



Commentary

Social media, ageism, and older adults during the COVID-19 pandemic

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The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has caused an ongoing pandemic, with over 40 million cases worldwide [1]. COVID-19 has placed a disproportionate load on disadvantaged populations, including racial minorities, low-income communities, and older individuals. Although older adults carry a significant proportion of the COVID-19 burden, they have been mostly left out of the pandemic response, and few policies have included a focus on aging [2]. This is partly due to ageism, or the discrimination of older adults based on age, which has been prevalent in research, policy, and the media.

Traditional media (such as newspapers, television, and radio) have long reinforced ageist stereotypes by often portraying older adults as a burden to society. During the pandemic, this phenomenon has also been observed in social media (online platforms for sharing user-generated content) [2]. COVID-19 has accelerated changes in the way we share information, with a shift towards social media use by governments, news outlets, and researchers. While this has speeded up the transmission of data, it has also led to the dissemination of misinformation and negative messages.

Negative social media messages about COVID-19 and aging often characterize older adults as helpless and expendable individuals. Existing hate speech and intergenerational resentment can be exemplified by the “#BoomerRemover” Twitter hashtag (user-generated metadata term), which was widely shared in social media at the beginning of the pandemic. To understand the dissemination of ageist messages in social media, our group conducted a qualitative analysis of the content English-language tweets about COVID-19 and older adults posted in the ten days following the pandemic declaration [3]. Our findings showed that almost a quarter of tweets downplayed the importance of COVID-19 because it was deadlier among older individuals, and that 14% contained offensive content or jokes [3]. Using our same methodology, another group of researchers analyzed 82,893 tweets published between January and

April 2020 [4]. Like in our study, most tweets contained personal opinions, but with a lower proportion of tweets with ageist content of only 12%. Sentiment analysis found that negative tweets mostly contained words related with death and/or sickness, and that sentiments changed over time, with an increase in negative content right after the pandemic declaration and a decrease thereafter [4].

Ageist social media content seems to be dependent on geography and culture. An unpublished analysis of tweets in Spanish by our group showed that most accounts tweeting about COVID-19 belonged to organizations, and that <10% of tweets had ageist content. Similar results were found when posts on the Chinese social media platform Weibo were analyzed, with most containing positive messages highlighting the contributions of older adults to society [5]. Differences in ageist content in social media mirror the experiences of older individuals across societies. In the United States, for example, >80% of older adults have felt discriminated because of their age, while this figure is of 18% in Mexico, and only 4% in Spain [6–8]. These variations may be related to the proportion of older adults in a country's population, but also with local social and political issues leading to intergenerational tension and resentment.

Ageism in social media can partly be explained by the digital divide between younger and older individuals, with most older adults facing limited access to digital technology. Social media is significantly more popular among individuals aged 15–29 years, and only 7% of Twitter users in the United States are aged ≥65 years [9]. Furthermore, older adults generate a limited amount of online content, with a recent study showing that older social media users, and particularly those who are frail or have disabilities, are less likely to post about COVID-19 (OR 0.73) [10].

So how can we fix this (Fig. 1)? There is a need to promote inclusivity in social media and to make the voices of older adults heard. Increasing the participation of older individuals can boost their engagement in social interactions and represent a way to provide and receive social support during the pandemic. Organizations, as well as the media, need to transmit information which is trustworthy and relevant for older adults, and avoid stigmatizing labels and terms [2]. Finally, healthcare providers and researchers should expand their social media presence and engage in fact-checking and debunking of myths and hoaxes.

Ageism is common in both traditional and social media, and this has increased due to COVID-19, impacting the public's perception of social and economic policies associated with aging. Combating ageism requires a concerted effort from all stakeholders to transmit

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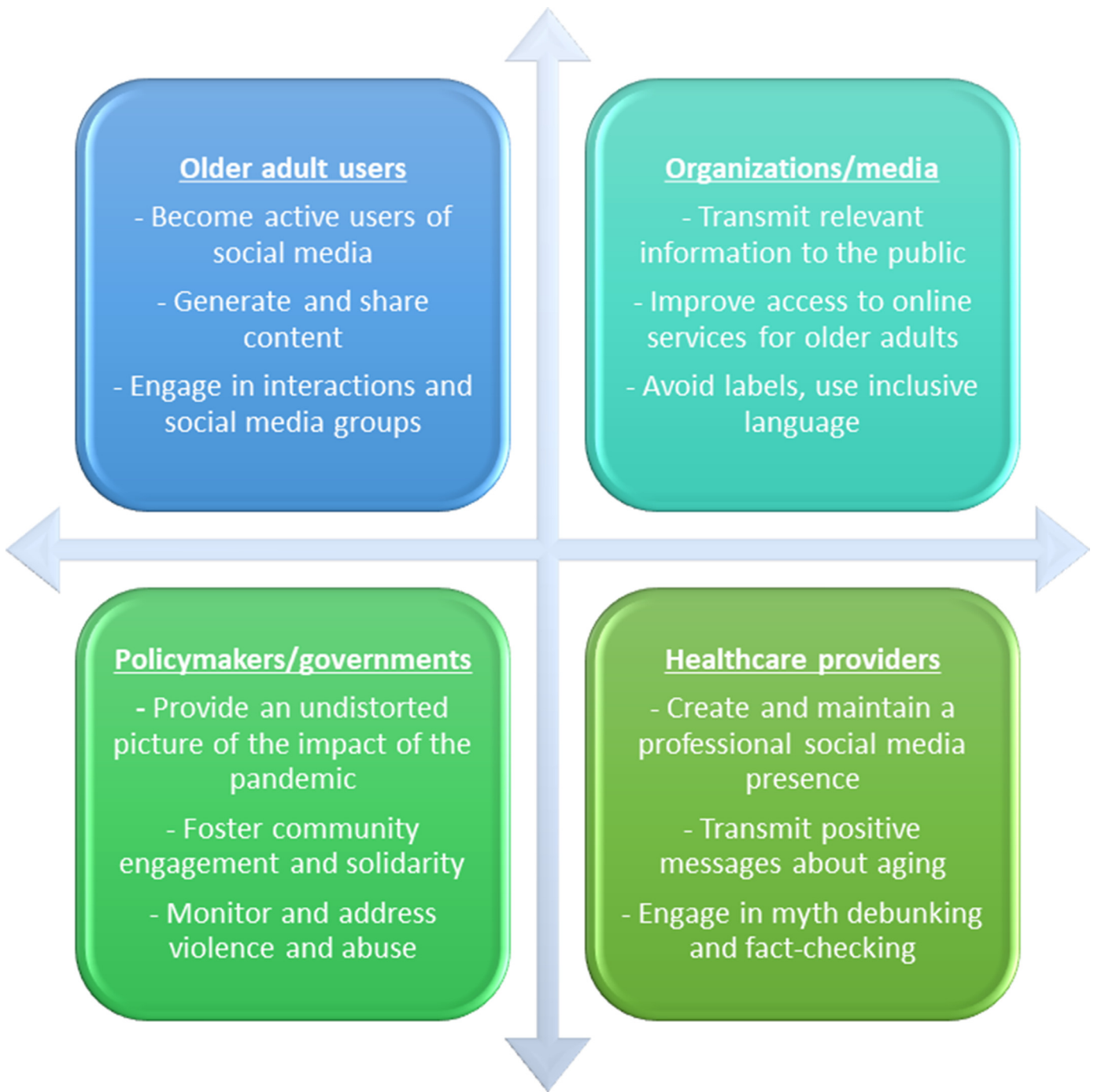


Fig. 1. Suggested actions by key stakeholders for tackling ageism in social media.

positive messages associated with aging, and to create an environment of respect, empathy, and solidarity towards older adults during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The author has no financial conflicts of interest to disclose.

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