"Remember this picture when you take more than you need": Constructing morality through instrumental ageism in COVID-19 memes on social media

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ABSTRACT

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, a parallel pandemic of ageism is spreading through social media. This paper argues that COVID-19 health securitisation logic and the urgent need to disseminate public health information have allowed nuanced forms of ageism to be reproduced in online forums. I use a critical discourse analysis and social semiotic analysis to deconstruct the use of ageist representations of older adults in COVID-19 memes, which have been organised into four illustrative categories. The analysis attends to ageist representations that both reinforce stereotypical messages and exacerbate intergenerational tensions. Drawing upon moral anthropology, I propose that the memes employ "instrumental ageism," a nuanced form of ageism that advances the health securitisation agenda during the pandemic. The paper concludes with a recognition of the impact of ageist pandemic memes on intergenerational tensions and a call for attention to nuanced forms of ageism in our online and offline social worlds.

Introduction

The novel coronavirus, severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2, renamed COVID-19 in February 2020), emerged on the global stage at the turn of the decade, between 2019 and 2020. On January 30, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak a public health emergency; on March 11, 2020, it was declared a global pandemic (WHO, 2020). As of February 2022, the WHO reported a global number of over 423 million confirmed cases of the virus and over 5.8 million deaths (WHO, 2022).

It has been noted that since the beginning of the pandemic, the COVID-19 outbreak has been framed as an "older adult" problem (Fraser et al., 2020). However disproportionate the number of deaths has been among older people, the pandemic has also thrown into overdrive the problem of rampant global ageism. Ageism, first defined by Robert Butler, is the systematic discrimination and stereotyping of people based on chronological age (Butler, 1975). Generational divides have been exacerbated during COVID-19, particularly as chronological age has become the basis of decisions in the rationing of care and pandemic control measures pertaining to "at risk" older adults (Barrett, Michael, & Padavic, 2020). Ayalon (2020) documented the impact of ageism during the pandemic in numerous countries, including the UK, Spain, Israel, Germany, and the United States, noting the influence of national governments in exacerbating the divisions and friction between generations

at local levels. In Western societies, animosity toward older adults has been fueled by a state-endorsed discourse that the economic cost of "vulnerable" older adults with shorter expected lifespans will be too high (Barrett et al., 2020; Magen, 2020). These problems are evident in ageist messages about safety during the pandemic, which risks increasing intergenerational tensions in already age-segregated societies (Lichtenstein, 2021). As Rahman and Jahan (2020) argue, we need to "immediately…respond to public perceptions, and attitudes and behaviours around the outbreak" to reduce community discrimination (p. 633). In response to Rahman and Jahan's (2020) call for action, this paper will explore how images of older adults have been used in a political genre of COVID-19 Internet memes that were designed to effect social change during the pandemic.

The social practices and politics around Internet memes continue to be objects of academic inquiry (Denisova, 2019; Mihailidis, 2020; Milner, 2013; Peters & Allan, 2021; Shifman, 2013; Wong & Holyoak, 2021). Shifman (2013) defines Internet memes as "a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which were created with awareness of each other, and were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users" (p. 41). According to Denisova (2019), "Internet memes are intrinsically linked to the logic and rhythms of networks and social media, as well as to the ways a society expresses and thinks of itself" (p. 2). Political memes are one of the many genres of Internet memes. In democratic societies,

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political memes are a creative fusion of individual and collective means through which people can make a point about "how the world should look and the best way to get there" (Shifman, 2013, p. 120). Whether humorous or sombre in tone, political memes rely on persuasion, action, discussion, and wide circulation in the global memescape. These memes depend on sociopolitical context, as well as a culturally informed reading of the body/bodies depicted in the meme. They are, as Denisova (2019) said, "mindbombs" of condensed ideas and connotation that raise viewers' awareness of political issues (p. 195). As rapidly circulating, often "viral" cultural artefacts that simultaneously shape and are shaped by the social landscape, it is crucial to consider how memes might be perpetuating ageism during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recent research has explored memes that have been created in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, exploring the political role of pandemic memes (De Saint Laurent, Glăveanu, & Literat, 2021) and specifically looking at how memes reflect the socio-political and emotional frustrations of Generation X during the pandemic (MacDonald, 2021). This paper will explore how ageist visual representations of older adults were used in COVID-19 Internet memes to construct morality during the pandemic around social behaviour and public health measures. Particular attention is given to the potential consequence that the memes may exacerbate ageist beliefs and stereotypes, and further ignite intergenerational tensions in Western society.

The first part of this paper will present a theoretical background for understanding memes targeting health security measures taken during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing upon moral anthropology, critical studies of ageing, and ageism on social media. Using critical discourse analysis and social semiotic analysis, I will propose four categories of COVID-19 memes featuring representations of older adults. The final section of the paper will discuss how these COVID-19 memes present a nuanced form of ageism located between calculated ageism and compassionate ageism, which I call "instrumental ageism." I discuss how instrumental ageism homogenises representations of vulnerable older adults, reducing our capacity to notice vulnerabilities in a wider more diverse range of older adults, which may thereby exacerbate negative health outcomes for older adults and increase intergenerational tensions and ageism in society.

Theoretical background: COVID-19 health securitisation discourse, moral breakdown, and ageism

Forms of ageism in the COVID-19 health securitisation discourse

Ageism has characterised the health securitisation response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Health securitisation discourse initially framed COVID-19 as a virus that only affected older adults (Barrett et al., 2020). News stories headline the ethical horrors of the age-based rationing of care, including with respect to ventilators, hospital beds, and medical service (Jaziri & Alnahdi, 2020). Official counts of COVID-19 positive cases and deaths were attributed to long-term care facilities, removing the virus from the public domain, and reinforcing the idea that the virus is an older adult problem (Fraser et al., 2020). COVID-19 health security practices described in the media have repeatedly distinguished "young" from "old" and exacerbated the image of the susceptibility of older adults by emphasising the need to keep older adults separate from the rest of society (Ayalon et al., 2020). Scholars have raised concerns about increasing intergenerational tension during the pandemic and the reinforcement of age segregation in societies (Ayalon, 2020; Fraser et al., 2020; Garcia, Homan, García, & Brown, 2020; Lichtenstein, 2021).

In previous global health emergencies, such as H1N1, SARS, and Ebola, the media's health messaging incited stigmatisation, scapegoating, and othering which led to violence and negative health outcomes for targeted groups (Briggs & Nichter, 2009; Eichelberger, 2007; Marcus & Singer, 2017; Monson, 2017). In the current COVID-19 crisis, illness is constructed as a security threat and the response to the threat is embedded in webs of power and politics (Holbraad & Pedersen, 2012;

Kamradt-Scott & McInnes, 2012; McInnes & Rushton, 2013). Following securitisation theory (Balzacq, 2005, 2011; Strizel, 2007), the COVID-19 pandemic has signaled "a call for urgent and exceptional measures to deal with the threat" (Wæver & Buzan, 2003, p. 491). In the context of the early days of COVID-19, Nunes explained that "the response has resulted in a scenario of exception, with confinement and social distancing policies…. Aside from a few cases, societies have accepted this state of exception" (2020, p. 3). Particular groups are labelled as "vulnerable" (e.g., older adults), and other presumably less vulnerable groups are asked to take measures to protect them. Nunes (2020) writes,

> The trajectory of COVID-19 and its short- and long-term consequences hinge not only on an abstract neoliberalism, but on individual behaviours: the decision to stay at home or leave; the information we produce and share; what, when, and how much we consume; the choice between solidarity, the pursuit of self-interest, or the stigmatisation of others; in short, our proximity or distance, both in physical and ethical terms. (p. 3).

Further, Rahman and Jahan (2020) noted that, "we already see the impacts of media reporting that influence public sentiments toward the outbreak such as panic buying, food hoarding, and behaviours toward the risk groups including isolation from grandparents" (p. 632). Public health authorities' emphasis on protecting older adults through securitisation measures such as social distancing and suspending any in-person contact is simultaneously protective and problematic because of the slippage into ageist messaging.

Other analyses of media discourse during COVID-19 have disclosed the different forms of ageism at work. These include "negative" ageism and "calculated ageism" (Barrett et al., 2020; Cesari & Proietti, 2020). Negative and calculated ageism deliberately justifies prejudiced beliefs by promoting messages that older lives are expendable (Barrett et al., 2020). There is also "benevolent" or "compassionate ageism" where positive beliefs about older adults are paired with patronising messages of incompetence, frailty, and victimhood (Binstock, 1985, 2010; Reynolds, 2020; Vervaecke & Meisner, 2020). In these ways, the pandemic has exacerbated ageist devaluations of older adults. For example, an insidious form of calculated ageism has mobilised claims that since older lives are expendable, older adults should sacrifice their lives for the sake of both returning prosperity to national economies and freeing up ventilators for younger patients during care rationing (Barrett et al., 2020). For example, "The current crisis highlights a disturbing public discourse about ageing that questions the value of older adults' lives and disregards their valuable contributions to society" (Fraser et al., 2020, p. 2). And while older lives are a complex of heterogeneous and plural trajectories and transitions, news reports about COVID-19 reduced them to chronological age, marked as helplessly vulnerable to the virus and, again, less valuable than younger lives despite the evidence that younger people are also at risk and dying (Fraser et al., 2020). Sadly, we are witnessing a return of a social Darwinian logic of survival-of-the-fittest and Malthusian discourse of demographic disposability in countries with stressed medical systems, that look to depict especially poorer older people as having outlived their entitlement to social resources (Lichtenstein, 2021).

More difficult is the critique of "benevolent" or "compassionate" ageism, and, as Vervaecke and Meisner (2020) note, here there is more nuance to ageism than dichotomised practices of discrimination and compassion, such that ageist "actions can in fact be both" (p 0.4). An example of compassionate ageism during the pandemic was "caremongering," a local-level social movement where people used social media to organise ways to provide care for those who "need it." A similar local-level effort to create a "vulnerable persons registry" to identify those at risk used chronological age as main criterion for inclusion on the list (Fraser et al., 2020, p. 3). In both cases, well-meaning efforts became harmful by homogenising older adults with phrases such as "our elderly," and reinforcing stereotypes of dependency through a

paternalistic ethos that assumed older adults needed and wanted help because of their age when this was not the case (Vervaecke & Meisner, 2020, p. 161).[1] For this present analysis, the COVID-19 pandemic provides many examples of nuanced ageism, where well-intentioned social initiatives represent and reinforce ageist stereotypes. In other words, responses targeted to help older adults for illnesses such as COVID-19 can also be ageist. Such "protective" and "positive" responses can lead to unintended negative consequences, such as communicating patronising and stereotypical messages about helplessness and dependence (Monahan, Macdonald, Lytle, Apriceno, & Levy, 2020).

COVID-19 has blurred the dichotomy between "good" and "bad" ageing, or third and fourth ages. Gilleard and Higgs (2010) define third age as a "cultural field" marked by generational lifestyles borne out of 1960s that emphasise choice, autonomy and self-expression, rejecting anything that is old "because it is old" (p. 122). In sharp contrast, the authors define the fourth age as a "social imaginary," symbolising a "terminal destination" wherein one loses "the articulation of choice, autonomy, self-expression, and pleasure in later life" (Gilleard & Higgs, 2010, p. 123). Indeed, Gilleard and Higgs (2010) use the metaphor of a "black hole" to describe the fourth age as a space beyond social life: "The fear of the fourth age is a fear of passing beyond any possibility of agency, human intimacy, or social exchange, of becoming impacted within the death of the social, a hyper-reality from which there is no reality to return" (p. 125). Thus, by blurring the distinction between third and fourth age, the calamities of fourth age existence are pushed across the lives of all adults above 65 years old, now as members of the vulnerable "at risk" group. This final stage of life is marked by "the 'othering' of old age – the shadowlands of disability, diminishment, and death" (Gilleard & Higgs, 2010, p. 126). Older adults have been homogenised through the lens of COVID-19 media visibility and limited to scenarios of 'burdens on society' or 'recipients of protective health security practices.' The moral discourse that accompanies securitisation normalises divisive social categories, opening space for ageism to proliferate in everyday places, such as online social media platforms.

Moral breakdown reviewed through the lens of moral anthropology

Moral anthropologists have understood morality and ethics in several ways: as a matter of cultural values that shape moral life (Robbins, 2007, 2020); as an historical and dialectical social practice that is simultaneously implicit and explicit (Lambek, 2010); and as an "ordinary ethics" embodied through language, gesture, and habitual practices of daily life (Das, 2012). Following Das (2012), the shaping and reshaping of morality is taking place through the mundane channels of social media and the everyday practice of meme creation and circulation. "The everyday," Das states, "is taut with moments of world-making and world-annihilating encounters that could unfold in a few seconds or over the course of a lifetime" (2012, p. 54). The rapid uptake and circulation of COVID-19 pandemic memes has become an everyday part of emotional life, including intergenerational tensions (MacDonald, 2021).

In addition, anthropologists have also considered the experience of morality and ethical performance in terms of "moral breakdown" (Ning & Palmer, 2020; Zigon, 2007) and moral sentiments (Throop, 2012), and as entwined with the political domain (Fassin, 2015, 2020). As noted in the introduction, I am taking COVID-19 memes as a political genre of Internet meme that use ageist messaging to promote public health security. Fassin (2015) reminds us that morally questionable means may be used to reach "good" ends, bringing "the dark side of morality" to the theoretical table. Many of the COVID memes achieve this by creating "moral breakdowns" (Zigon, 2007) that appeal to viewers' "moral sentiments" (Throop, 2012). Zigon (2007) defines the

moral breakdown as a moment that interrupts a person's taken-for-granted way of being and forces them to consciously think about what to do about the moral dilemma with which they are presented. Zigon notes that the unconventional character of the moral breakdown means that neither the ethical demand, nor the response, must be 'moral' according to social conventions. In these moments, however, we can see how "moral dispositions themselves are shaped and reshaped" (Zigon, 2007, p. 148). Throop (2012) asserts that the moment of moral breakdown is fundamentally an experience of emotions, or a "sentiment-based affair" (p. 158). He suggests the moral breakdown is a moment of destabilisation that centres upon feelings of benevolence, pity, compassion, sympathy, and "fellow feeling" for others, making transformation possible. Importantly, these scholars also make room for the possibility of the 'immoral' in the response to moral breakdown, stating that society will act as the "moral legislator" to determine what qualifies as a moral response (Zigon, 2007, p. 133). This paper considers the domain of emotions as moral sentiments connected to the explored memes, including how the memes impact ambivalent feelings about the perceived vulnerability, frailty, and dependence of older adults on social media.

Ageist representations of older adults on social media during COVID-19

During COVID-19, people have specifically sought online social media platforms to consume, create, and circulate messaging about the pandemic. A serious concern during the pandemic has been the circulation of misinformation and the increased negative characterisations of older adults as burdensome and expendable (Skipper & Rose, 2021; Soto-Perez-de-Celis, 2020). Soto-Perez-de-Celis (2020) observed that the ageist social media content varies by country and is shaped by the proportion of older adults in the population and the degree of ageism in social and political debates that create intergenerational tension and resentment. In Western society, ageism and generational division was rampant before the pandemic, and has been exacerbated by pandemic health security measures and governments' economic decisions based on perceived vulnerability and risk to older adults.

Social media platforms, such as Twitter, have become platforms for explicitly negative ageism during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, on Twitter we find circulating hashtags such as #BoomerRemover, #grandma/grandpa killer, #YOLOgrandparents, #greyshufflers, and #moldy oldies, as well as phrases like "boomer doomer" that denigrate older adults and normalise their high-mortality rate as a natural consequence of the pandemic (Flett & Heisel, 2020; Fraser et al., 2020; Lichtenstein, 2021; Skipper & Rose, 2021). At the beginning of the pandemic in North America (mid-March 2020), one-quarter of Twitter tweets were ageist, particularly when referencing older adults as less valuable (Jimenez-Sotomayor, Gomez-Moreno, & Soto-Perez-de-Celis, 2020). Even more interesting is the intersection of ageism and politics on Twitter. Skipper and Rose (2021) explored the political function of the ageist hashtag #BoomerRemover on social media. They found that the hashtag was used to forecast the social, political, and economic consequences of contentious government decision-making during the pandemic (e.g., to close businesses and schools or to keep them open), to critique American politicians' ideas, and to highlight long-term political implications of the pandemic. Interestingly, social media became the ground to resist ageism in COVID-19 politics. For example, in opposition to the #BoomerRemover hashtag, people on Twitter used the hashtag #DisruptAgeism (Skipper & Rose, 2021). Morality and ethics during COVID-19 have become a matter of political participation on everyday platforms, such as social media. It is important that as pandemic politics are being negotiated, representations of older adults are mobilised as key tools for communication. The following sections of the paper employ critical discourse analysis and social semiotic analysis to examine ageist representations of older adults in four categories of COVID-19 memes, each designed to circulate a moralising message about health security during the pandemic.

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[1] A recent article by Amundsen (2022) points out that the term "elderly" is no longer used in gerontological circles, including in this journal, because of its pejorative connotation and because older adults find the term disparaging.

Methodology: Critical discourse analysis of COVID-19 ageist memes

Data collection

Between November 2020 and September 2021, multimodal COVID-19 memes featuring older adults were collected public Facebook groups dedicated to COVID-19 memes: "COVID Memes," "Covid-19 Memes & More," "CoVid-19 Memes and Memories," "Covid-19 Memes," and "COVID Memes Australia." Virtual snowball sampling was also used to locate publicly shared coronavirus memes, whereby images were explored by following memes linked to other memes on Facebook. Some memes appeared on more than one social media site, cross-posted with hashtags, but data collection was focused on Facebook groups. Memes had to be macroimages (e.g., images with text superimposed on them) with a photograph of one or more older adults with a moralising message pertaining to COVID-19 health security. Memes with cartoons, GIFs, and video-based memes were excluded from the selected data. Memes that met the inclusion criteria were collected using the Chrome browser extension FireShot. The extension allowed both the meme and the surrounding comments to be selected and saved as an image file. In total, 153 memes were included in the dataset for analysis. These memes were analysed and sorted into four thematic categories: fourth age representations of older adults, confinement of older adults, sexualised representations of older adults, and explicit contrast with younger generations. An illustrative sample of memes has been chosen and analysed for each category. These illustrative memes were chosen for salience for capturing each theme in a similar way to how an anthropologist selects descriptive ethnographic vignettes from fieldnotes. In the selection process, the salience of the memes to the paper's topic was considered above the number of online "likes" or shares.

Analytic framework

This study empirically investigates the current trends in the use of representations of older adults in COVID-19 memes. According to Fairclough and Wodak (1997), critical discourse analysis (CDA) is "the analysis of linguistic and semiotic aspects of social processes and problems" (p. 271). In the context of media analysis, CDA is a helpful analytic tool because it figures discourse as a social practice that is not only read against a particular social milieu, but also actively shapes and transforms social, political, and moral landscapes (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; van Dijk, 1993). Locke (2004) outlines the following three methodological characteristics of CDA: first, CDA is analytical because it systematically examines an object in great detail, drawing substantiated conclusions; second, CDA is discourse-oriented because it focuses on how language and meanings are socially-constituted; third, CDA is critical because "a central outcome of the act of analysis is to enable consideration of the social effects of the meanings a reader is being positioned or called upon to subscribe to in the act of reading, and the contestation of those meanings" (p. 9).

I will also employ the tools of social semiotic analysis, which focuses on the processes of sign-making as situated social practice within a socio-political context (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021; Van Leeuwen, 2008, 2018). Through this lens, the processes of creating and reading images can be unpacked by identifying the semiotic resources, explaining how the resources are being used, and examining the relationship between the resources and local values. This makes social semiotic analysis an important tool for exploring topics that are difficult to capture, such as the construction of a moral discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic as this paper examines. Three key dimensions of the social semiotic analytic framework can be distilled from the work of Kress and van Leeuwen (2021): representational meaning, interactive meaning, and compositional meaning. I will outline these below.

Representational meaning is concerned with the visual design of narrative representation (social action) and conceptual representation (social ideas). *Narrative representations* explore how represented participants (social actors, places, and things) engage with one another through action in a given setting. Action is interpreted through visual vectors, typically diagonal or triangular lines formed by the face (sightlines), body lines (a gesturing hand), or social tools (a pointed gun). In transactional structures, the viewer can see the target of the participant's action (another person or thing), but in non-transactional structures, the viewer cannot see the destination of the vector. *Conceptual representations* consider how connections between numerous participants are illustrated in a single structure (diagrams, timelines) to model our understanding of the world.

Interactive meaning describes and interprets the relationships of contact, social distance, and attitude between the represented participants in the image and the interactive participants (real people looking at the image). These relationships are realised through *gaze*, *size of frame*, and *point of view*. In terms of *gaze*, a represented participant looking directly at the viewer is a "demand gaze," and this establishes (imaginary) contact with the viewer as if they were asking for something from the viewer and defining the viewer's social position in relation to them. On the other hand, a represented participant whose sightline does not connect with the viewer is an "offer gaze," offering themselves as objects of information and study without inviting the invisible viewer to identify with them or forge any connection (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021, p. 119).

Social distance is interpreted through *frame size* (i.e., close, medium, or long shots) that define imagined social relationships between the represented and interactive participants. Proximity and distance are categorised as intimate distance (face or head visible), close personal distance (head and shoulders visible), far personal distance (viewed from the waist up), close social distance (whole figure visible), far social distance (whole figure visible with space around), and public distance (bodies of several people are visible). These distances each define people *as though* they are intimate relations, friends, acquaintances, or strangers to the viewer and to other represented participants in the image. The closer the shot, the more intimate the relationship between represented and interactive participants ("like me" or "like us"), and the longer the shot, the less intimate the relationship ("not like me" or "not like us") (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021, p. 137). The *point of view* created by the horizontality and verticality of the angle constructs a subjective attitude of the viewer toward the represented participants. A frontal angle suggests the viewer is involved with the represented participants ("What you see here is part of our world, something 'we' are engaging with"), but an oblique angle suggests the viewer is detached ("What you see here is *not* part of our world, it is *their* world, something 'we' are, at this moment, not engaging with") (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021, p. 136). The power relationships between the viewer and the represented participant are defined by the viewer's point of view: a high angle gives the viewer power over the represented participant, a low angle gives represented participant power over the viewer, and an eye-level angle renders them equals.

Compositional meaning describes how the image as a whole is interpreted according to the spatial orientation of its elements. Analysis of composition considers three dimensions: *information value, framing, and salience*. The *information value* is based on where elements of the image are located in relation to one another: left versus right, top versus down, centre versus margins. For example, Kress and van Leeuwen (2021) describe the meaning of a horizontal arrangement of images: anything in the left area of the image is "given," or "something the reader is assumed to know already, something that is part of the culture, or at least part of the culture to which the text belongs," while anything in the right is "new," or deemed crucial and relevant to the present or future (p. 186). The vertical arrangement of images contrasts the upper "Ideal" ("what might be") with the lower "Real" ("what is"). The "Ideal" image is perceived as the most salient and that which is empirically given without mediating interpretation. Conversely, the "Real" image contains specific and practical information, our perception of this may

be subjective and filtered through language (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021, p. 190–191). Information value of an image can be analysed by the centre-periphery arrangement of visual elements. The element at the centre is the core to which all elements on the margins are associated, belong, and gain their meaning.

Compositional meaning is also given by the *framing* which is changed using devices (white lines and frames within frames) that disconnect images into informational units. This can affect the overall meaning of the images as the elements are understood by the viewer as being more or less separate or connected. Finally, compositional meaning is based on the *salience* of the image is what attracts the viewer's attention. Salience is controlled by how elements of the image are differently foregrounded, sized, colored, or sharpened in relation to one another.

Results

The following section will present four categories of memes: fourth-age representations of older adults, confinement of older adults, sexualised representations of older adults, and generational contrast. The selected memes for each theme are separated by interior white frame lines, but encompassed by a larger black frame to collect them as illustrative of the single theme. Under each theme, the memes are followed by a social semiotic analysis of their content.

Theme 1: Fourth age representations of older adults

In both memes in Fig. 1, the older adults have been photographed with their eyes cast downward. This composition is an "offer" for the viewer's gaze, creating social distance between the figures and the viewer. Instead of being drawn to engage with the figures, the image "'offers' the represented participants to the viewer as items of information, objects of contemplation, impersonally, as though they were specimens in a display case" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021, p. 118). Further, both figures are photographed from a long shot and an oblique angle (viewed from the sidelines). In terms of interactional meaning, the long shot creates social distance with the viewer positioned at a public distance as though the viewers and the older adults are strangers to one another (they are "not like me"). Further, the oblique angle suggests the viewers are detached, they are not part of the older adults' worlds. The older adults are represented as faceless bodies, objectified in a way that negates their personhood and denies power. The viewer holds the power in the image, not only as the viewer of the meme, but also as the

consumer who can choose to agree with the moral message of the meme.

The viewer is also gripped by the physical posture, or the shape, of the older adults. Both images depict older adults who appear to have kyphosis, or a hunched-over, stooped posture. The older woman is extremely bent at the spine suggesting limited mobility and debility. Kress and van Leeuwen (2021) describe the narrative representation of geometric composition, explaining that the circle's curved shape is associated with passivity. A comparison between the memes shows that the woman is far more curved in her bent position than the man, placing her physically lower in space. In the bent over position, the figures are neither fully up, nor down, but curved into a passive social position, occupying an ambiguous space betwixt and between. In terms of point of view, the vertical angle appears to point downwards onto the older woman, connoting that the viewer has more power than her. The older male appears to have been photographed at approximately eye level, suggesting no power difference between the viewer and the man.

Considering the meme of the older male, we can observe several important narrative representations. The composition of the meme is based on the Given-New structure, where the left-hand image of the soldier is that which is known and situated in a shared history and set of values for the viewer, while the image of the older adult and his implied vulnerability on the right is new information, crucial to the present and future of society. Further, the images are presented as distinct frames, separate information, but their connection is bridged by the continued flow of the written script across both memes, mirrored in black and white color. The viewer's eye is drawn to the colorful, sharply focused photograph of the older adult, making it more salient in contrast to the grey scale image of the young soldier. The geometric composition, or action orientation, is also quite different between the two frames. The older man's curved form is contrasted against the soldier's upright body that follows the line of the triangle. This is particularly important, because the diagonal lines of a triangle suggest action, aiming, and generative power. Kress and van Leeuwen (2021) remark that the back view is an "equally complex and ambivalent" angle, reinforcing social distance and "otherness." The soldier has his back turned toward the viewer suggesting a relationship of trust, perhaps of reciprocity from society for his service. The ambiguity of the young soldier and older man mirrors the broader ambiguity in the representations of the older adults in both memes, as well as the idea of a moral duty to care for older adults who have been defined as vulnerable during the pandemic.

The language and typography of each meme is moralising in its sanction of panic buying and hoarding. This reinscribes the separation of

Fig. 1. Two memes representing fourth age older adults.

older adults from the rest of society because of their vulnerability. The message of the meme of the older woman reads, "Remember this picture when you take more than you need." The black font stands out against a white background, placed at the top of the frame where the viewer is sure to see it. The imagined writer uses the second person ("you") to directly address the imagined viewer, finding a way to engage the viewer in the absence of the visual "you" that would have been given by eye contact with older woman in the meme. In the first meme, the stylised text reads, "Front of the queue in our hour of need," while on the image of the older man in the aisle of empty grocery shelves, the text reads, "Back of the queue in his hour of need." The disembodied authoritative voice in both memes calls upon the viewer to change their behaviour through the moralising language on the meme.

Theme 2: Confinement of older adults

The memes in Fig. 2 use an image of an older woman inside a large macaw cage to comment on the stay-at-home orders during the pandemic. The image is striking and echoes intergenerational tensions and boundaries of care and control. The first two memes imply that under the threat of the coronavirus, it is justified to keep your parents and grandparents caged for their own safety. The third image, however, does not reference the younger generation, but suggests it is alright to use older adults as test cases for COVID-19 as if they are a miner's canary. The miner's canary, or the canary in a coal mine, are idioms describing the use something whose vulnerabilities to the environmental hazards make it an early indictor or warning signal for those less vulnerable. The miner's canary would die of carbon monoxide poisoning in the mine shaft, giving the miners time to escape, and the meme suggests that the older adults' vulnerabilities would predispose them to fall ill or die of COVID-19 before the younger, supposedly less vulnerable, generations.

In all three images, the older woman meets the viewer in a demand gaze as she stands with her body pressed up against the cage door, her hands holding onto the bars. In terms of the frame size, two of the images are long shots (showing the full body with space around it) creating far social distance. In the second meme, it is a closer shot (showing the figure from the waist up) and there is far personal distance between the viewer and the older woman. The older woman is effectively "othered" to different degrees by the both the barrier of social distance and by the presence of the cage as a physical barrier between the older women and the viewer. The point of view of the memes positions the viewer at an oblique angle that suggests they are detached and reinforcing the "otherness" of the older woman. In terms of power relationships, in the first two memes the asymmetrical power relationship between older and younger generations is evident in the text, where the younger generation has more power, but this relationship is rendered somewhat ambiguous by the eye-level angle between the viewer and older woman implying power equality. The ambiguity echoes the blurring of care as protection and care as control during the pandemic. The typography on each meme catches the viewer's eye, and in the first meme the text is divided and color coded in such a way that the phrase "trying to leave the house" stands out as the more pertinent message of the behaviour that the cage is meant to control.

Theme 3: Sexualised representations of older adults

Both memes in Fig. 3 use images of older women to comment on individual behaviour during the pandemic that could be seen to go against the Rawlsian moral principle of behaving in a way that supports the greater social good. The meme on the left uses a sexualised image of an older woman to highlight selfish hoarding behaviour during the pandemic. The framing focuses the viewer's eyes on the full toilet paper rolls that are substitutions for the woman's breasts. While the colours are muted (mostly pastel pink, beige, and white), the dark centre of the toilet paper rolls catches the viewer's eye for their resemblance to areolas. The frontal, eye-level perspective, taken from far personal distance, positions the viewer as involved with the older woman on an equal power level. The close-up shot places the viewer at far personal distance (seeing the older woman from the waist up), portraying the viewer and older woman as though they are friends or acquaintances. Her gaze demands the viewer's attention, and her mouth is open as if she is in the midst of saying something. The meme has non-transactional structure, with diagonal vector of her raised arm showing action, but the hand is cropped such that the viewer can only imagine the gesture that completes the narrative representation. The text makes the meme relatable, "me leaving everyone's house," condones otherwise immoral acts of stealing and hoarding toilet paper during the pandemic. This may also subtly suggest that older adults are behaving selfishly during the pandemic.

The meme on the right uses an image of an older woman seated in a garden, casually holding a cup of tea or coffee to comment on mask-wearing as an action that is not for oneself, but for the protection of other people (for the greater social good), even if it goes against one's individual desires. Her direct gaze at eye level engages the viewer, involving them in her world. The far social distance of the frame suggests that the viewer is standing away, looking at her in a still impersonal way. The naturalistic modality gives the image a sense of reality as opposed to fiction, aided by the high degree of color saturation that catches the eye. The text has a sexualised tone that comments on the
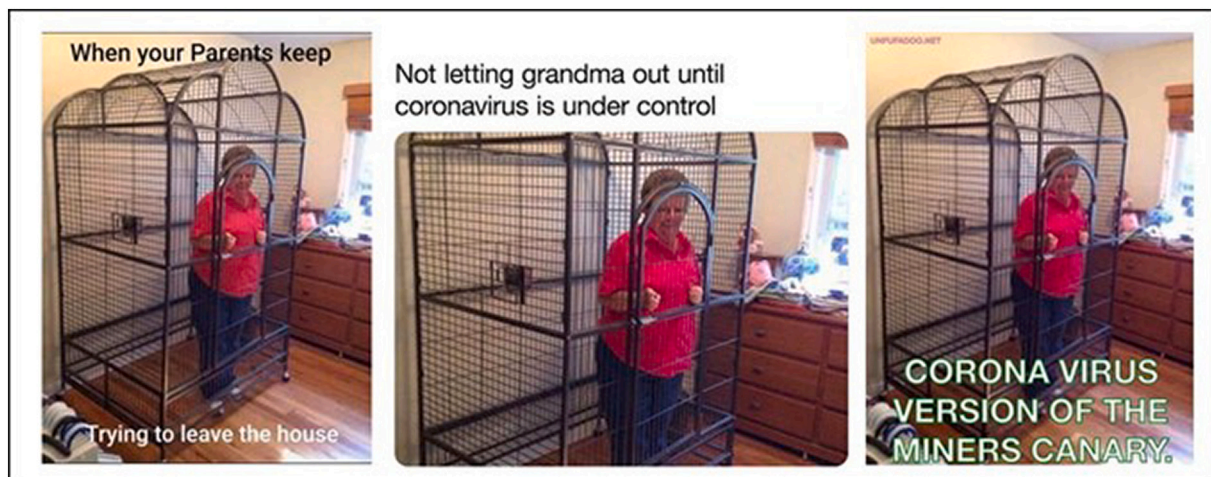

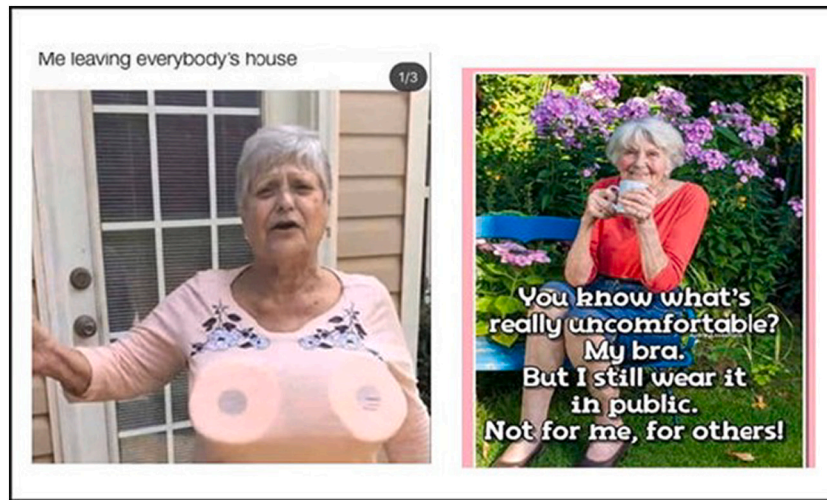**Fig. 2.** Three memes representing an older adult woman confined in a cage.

Fig. 3. Two memes representing sexualised images of older adult women.

older female body as something that ought to be contained and controlled in public. The image symbolically emphasises this message by showing the woman's arms held up over and covering (perhaps containing) her breasts. With the single actor in the image, it is a non-transactional representation, and the viewer must imagine the scene in which the older woman is situated.

Theme 4: Generational contrast

The above memes in Fig. 4 use explicit contrast between younger and older generations to comment on enduring the cost of the pandemic to individuals and society. Unlike the previous themes, the memes in this theme depict groups of older adults contrasted with groups of younger people. Following Kress and van Leeuwen (2021), the top image contains the "Ideal" unmediated, information and the bottom image contains the "Real" information that is shaded by our subjective interpretation and filtered through language and cultural schemas.

The first meme presents a pair of vertically stacked images, the top

trio of young women contrasted with the bottom trio of older women. The top image involves the viewer in the lives represented participants, captured by the demand gaze of two of the women, and positioned at a frontal angle in relation to them from a far personal distance. The viewer is at eye-level, suggesting an equal power relationship. The background of the picture is simple, suggesting an indoor venue, perhaps a selfie taken among friends. The message implies that the stress of the pandemic has aged these young women exponentially (despite the dates on the photos) to now appear much older. This advanced age is represented by the bottom image of three older women sitting together on a park bench. The naturalistic modality of the outdoor park setting adds to the sense of truthfulness of the message because it could be a something one would see in everyday life. The women are dressed in heavy overcoats, stockings, hats, and boots. Two of them carry canes suggesting mobility issues. The women's gazes are all versions of the "offer" gaze, giving more power to the viewer than to the represented older women and contrasting sharply with the demand gazes and power of the younger women in the upper frame. There is ambiguity in how the

Fig. 4. Two memes representing contrast between younger and older generations.

meme constructs "otherness." In terms of composition, the long shot and oblique angle suggests that the viewer is uninvolved and that the older women are "not like us," "not part of our world, it is *their* world". The viewer is simply passing by at a public distance as though they were a stranger, reinforcing "otherness" of older adults. On the other hand, the language in the text at the top of the meme draws in the reader, saying, "2021 has been hard on all of us," engaging the viewer in this homogenising "like us" narrative.

In the second meme, the plurality of "us" in the first meme is reiterated in the language of "we," and in both meme examples images of groups of people reinforce and amplify the collective perspectives. The images in the second meme show the bodies in each group overlapping with very little social distance between them as though they are groups of friends, acquaintances, or at least an organised set of people who share the same perspective. The viewer is invited to join not just one individual's perspective, but the perspective of a represented homogenous group. The second meme juxtaposes a top image of frowning children with a bottom image of smiling older adults who are headed to Benidorm, a popular resort destination. The meme comments upon the perception that older adults are behaving selfishly, while children (another vulnerable demographic) experience great disruption in their lives. One child holds a basketball under her arm signaling that their play has come to a stop, while the older adults are giving the thumbs up, creating vectors of action that symbolise they are active and unencumbered by the pandemic. Both generations face the viewer from a frontal angle; however, the children are photographed from a high angle, suggesting they have less power than the viewer which reinforces their vulnerability. The older adults are photographed at eye level, suggesting power equality with the viewer and suggesting that they are not really the vulnerable population who need protection.

Discussion: Instrumental ageism

The above memes use ageist representations of older adults to introduce a moral commentary about health security issues during the COVID-19 pandemic. These issues include panic buying and hoarding of food and toilet paper, wearing a mask in public spaces, care of vulnerable older adults, and enduring the costs of the pandemic. The selected thematic representational categories outlined above are illustrative examples of instrumental ageism. I define instrumental ageism as a nuanced form of ageism that involves the deliberate use of ageist representations of older adults to advance a moral agenda. As discussed in the introduction, morality is socially constructed in relation to sociohistorical and political contexts. The construction of morality through ageist representations of older adults' risks exacerbating ageism, increasing age segregation, and fueling intergenerational tensions.

Instrumental ageism is evident in the first theme, where the meme creators could have placed any type of person in front of the empty grocery store aisles, but they chose images of older adults that troubled the boundaries between third and fourth ages and who were marked by symbols of vulnerability and helplessness. In a society accustomed to images of successful third agers, these ambiguous figures disturb the familiar setting of the grocery store aisle with the strangeness of their desperate condition. In the second theme, the memes using an image of the older woman in a cage highlight the tension between care as protection versus care as control of older adults. The sentiment to keep parents and grandparents safe and protected (confining them for their own good) is sharply contrasted with the idea of using older adults as a test for coronavirus as if they were a disposable test subject like the miner's canary. In both cases, instrumental ageism is evident in the way the memes infantilise older adults, deny their agency, and imply that during the exceptional health security crisis, confining older adults is acceptable practice. In the third theme, the sexualised representations of older women were used to comment on social behaviours that highlight the tensions between individual liberties and acting in a way that supports the social good (sometimes at the experience of one's interests).

The women are pictured as agentive, capable, and independent, but the objectification of women through the hyper-focus on their breasts is problematic because it obscures the myriad other dimensions of older women and their experiences during the pandemic. Finally, in the fourth theme, generational contrast is used to express the impact of stress and lockdown measures on younger people. In one case, the group of older women is used to emphasise old age as decline from youth, power, and vitality, while in the second example the group of healthy and vibrant-looking older adults is used to emphasise children's vulnerability. This troubles the social definition of who is most vulnerable and deserving of protection during the pandemic. In both cases, the images homogenise and stereotype what older age looks like and what it means during the pandemic. These are poignant examples of instrumental ageism, located between calculated ageism and benevolent ageism that occurs when ageist representations of older adults are used to advance larger public health goals, as well as politicised agendas.

Echoing Fassin (2015), the construction of morality and ethics in the public sphere of politics leaves room for agents to adopt and manipulate ethical objects, sometimes invoking morally questionable means to reach desired moral ends. Each of the representations creates a moral breakdown that pushes the viewer out of their comfort zone to reconcile with the moral dilemma in the meme. Associated with the moment of breakdown is a moral sentiment, which may range from a sympathy, pity, humour, or a "fellow feeling" (Throop, 2012). The visual and textual content of the meme impacts the moral sentiment. As Kress and van Leeuwen (2021) explain, the subjective attitude of the images describes the viewer's involvement or distance with the images, and the relational power between viewer and image. The images have been selected by the producer for the viewer in order to subject the viewer to something or someone. For example, a close up shot with a demand gaze may encourage a sense of familiarity, while a long distance shot of someone with an offer gaze may call for more sympathy or pity. Often the images that arouse the most sentiment are also ageist in nature.

The selected memes presented above show how instrumental ageism follows an ends-over-means logic, prioritising, for example, the goals of achieving more health security and solidarity over the goal of equitable representations of older adults. The emergent themes of memes that explicitly contrast younger and older generations (Theme 3), and the memes that explicitly contrasted generations (Theme 4), are examples of using cultural materials to shape the moral space of the pandemic. Most of these memes use representations of older adults to comment on the challenges endured during the pandemic and the public consensus that coronavirus is a very unwelcome interruption in our lives. While the memes use images of reasonably healthy older adults (albeit passive-looking in one case), the representations can still be classified under instrumental ageism because the memes use these positive images to represent how younger generations have suffered during the pandemic, to represent the pandemic virus itself, and to reinforce existing negative attitudes toward older adults as selfish and separate from society. So, a viewer may empathise with the first meme's message that the coronavirus has worn us down, but in so doing, they must also accept the idea that older women are worn down (as shown in the meme's image). Similarly, agreeing with the second meme's message that the pandemic has been detrimental to children's education and the economy means also accepting the message that the source of children's suffering is older adults who appear more selfish and less vulnerable than pandemic narrative described.

The implications of instrumental ageism centre on the potential for causing a fundamental attitude shift and narrowing of perspective toward older adults. This results in less compassion and empathy between generations. Particularly in a milieu where COVID-19 has been positioned as an older adult problem, and care rationing and vaccine distribution turns on chronological age, the use of homogenising representations of older adults to promote sacrificing the right to consume in a neoliberal market will create intergenerational tensions. Experiencing the moral breakdown in each meme and potentially

shifting one's attitude toward accepting ageist messaging may have a lasting impact on one's broader approach to the older adults in society. Among other consequences, these memes may impact people's capacity to notice other older adults who are truly vulnerable. This is a threat to intergenerational solidarity. Taken further, this division could impact older adults' self-concept, cognitive functioning, and stress, which contributes to worse health outcomes (Ayalon et al., 2020). It may also exacerbate ageing anxiety among younger adults who would avoid and neglect older adults (Monahan et al., 2020).

There is a risk that these detrimental effects will impact older adults both during the pandemic and into the post-COVID-19 future. Looking at frameworks of COVID-19 crisis management, Branicki (2020) argues that society needs to be more conscious of our vision of the crisis and the time afterwards. Comparing the assumptions of the rational (calculative) framework and feminist (relational) framework, she observed that there was a distinct difference in people's thoughts about how crisis management strategies would impact the post-pandemic world. The rational framework was utilitarian, concerned with immediate costs and benefits, and viewed the pandemic as a temporally and socially specific and isolated event. The feminist framework was concerned with preserving and extending relationships through opportunities presented amidst the crisis, with the recognition that anything done during the pandemic would shape the post-pandemic world. The use of homogenising representations of older adults in the construction of moralised action is not a trivial matter. Following the feminist framework, there may be long-lasting impacts on perceptions of older adults as well as intergenerational tensions.

Conclusion

This paper broadens existing knowledge about ageism, media representations, and the construction of morality in digital social life. I have argued that the health securitisation practices mobilised to contain viral transmission have permitted an exceptional logic of ends-over-means to take hold. Combined with the pressing urgency to disseminate public health information, the social practice of creating memes and constructing morality emerges, shifting audiences' focus away from the critical appraisal of information and allowing nuanced forms of discrimination and othering to proliferate. Exploring the interplay of politics, morality, and ageism in the everyday context of digital culture during the COVID-19 pandemic, the paper has highlighted how seemingly benign representations of older adults can in fact be dangerous. The particular memes analysed above occupy an ambiguous position between benevolent or compassionate ageism and calculated ageism, illustrating what I have termed "instrumental ageism."

Further research is needed to explore representations of older adults in digital culture, both related to the COVID-19 pandemic and more generally. A concerted effort should be made to identify and examine the nuanced forms of ageism at work in both created memes and in viewers' written comments. Careful attention needs to be paid to the intention of a meme, its tone, and tacit social scripts, biases, and stereotypes that make the content culturally legible to viewers. Research should continue to seek connections between ageism in digital culture and ageism in other domains of society, looking at how online and offline forms of ageism operate in tandem. Instrumental ageism threatens to undermine intergenerational solidarity, dividing us when we most need to unite.

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