'. This is in contrast with memes about older adult's information literacy, which is more likely to refer to older adults using gender-neutral terms like 'boomer' and 'grandparents'. This gender divide not only references the gender gap in technology that has been documented in memetic sexism (Drakett et al., 2018), it also points to the complex nature of memetic ageism as intersecting with other forms of discrimination like sexism.

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Figure 5. Fake news meme

Figure 6. Restarting phone meme

Older adults as engaging in immature behaviors. A portion of memes mocked older adults for behaving in ways that are likened to a child such as ranting. One of the memes in the ‘Why can’t you just be normal?’ format, showed ‘literally everyone else’ staring in horror at a child seated at the backseat of a car, which was labeled ‘Boomers’. As seen in Figure 7, although the child was told ‘Why can’t you just be normal?’, his reply was ‘*screams in ntuc*’ (NTUC is an abbreviation for the National Trade Union Congress which operates numerous supermarket outlets in Singapore), which alludes to older adults being the main group of people responsible for panic-buying episodes in Singapore during the lockdown period. The representation of older adults as a screaming child was juxtaposed to ‘everyone else’ portrayed as an adult in the driver’s seat, implying older adults are prone to acting out like a child and require supervision from others in society. Another example of such memes can be seen in Figure 8. In the meme, older adults, as signified by ‘Patrick Star’, were portrayed as being insistent in going to supermarkets despite being repeatedly warned about the dangers of crowding at supermarkets. This characterization of older adults as being childishly persistent and irrational about stockpiling essential items can unfairly single out them out as the primary demographic group responsible for panic-buying episodes.

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Figure 7. Why can't you just be normal? Meme

Figure 8. Patrick Star meme

The barbarization of older adults. The second theme identified is the barbarization of older adults. Memes under this theme often mock older adults for being uncivilized by portraying them as being uncultured or as having inferior cultural tastes.

Older adults as uncultured. One prominent theme in the collection of memes is the mocking of older adults for their purported bad transport etiquette. Figure 9 shows an example of a meme that likened old people to a snail when crossing roads, and the superhero 'Flash' when they see an empty seat on the train. Several other memes also mocked older adults for jostling for reserved seats, which are seats that are typically reserved for groups like older adults or pregnant women. Collectively, these memes call out older people for undesirable behaviors such as rushing to enter the train even when the train doors are about to close – an 'ungracious' and socially unacceptable behavior in Singapore that is publicly discouraged through regular train announcements and local campaigns. It may also typify traditional expectations that older adults should behave with dignity and grace and not in a selfish way, as expected in Confucian Asian societies that typically place relatively high esteem on their aged population.

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Older adults as being culturally laggard. Some memes attacked older adults for not adapting to the times and emphasized the cultural divide that exists between older adults and the younger generations. Not only do these memes suggest a difference in cultural tastes, they also tend to portray older adults as being less open-minded. Figure 10 depicted an older bald man crying and flailing his arms in a fashion similar to how a toddler throws a tantrum when the older man learned about the new rendition of Singapore's national anthem by the musician Ramli Sarip, implying that the older man is unable to appreciate changes in contemporary cultural tastes, and instead reacted to it by throwing a tantrum. Further incorporating elements of infantilization, the meme included a supposed hypocritical rant by older adults on not being easily offended, but purposefully misspelled certain words such as strawberry as 'storberi' and millennials as 'mirehnears' to diminish its credibility.

Figure 9. Flash meme

Figure 10. Ramli Sarip meme

The fetishization of older adults. The last theme pertains to the collection of memes that position older adults as an object of sexual fetish. Most memes in this section revolve around the character of the 'Kopitiam Auntie'. 'Kopitiam', which can be roughly translated to a food court from Hokkien (Chinese dialect), is a local food establishment that sells an

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1 amalgamation of food and drinks. 'Kopitiam Auntie' hence refers to the middle-aged or older
2 women that work at such establishments, either as food servers or cleaners.

3 One common motif in such 'Kopitiam Auntie' memes is the 'Shuai Ge' element. In
4 Singapore, service staff can sometimes address male customers as 'Shuai Ge', which roughly
5 translates to a handsome young man in Mandarin to be casual and polite. Many memes
6 played on this idea by portraying young men as being ecstatic about being called 'Shuai Ge'.
7 For example, Figure 11 showed a meme portraying a young man shedding tears of happiness
8 when he heard the 'Kopitiam Auntie' calling him 'Shuai Ge', with the tagline stating, 'Can't
9 wait to feel handsome again'. While this can be interpreted as a form of self-deprecating
10 humor for young men, imbuing inappropriate sexual connotations to the term 'Shuai Ge' can
11 be an overt sexualization of older women working in the service industry.

12 Another meme that utilized the fetishization element is the 'Kopitiam Auntie' and
13 'Girlfriend' meme. In Figure 12, a side-by-side comparison was made between the 'Kopitiam
14 Auntie' and the 'Girlfriend'. Although the 'Kopitiam Auntie' seems to be compared on equal
15 grounds with the 'Girlfriend', portrayed as a young, attractive woman in a red dress, the stated
16 positive traits of the 'Kopitiam Auntie' were disingenuous. One of the comparison points is
17 that the 'Kopitiam Auntie' can 'remember everything you ordered'. which appears to be a
18 point of affirmation for the 'Kopitiam Auntie's' memory prowess, but it was contrasted to the
19 'Girlfriend' remembering 'everything you said', a jab at problems in romantic relationships.
20 Another comparison point was that the 'Kopitiam Auntie' 'makes great kopi (coffee) for you
21 everyday', which looks as though it was praising the competence of the 'Kopitiam Auntie', but
22 it was contrasted to the denunciation of the 'Girlfriend' making 'demands out of you
23 everyday'. Although on the surface both examples seemed to be providing positive
24 affirmations for the 'Kopitiam Auntie's' occupational competence, the older worker in

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question was not the center of the discussion, but instead, was fetishized and exploited as a tool to explicate sexist denigrations of women in general.

As seen above, the fetishization of older adults was largely directed at older women working as servers in the service industry. While older men were not entirely spared from this fetishization theme (see Figure 13), the fetishization of the ‘Kopitiam Auntie’ was significantly more sizable in terms of the volume and the scale of sexualization – a continuation of our finding on the intersection between ageism and sexism. There was also an overrepresentation of Chinese older adults who work in the service industries such as food and beverage operators, cashiers, or taxi drivers. This group of older adults was also the ones that were frequently made fun of, either through being fetishized as ‘Kopitiam Aunties’ or portrayed as ‘Kopitiam Uncles’ – a finding that could also point to the intersection of ageism with classism.

Figure 11. ‘Shuai Ge’ meme **Figure 12.** ‘Kopitiam Auntie’ meme **Figure 13.** ‘Kopitiam Uncle’ meme

Discussion

This study sought to examine how Singapore meme factories portray older adults in their memes and if their portrayals can be considered ageist. As the pioneering study to examine expressions of ageism in memes produced by meme factories and the role of meme

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1 factories, this study provided much-needed empirical evidence on how emerging media
2 formats like memes can contribute to ageism in the media. In contrast to past studies that
3 found the overall mass media landscape to be moving towards being less ageist and more
4 accepting towards older adults (Loos and Ivan, 2018; Rozanova, 2010), we found the memes
5 produced by meme factories to still be largely ageist. While other media platforms such as
6 television programs and advertisements have begun to embrace more positive narratives
7 about older adults over the past decade (Joyce et al., 2015), the memes largely portrayed
8 older adults in a demeaning manner using discriminatory themes such as infantilization,
9 barbarization, and fetishization. An underlying cynical or ironic tone towards older adults
10 also belies the positive narrative of older adults present in the handful of memes that
11 portrayed older adults as being healthy, active, and self-reliant.

12 This is also the first study that documented the themes of infantilization,
13 barbarization, and fetishization in memes about older adults. These themes can even be
14 overlapping in nature (for example having both elements of infantilization and barbarization),
15 as they complement each other in the goal to diminish older adults. This is especially potent
16 in memes as it can include both visual and textual elements, amplifying the avenues of
17 disparagement. It is important to note that such themes are not novel expressions of social
18 discrimination and oppression in memes. Infantilization has been used in memes to denigrate
19 women (Shifman and Lemish, 2011) and ‘trash talk’ sports teams (Kassing, 2020), while
20 barbarization has been found in anti-Aboriginal memes (Al-Natour, 2020) as well as anti-
21 refugee memes (Hakoköngäs et al., 2020). The fetishization of women is also prevalent in
22 sexist memes against women (Andreasen, 2021; Drakett et al., 2018). These three ways of
23 diminishing older adults are also not uncommon in other media formats. For example, the
24 infantilization of older adults has been identified in advertising (Lewartowska-Zychowicz and

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Strumska-Cylwik, 2016), while the barbarization and fetishization of older women were found in television programs and films (Lemish and Muhlbauer, 2012).

However, this is one of the first times where these motifs are documented in memes, and particularly, memes produced by meme factories in a Confucian Asian society like Singapore. Given that memes can be viewed as the encapsulation and collective expression of personal values due to their perceived ‘authenticity’ as a unique communicative format (Shifman, 2019), the expressions of strong ageist sentiments in memes would seemingly contradict with the expressed traditional values of a Confucian Asian society, where older adults are supposed to be much revered. One possible explanation for the contradiction of values relates to the individualism-collectivism puzzle presented in Nissenbaum and Shifman (2018: p.307) where the expression of ideas of memes that contradict with the values of its originating society could be to “compensate for forms of expression that may be missing in other contexts”. Given that memes are intertextual in nature in that they often make references to current events (Laineste and Voolaid, 2017) and that our data collection period coincided with the first ten months of the COVID-19 outbreak in Singapore, another plausible explanation could be that the ageist sentiments are merely a manifestation of the heightened intergenerational stresses brought about by the pandemic. In either case, this highlights a need for meme studies to pay close attention to the cultural and situational contexts on which the memes are predicated upon.

Quadruple oppression? The intersectionality of age, gender, class, and race

The findings also point to how ageism comprises the intersection of age with many other social factors such as gender, class, and race. Older women who are Chinese and come from the lower socioeconomic class were the demographic group most frequently targeted by

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1 meme factories. These women were more likely to be singled out as being ill-mannered
2 commuters and technologically illiterate, as well as being fetishized and sexualized.

3 The overrepresentation of the Chinese, the largest ethnic group in Singapore, could be
4 attributed to the media's tendency to portray older adults as a monolithic group. This
5 corroborates with past ageism in media studies in western societies where older adults are
6 typically only represented by the dominant ethnic group, Whites (Sourbati and Loos, 2019).
7 There is also an overrepresentation of older adults engaging in jobs with low occupational
8 prestige, such as cleaners or cashiers. As older workers in Singapore are similarly
9 overrepresented in these service sectors, these physical sites are also likely to serve as major
10 points of interaction between the younger generation and non-family older adults, leading to
11 many of their portrayals in these jobs.

12 **Must meme factories be ageist to be funny?**

13 These findings do not suggest that older adults should be an out-of-bounds topic for
14 meme factories. Instead, they point to the need for meme factories to be more mindful of how
15 the jokes are delivered through their memes to not contribute to ageism discourses online.
16 Instead of using disparaging humor that belittles or denigrates older adults as the 'butt' of the
17 joke, meme factories could use less offensive humor styles such as incongruence or relief that
18 makes memes about older adults funny yet not ageist. Furthermore, perpetuating harmful
19 ageist stereotypes through offensive and abrasive portrayals has been found to be an
20 unpopular approach among both younger and older people alike (Robinson et al., 2008).

21 In line with other recommendations from media ageism studies, meme factories
22 should also reduce negative portrayals of older adults with chronic health conditions (Loos
23 and Ivan, 2018). They should balance their portrayal by showing older adults that have been

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adjusting well regardless of their biological age, in which being healthy is not just a fluke outcome, and that older adults can occupy different strata of society. At the same time, they should also refrain from overindulging in the successful aging narrative to prevent themselves from unintentionally perpetuating unrealistic expectations of aging (Katz, 2009). Aging is an inevitable human experience and meme factories should not skew its portrayal with the terror of growing old (Martens et al., 2005).

We opine that meme factories could do more to reduce visual ageism online instead of contributing to it. For example, they can increase the visual representation of older adults in the emerging media forms by featuring older adults in memes. They can also use their platform to help people of all ages reconcile and be more resilient towards the increased uncertainty and challenges aging can bring.

With the rapid popularization of meme factories and the increased participation of older adults on social media platforms, it is tenable that older adults may start consuming more memes and become a sizable target audience for meme factories in the future. Increased involvement of the old in the political economy of memes can potentially reduce the exploitation of the marginalized old and motivate meme factories to produce less ageist memes. As such, while the findings of this study have been largely discouraging, we are hopeful that meme factories will, one day, join the other media forms in embracing less ageist narratives about older adults.

Study limitations

These findings should be viewed in light of the following limitations: First, as the search engine CrowdTangle, was used to derive the sample, only memes that included the search terms used either in the image or in the taglines could be collected. Since image

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analysis was not employed to search for these memes, there is a possibility of missing out on memes that did not include any text identifiers related to the search terms. However, as memes usually rely on the texts to convey important information, the risk of missing out on a significant portion of related memes should be low. Second, as humor is often culturally-based (Jiang et al., 2019), the findings may not necessarily be generalizable to older adults in other regions.

Further research directions

Future studies could explore more on how the political economy of memes can influence manifestations of ageism in memes by meme factories. This could be done by examining the possible ways younger meme consumers can contribute to or reduce ageism by meme factories, or whether all meme factories are equally ageist. Another area is to examine how meme factories portray younger adults in their memes and contrast it to their portrayal of older adults.

Conflict of interest

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For Peer Review