

New love, old stereotypes: ageism in social media discourses on the golden bachelor[†]

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Highlights:

- Social media perpetuates explicit, implicit, and benevolent ageism around older adult representation.
- “The Golden Bachelor” challenged and reinforced stereotypes about aging and romance.
- Sexuality in older adults was both celebrated and stigmatized by social media users.
- Ageist and sexist tropes intersected in online reactions to older reality TV contestants.

Abstract

Age-based discrimination or ageism is often propagated through media platforms. Focusing on the 2023 reality television show “The Golden Bachelor”, which features older adult contestants seeking romance, this study explored ageism spread via social media posts related to the program. Using social astronomy software and qualitative content analysis of user posts, four forms of ageism (1) personal, (2) explicit, (3) implicit, and (4) benevolent, were explored in a sample of 4000 posts shared between November 2023 and June 2024 in Reddit’s English-language corpus. The analysis of Reddit posts related to “The Golden Bachelor” revealed four key themes: (1) Dimensions of Ageism—discussions highlighted overt and subtle forms of ageism, including personal, explicit, and benevolent biases; (2) Aesthetic and Gendered Expectations in Aging—Reddit users critiqued societal pressures for older women to maintain youthful appearances; (3) Sexuality and Romance in Older Adults—while some users expressed skepticism about older adults’ romantic pursuits, others celebrated the cast members’ desires for love and intimacy; (4) The Convergence of Ageism and Sexism—comments reflected a gendered lens, where older women faced harsher scrutiny compared to their male counterparts. While “The Golden Bachelor” may help some understand the capabilities of older adults and counter the misperception of them as asexual, existing ageist stereotypes emerge and are shared on social media platforms. These findings underscore the pervasive nature of ageism in social media and highlight the importance of addressing age-related biases in media representation.

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1. Introduction

Age-based discrimination is one of the few prejudices that is still socially accepted (Sánchez-Román et al., 2022). Ageism, which manifests through a variety of stereotypical beliefs and perceptions, perpetuates prejudice and discriminatory actions against individuals or groups due to their age, consequently fostering the societal exclusion of older adults (Fraser et al., 2020).

Stereotypes related to age can lead to presumptions regarding an individual's physical and cognitive abilities, interpersonal aptitude, sexuality, and various other attributes solely based on their age (Iversen et al., 2009). Mainstream media, including newspapers, television, and radio, have perpetuated ageist stereotypes over time by frequently depicting older adults as societal burdens (Soto-Perez-de-Celis 2020). This phenomenon has likewise been noted on social media platforms (i.e., web-based services for sharing user-generated content) in recent decades (Soto-Perez-de-Celis, 2020). Ageism can adversely impact the psychological health of older adults, potentially precipitating mental health challenges like depression and anxiety (Kang & Kim, 2022). This form of prejudice can also perpetuate loneliness, lead to psychological distress (Courtin & Knapp, 2017), reduce quality of life and health-seeking behaviors (Chang et al., 2020). It is therefore essential that ageism be recognized as a public health concern and that its perpetuation be investigated and disrupted.

Ageism has been recognized to take multiple, sometimes intersecting, forms: (1) personal (i.e., prejudices, biases, attitudes, and practices that discriminate against individuals or groups on the basis of their older age; for example, assuming an older person is forgetful or less capable in a workplace setting), (2) explicit (i.e., practices that are knowingly discriminatory on the basis of older age; for instance, refusing to hire an older candidate because of the belief that they are 'too old' to adapt to new technologies), (3) implicit (i.e., practices that are unconsciously discriminatory; assuming older adults are bad at technology or automatically blaming age for a person's forgetfulness), or (4) benevolent (i.e., positive stereotypes or attitudes that, while well-intentioned, contribute to the marginalization or infantilization of older individuals; for example, overly praising an older adult for completing a simple task, implying that such achievements are exceptional due to their age) (Marques et al. 2020). These forms of ageism can overlap and compound, with ageist behaviors often manifesting as both benevolent and implicit simultaneously, for example, thereby amplifying their impact (Marques et al., 2020). Recognizing these intersecting forms is critical for understanding how ageism operates in everyday life and for developing more effective strategies to challenge and dismantle it. One particularly persistent and harmful expression of ageism involves how older adults are perceived in relation to sexuality.

Ageist stereotypes often depict older adults as asexual or lacking in sexual desire (Srinivasan et al., 2019). While it is true that the prevalence of sexual dysfunction tends to increase with age, research on sexual satisfaction indicates that only a minority of older adults experience significant distress related to their sexual health (Srinivasan et al., 2019). Nevertheless, popular culture frequently conflates aging with sexual dysfunction, reinforcing these negative stereotypes (Syme & Cohn, 2015). Sexuality is a multifaceted construct that encompasses not only sexual activity and behavior but also attitudes, motivations, and the nature of partnerships (Ricoy-Cano et al., 2020). Studies show that many older adults can, and choose to remain sexually active well into later life (Srinivasan et al., 2019), and the importance of intimate relationships persists as people age (Harris, 2024). Loneliness and isolation can drive both older and younger adults to seek romantic connections, yet popular media often portrays older adults as devoid of romantic feelings, perpetuating stigma surrounding their sexuality and romantic lives (Harris, 2024).

While prior research has examined ageist stereotypes in media (Bacsu et al., 2022; Cheng et al., 2018; Fraser et al., 2020; Soto-Perez-de-Celis, 2020), little is known about how reality TV challenges or reinforces these stereotypes, and even less about how audiences respond to portrayals of older adults in this genre. On September 28, 2023, "The Golden Bachelor" premiered as a spin-off of the well-known dating reality series "The Bachelor", which traditionally features a single bachelor in their twenties or thirties choosing a partner from a pool of contestants in their twenties and thirties. This new iteration targets older adults seeking companionship (Porter, 2023). As a fresh approach to a franchise that has aired over 169 seasons in more than 23 countries since its debut in 2002 (Lenhard et al., 2023), "The Golden Bachelor" introduced 22 women aged 60 to 75 and one bachelor aged 72, marking a significant milestone by featuring older adults on reality television (Kayser et al., 2024).

This study utilizes Reddit as a primary data source to investigate potential ageist attitudes and discourses of its users towards "The Golden Bachelor". Using qualitative content analysis, we aimed to answer the question: How does the portrayal of "The Golden Bachelor" in popular media and social platforms influence ageist

stereotypes and assumptions about older adults' sexuality? By posing this question, our objective is to understand how popular representations of aging intersect with public discourse to either reinforce or challenge ageist views, particularly those related to romance and sexuality in later life.

Theoretical Framework

Social Identity Theory is a social psychological framework that examines how individuals' self-perception, along with social beliefs, influences group dynamics and interactions between different social groups (Hogg, 2016). Social Identity Theory explores the relationships between large social groups by focusing on psychological processes related to social identity (i.e., an individual's perception of belonging to a group and the emotions tied to that affiliation) (Harwood, 2020). It offers a framework for understanding intergroup interactions and communication, emphasizing how people assign significance to their group memberships and strive to perceive their own groups favorably (Harwood, 2020). This tendency can contribute to biases and conflicts between groups (Harwood, 2020). Social Identity Theory has been widely applied in studies on ageism, demonstrating how younger adults may perceive older adults as an out-group, reinforcing negative stereotypes and exclusionary behaviors (Chonody & Teater, 2016; Gans et al., 2023). Similarly, research has shown that media representations can shape intergroup attitudes by either reinforcing or challenging social hierarchies and stereotypes (Arendt, 2023; Harwood, 2020). Given that *The Golden Bachelor* presents older adults in romantic and social contexts typically reserved for younger individuals, Social Identity Theory provides a useful framework for analyzing audience reactions. This framework provided a structure for organizing the data and drawing explanatory conclusions related to our research question. Social Identity Theory is particularly useful for interpreting complex, unstructured data such as social media posts, as it helps illuminate patterns of in-group favoritism (e.g., younger users) and out-group bias or discrimination (e.g., older adults).

2. Method

Data screening and extraction

Reddit is a widely used social media and micro-blogging platform with over 57 million daily users, offering a rich environment for exploring public discourse (Chi & Chen, 2023; Pollack et al., 2022). Reddit is a social media platform organized into user-created communities, known as "subreddits," which focus on specific topics or interests. Users create posts, typically in the form of questions, personal stories, images, videos, or links, that serve as prompts for discussion (Goddard & Gillespie, 2025). Other users respond in the comment section, resulting in threaded conversations that often reflect diverse opinions and lived experiences. Posts and discussions can be located using subreddit titles or relevant keywords (e.g., "Golden Bachelor"), allowing researchers to analyze discourse around specific topics through search-based content retrieval (Goddard & Gillespie, 2025). This platform is most popular in the United States, which accounts for the largest share of users, followed by Australia and India. The majority of users are male (69%), with over 90% being below the age of 50 (Sattelberg, 2021).

For this study, data screening involved assessing the relevance of each post to the research question: how ageism and related themes are discussed in relation to "The Golden Bachelor." Posts were included if they contained explicit or implicit content related to ageism, counter-ageism, or secondary themes such as romance, sexuality, and appearance in the context of older adulthood. Posts were excluded if they (1) lacked meaningful textual content (e.g., just a meme or image without commentary), (2) only shared media links or promotional material without further discussion, or (3) did not reference "The Golden Bachelor" either directly or via keyword-based search terms (e.g., "golden bachelor"). After applying these criteria, 1,435 posts were retained for full analysis.

Data analysis

Qualitative content analysis encompasses a range of methods for systematically examining texts and media (Seddighi et al., 2021). This approach aims to condense large amounts of text into a concise, organized summary of the main results (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017). As a result, raw data (i.e., Reddit posts) are analyzed to identify categories or themes, allowing for further abstraction. Themes were identified based on the frequency and significance of discourse, with particular attention to how ageist and counter-ageist narratives intersected with personal identities in romance and appearances. Developed themes sought to provide insight

into generational perspectives on ageism and social relationships. While the initial codebook guided the analysis, emergent themes beyond predefined categories were identified, including the convergence of ageism and sexism, reflecting the dynamic discourse on age and appearance in the posts. Qualitative content analysis encompasses a range of methods for systematically examining texts and media (Seddighi et al., 2021). This approach aims to condense large amounts of text into a concise, organized summary of the main results (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017). As a result, raw data (i.e., Reddit posts) are analyzed to identify categories or themes, allowing for further abstraction. Themes were identified based on the frequency and significance of discourse, with particular attention to how ageist and counter-ageist narratives intersected with personal identities in romance and appearances. Developed themes sought to provide insight into generational perspectives on ageism and social relationships. While the initial codebook guided the analysis (see Appendix 1), emergent themes beyond predefined categories were identified, including the convergence of ageism and sexism, reflecting the dynamic discourse on age and appearance in the posts. The initial codebook was developed through a combination of theory-driven and inductive processes. It included 17 primary codes (e.g., personal or internalized ageism, benevolent ageism, counter-ageism, gendered ageism, appearance-focused comments), allowing for classification of posts based on types of age-related attitudes and perceptions of aging as shared by Reddit users. To illustrate this process, one representative quote, “There’s a new version out called *The Golden Bachelor* which has people in their 60s and 70s. There’s a woman twice my age named Edith with a full head of luscious gray hair.”, was first coded as “Appearances-women (9A)” and “Counter ageism/age inclusion (7).” These were grouped into the broader category of “Disparities in age expectations between men and women.” This, in turn, contributed to the overarching theme: “Aesthetic and Gendered Expectations in Aging.” This process was repeated across the dataset, with both deductive codes informed by the initial codebook and inductive codes emerging from the data.

Study design

This study employed an exploratory design (Rendle et al., 2019), guided by Social Identity Theory (Hogg et al., 1995), due to the novelty of the research area, with limited prior studies addressing this topic through social media (Bacsu et al., 2022; Cheng et al., 2018). Social Identity Theory examines how an individual’s sense of self is shaped by their membership in social groups and how this membership influences their attitudes and behaviors toward in-group members (those within the group) and out-group members (those outside the group) (Hogg et al., 1995). In the context of this study, we conceptualize in-group members as individuals under the age of 65 (younger adults) and out-group members as those over 65 (older adults). The theory highlights the tendency for in-group favoritism (i.e., where individuals positively evaluate and support members of their own group) and out-group discrimination, which often manifests as negative biases or behaviors toward those in rival or external groups (Hogg et al., 1995). This dynamic can contribute to ageist rhetoric, with younger adults favoring their own group while marginalizing older adults. Social Identity Theory has been widely applied to explore social dynamics such as prejudice and group conflict (Hogg et al., 1995), making it particularly relevant for examining ageist perspectives in media. When applied to Reddit discourse, Social Identity Theory provides a useful framework for analyzing how age-based group identities shape interactions. Online platforms often serve as spaces where age-related stereotypes and biases are either reinforced or challenged (Meier et al., 2020). This theory helps uncover how in-group favoritism among younger users may perpetuate the marginalization of older adults, while also exploring how older adults push back against ageist narratives, redefining their group identity in digital spaces or even through media such as reality TV. By applying this framework, we sought to gain a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics of age-based group membership and its role in perpetuating or challenging ageism, both online and in broader cultural contexts. Using qualitative content analysis, we elucidated patterns in the public discourse concerning aging and “*The Golden Bachelor*”, as observed on Reddit (Seddighi et al., 2021). We utilized Social Identity Theory to inform our codebook by developing codes that reflect how group identities (in-group and out-group) influence discourse, particularly in the context of ageism. Specifically, we focused on categories that capture the dynamics of age-based group membership, such as Ageism/Discrimination, Romance, Relationships & Sexuality, and Appearances. The Appearances category was further refined into sub-categories reflecting different types of group-based evaluations: Positive, Negative, and Neutral, allowing us to explore how these identity-based perceptions influence ageist discourse.

Search strategy

Data were scraped using Social Astronomy, an automated text analysis software designed for graphic visualization by co-author CB (Social Astronomy, n.d.). This tool employs a method similar to opinion mining, utilizing text mining techniques to aggregate co-occurring words in Reddit discussions (Baumgartner et al., 2020). To investigate public discourse surrounding “The Golden Bachelor”, we employed Boolean logic using the keyword “golden bachelor*” to search through Reddit posts shared online. Social Astronomy automatically identified 4,000 posts as the total dataset for analysis. This dataset spanned from November 2023 to June 2024, covering key events, including the Fall 2023 telecast and the January 2024 wedding. While we initially aimed to focus on these events, the extended timeline was necessary to capture the ongoing prevalence of relevant online discourse. Figure 1 presents the Reddit posts over time from November 2023 to June 2024, with the greatest number of posts occurring in December 2023, following the end of the series and leading up to the televised wedding special between “The Golden Bachelor”, Gerry, and his winner, Theresa, whom he eventually married. We gathered data from the complete English-language content of Reddit within this timeframe. Since Reddit posts typically lack metadata regarding users’ locations unless voluntarily disclosed, we opted not to categorize posts based on users’ nations or regions. However, the majority of Reddit’s user base is from the United States (222 million), Australia (18 million), and India (14 million) (Sattelberg, 2021), and ageist social media content has been found to be especially high in the United States (Soto-Perez-de-Celis 2020). Further, to protect user anonymity, we only included Reddit posts that were publicly available and did not contain any self-identifying information. Although Reddit users often post anonymously, we recognize the potential for re-identification through verbatim quotes. Therefore, we reviewed each quotation by entering it into a web search engine. When quotes were found to be searchable or potentially identifying, we shortened or slightly paraphrased them without changing their original meaning. This step ensured that user privacy was preserved while maintaining the integrity of the data.

Posts Over Time

Average 14.4 posts/day, based on data from Thu Nov 30 2023 to Sun Jun 30 2024.
First and last columns may not represent full time periods.

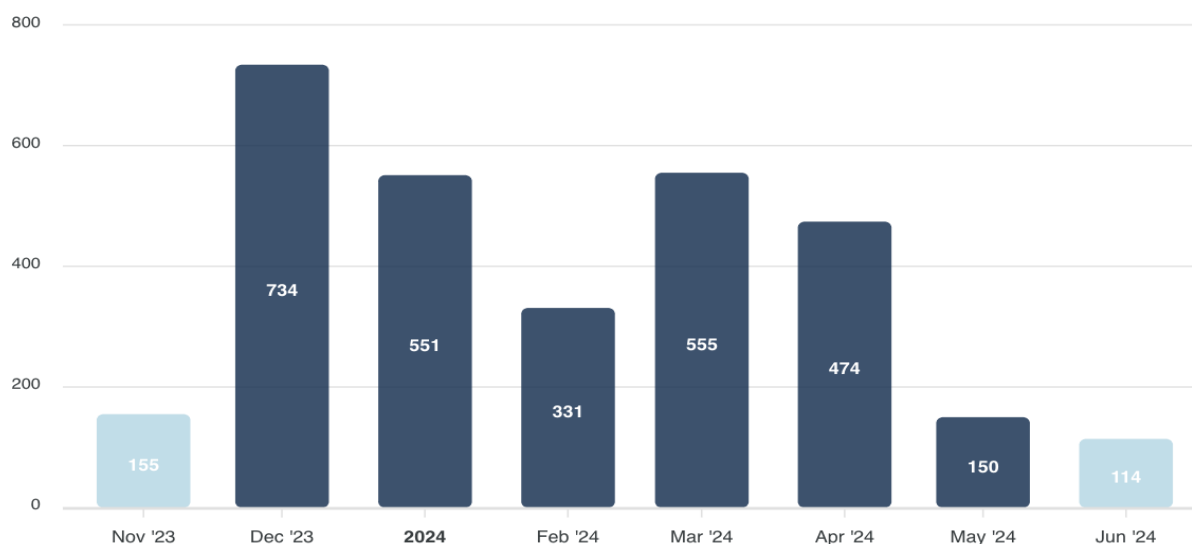


Figure 1. Reddit posts over time matching the keyword search “golden bachelor*”.

Data organization

To ensure consistency and clarity in our coding process, we conducted three rounds of interrater reliability testing, each involving 50 randomly selected posts. In the first round (May 21–June 4), the initial coding process

by six team members [AM, ALC, MVG, NB, MY & SF] resulted in fair agreement (67%), revealing areas where code definitions required refinement. Following updates to the coding guide and additional coder training, the second round (June 20–July 5) yielded fair agreement (63%), indicating ongoing challenges in distinguishing closely related codes. By the third round (July 10–July 24), further refinements and discussions led to moderate agreement (70%), demonstrating improved consistency among coders. Given that forms of ageism are not always mutually exclusive, coders were invited to assign two codes to each of the 50 posts during each round of coding. This approach explains the variation in our interrater reliability, as each post could be attributed multiple codes, leading to potential discrepancies in coding interpretations. While some overlap between codes remained due to the complexity of the data, our process ensured that coders could reliably distinguish key themes, capturing both their distinctions and intersections. These collaborative sessions refined the codebook, reducing it from 30 to 17 codes. For the remaining 3,850 posts, coding responsibilities were divided among team members: AM coded 950 unique posts, ALC, NB, MY and SF each coded 700, while MVG coded 100 posts. As first author, AM then reviewed all other team members' coding. Posts with ambiguous content were flagged in red, and team consensus was reached in a group review to ensure clarity and reliability in the data analysis. Figure 2 presents a visual summary of the data organization process.

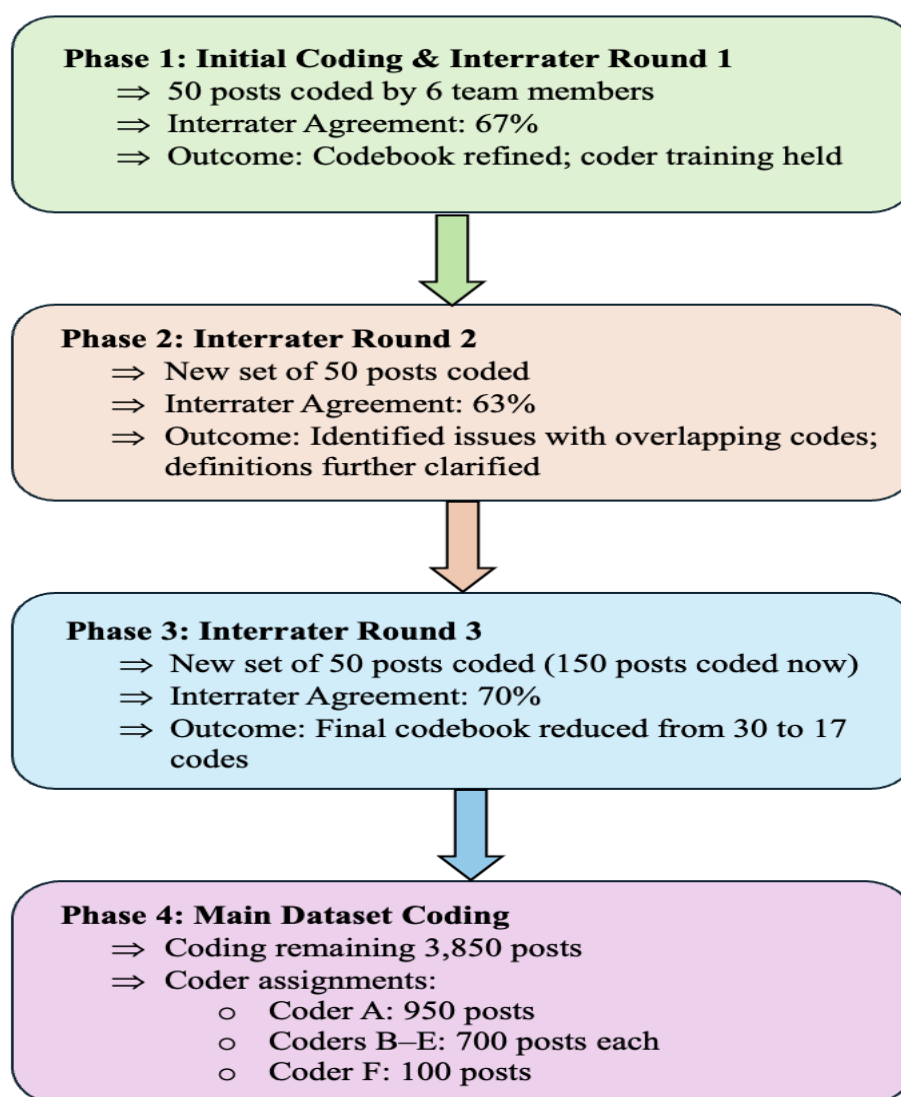


Figure 2. Overview of data organization and coding process.

3. Results

The coded Reddit posts related to “The Golden Bachelor” broadly emerged into four themes: (1) dimensions of ageism, (2) aesthetic and gendered expectations in aging, (3) sexuality and romance in older adults, and (4) the convergence of ageism and sexism.

Theme 1: Dimensions of ageism

This theme explored the various ways ageism appeared in Reddit discourse surrounding “The Golden Bachelor”, capturing both overt and subtle forms of bias expressed in discussions about the show’s contestants. Multiple forms of ageism surfaced, including personal, explicit, implicit, benevolent, and gendered ageism, reflecting a spectrum of attitudes ranging from hostility to well-intentioned but limiting stereotypes about older adults. *Personal ageism* was exemplified through biases that devalued the experiences and preferences of older adults, perpetuating attitudes that can lead to their marginalization and isolation. Reddit users categorized older adults on “The Golden Bachelor” as an out-group, with some expressing limited views on aging that imply that watching television is the only meaningful or valuable activity for older adults. By equating a lack of engagement in diverse hobbies, such as playing games or attending cultural events, with a diminished quality of life, these users implied that older adults are somehow less capable of enjoying or participating in fulfilling activities. One Reddit user said,

“I mean, the only hobby my parents had was watching television. They didn’t ever play any games, video or board or card games. Didn’t read books anymore. Didn’t watch movies in the theater or attend plays. Didn’t do anything outdoors beyond a daily walk around the neighborhood. Television is literally all boomers have. If the thrill of old age is watching The Golden Bachelor, kill me now.”

Explicit ageism was evident in derogatory comments that openly mocked older adults’ physical appearance and capabilities. Examples included derogatory language aimed at older bodies and sexuality through statements such as, “[w]hat The Golden Bachelor saves on tampons it spends on Depends”, as well as stereotypes portraying older adults as mentally or emotionally incompetent. These overtly negative remarks reinforced ageist stereotypes regarding physical and cognitive decline as exemplified in this quote: “Riding the success of The Golden Bachelor, they should have a dating show with two old folks that have dementia. They can call it: 50 First Dates”.

Implicit ageism reflects subtle biases that, while not overtly negative, reveal underlying ageist assumptions. For instance, users expressed surprise that older adults might be interested in reality television or assumed their lives primarily revolved around retirement and grandchildren. Additionally, the commentary suggesting that older individuals are less willing to make significant lifestyle changes compared to younger people underscores a belief that aging equates to stagnation:

“[T]hese contestants, for the most part, are settled in their lives. Young people are more prone to make big lifestyle changes, but most older people don’t want to leave their lifelong friends & family to move to another part of the country to be with a person they have only known for a short time.”

This notion perpetuates the idealization of youth, wherein youth, as depicted in shows like *The Bachelor*, is associated with vitality and potential, while older adults are viewed as less capable of adapting to change.

Benevolent ageism emerged as Reddit users described older contestants as innocent and wholesome, contrasting them with younger reality show participants which they described as full of drama. This portrayal implied that older individuals were inherently more genuine, nurturing, and emotionally stable, framing their romantic pursuits as heartwarming rather than complex. Phrases that are normally well-intentioned but ageist in their description of the show and/or its contestants like “genuinely wholesome” and “sweet grandpa” created an idealized image of aging that overlooked the diversity of experiences and emotions within older populations seeking romance or companionship. By emphasizing these simplistic narratives and this overtly positive but constraining language, the discourse inadvertently suggested that older adults were fundamentally different from their younger counterparts, promoting a patronizing view that ignored their individuality. The focus on “wholesomeness” also trivialized the nuanced realities of dating and relationships for older adults, reducing their experiences to a simplistic narrative of romance, vulnerability, and nostalgia, thereby reinforcing societal stereotypes about aging rather than challenging them. One Reddit user described their perspective:

“Golden bachelor is one of, if not the most, genuine reality shows I’ve ever seen, and I need more seniors to find love! They are just trying to find their person and it’s the most wholesome thing I’ve ever seen.”

Overall, these examples revealed the wide-ranging nature of ageism in the discourse, illustrating that even in a lighthearted context like reality television, ageist attitudes, whether explicit or implicit, were deeply embedded in social media users' perceptions of older adults.

Theme 2: Aesthetic and gendered expectations in aging

This theme reflects the perceptions of Reddit users regarding societal standards that influence views on aging, particularly for women. Many users noted that media and culture have perpetuated the idea that older women should maintain a youthful appearance, often emphasizing hair color, makeup, and cosmetic procedures. Discussions surrounding shows like "The Golden Bachelor" highlighted that the featured women, aged in their 60s and 70s, frequently presented themselves with colored hair and cosmetic enhancements to align with these expectations. One Reddit user shared their view:

"I don't love seeing all the critiques about these women specifically when The Bachelor (and any dating reality show really) has always been casting conventionally thin/attractive people. It feels like these women are getting more criticism for their looks when contestants in their 20s/30s get just as much - if not more - work done. Also, how these women choose to present themselves is a reflection of our society. Women are constantly being bombarded with "anti-aging" products, even teenagers I've seen putting together full skincare routines to prevent wrinkles."

Reddit users pointed out that there is a societal pressure for women to look significantly younger than their actual age, which aligns with cultural ideals that prioritize youth over natural aging. This has led to an aesthetic standard in which women may feel compelled to conceal their gray hair and pursue treatments to minimize visible signs of aging. While some users acknowledged that certain women embraced their gray hair and natural look, many expressed concerns about the societal pressure to conform to these gendered ideals, reinforcing the belief that women's value and romantic/sexual appeal remains closely tied to their appearance, even in later stages of life.

Theme 3: Sexuality and romance in older adults

The Bachelor franchise has long been known for creating opportunities for physical intimacy between contestants and the lead (i.e., "Bachelor" or "Bachelorette"). For instance, certain challenges within the show are designed to encourage physical closeness, such as kissing or embracing during romantic or playful scenarios. Additionally, one of the show's hallmark features is the "fantasy suites" date, a pivotal moment later in the season where the Bachelor is given the chance to spend the night privately with each remaining contestant, fostering deeper connections and intimacy. This theme revealed a complex interplay of societal perceptions related to romance, sexuality and sexual performance in older adults. Many commenters expressed a somewhat skeptical or humorous stance towards older adults engaging in romantic and sexual relationships, with remarks that highlighted the taboo surrounding such topics with statements such as "The Golden Bachelor missed an opportunity to be sponsored by Viagra". Many users joked about the potential use of Viagra on the show, reflecting a common stereotype that associates aging with diminished sexual capability. Others, however, acknowledged the reality of older adults seeking love and intimacy, emphasizing the normalization of these desires through the show and shared hopeful remarks such as, "I hope that Golden Bachelor is still a thing when I get older because I want someone to love my husband as much as I do when I'm gone". A few comments suggested that "The Golden Bachelor" provided a refreshing portrayal of older adults navigating romance, countering the notion that their sexual lives should be dismissed or ridiculed. Users appreciated the depth of relationships portrayed, particularly Gerry's respectful reminiscence of his late wife, which resonated with those seeking meaningful connections later in life. The discussions collectively underscored the ongoing societal challenge of reconciling aging with the right to love, desire, and sexual expression, suggesting that "The Golden Bachelor" may serve as a platform to challenge ageist assumptions and inspire confidence among older adults in their romantic pursuits. One Reddit user stated:

"He's 71 and his wife passed 6 years ago, really beautiful relationship it seems like, and she always said she'd want him to find love again and his kids support him in this and encouraged him to be on the show. Just a really warm, loving take on the whole idea of finding love after losing a partner".

This comment captures the emotional depth and societal value of the show, illustrating how narratives of later-life romance can challenge prevailing ageist attitudes and affirm that love, loss, and intimacy remain meaningful at any age.

Theme 4: The convergence of ageism and sexism

The convergence of ageism and sexism became evident in the Reddit discussions surrounding “The Golden Bachelor” as many users critiqued the show’s portrayal of aging women and highlighted the influence of societal expectations on how women were represented. Comments often reflected a belief that older women, particularly those in the cast, were unfairly judged based on their appearances and perceived behaviors. Phrases like “gold digger” and “whiny crybaby” illustrated a tendency to diminish these women’s agency, framing them as desperate or overly emotional. Simultaneously, the discussions revealed underlying ageist assumptions about older men, who were often described in more forgiving terms, such as ‘adventure-seeking’ or ‘sweet grandfather’, reflecting a more lenient view toward aging men compared to aging women. This disparity underscored a gendered lens through which viewers evaluated the participants, exposing the double standards that women faced compared to their male counterparts. As users expressed their discomfort with the show’s dynamics, it became clear that both ageism and sexism were deeply intertwined in the narratives surrounding “The Golden Bachelor”, ultimately reflecting broader societal attitudes towards aging and gender. One Reddit user stated:

“I just don’t see them finding a bunch of golden bachelors for a Golden Bachelorette. Women in their 60s and 70s are on social media, are still vivacious, love having female companionship, and there are more women in that age bracket who are single due to divorce or being widowed. Men in their 60s and 70s want younger women in the 40s, 50s, or lower 60s. Many get married quite soon after being widowed or divorced. I just don’t see them sitting around the mansion laughing, sharing stories, posting on social media, and forming bonds like the women did on “The Golden Bachelor”.

This disparity highlighted a gendered lens through which viewers evaluated the participants, revealing how ageism and sexism intersect to shape perceptions. Older women were scrutinized for not fitting into traditional ideals of beauty and femininity, while older men were more readily accepted regardless of appearance. Discussions around the show often focused on the women’s efforts to appear youthful, with criticisms aimed at the use of cosmetic enhancements like Botox or dyed hair. As one commenter observed, “[s]eeing women in their 60s-70s still trying so hard not to age shows that the pressure to conform to youthfulness doesn’t disappear.”

The discussions pointed to broader societal attitudes that marginalize older women, depicting them as less valuable if they don’t conform to youthful beauty standards to appear younger.

“I watched maybe the first 20 minutes or so of “The Golden Bachelor” last night and at first I was like, how are they going to manufacture drama if all these women are mature and have lived a whole life and won’t be slighted as easily? Then I watched the carousel of women in their 60-70s come out with fake boobs, dyed hair, and Botox faces and throw themselves at this man and realized, “oh no, these women who are obsessed with not aging will be just as bad.”

This intersection of ageism and sexism not only affected how the female contestants were perceived but also reflected wider cultural biases that devalue women as they age. Overall, the show served as a lens through which these biases were exposed, underscoring the persistent double standards that shape the experiences of aging women in comparison to their male counterparts.

4. Discussion

Our analysis of Reddit posts about “The Golden Bachelor” identified four key themes reflecting complex societal attitudes toward aging, revealing both overt and subtle forms of ageism and sexism. Using Social Identity Theory as a lens, these discussions illustrate how group-based categorization and comparison shape attitudes toward older adults (Hogg et al. 1995). The discourse highlighted personal biases against older contestants, with comments ranging from explicit mockery of their physical abilities to implicit assumptions about older adults’ interests, evident in the surprise expressed by some users at their enthusiasm for reality television. These reactions suggest a pervasive stereotype that older adults are out of touch with contemporary entertainment, reinforcing ageist assumptions about their place in popular culture. This aligns with Social Identity Theory’s concept of in-group/out-group dynamics, where younger viewers and contestants represent the in-group, and older contestants are relegated to the out-group, subjected to stereotypes and biases (Hogg et al., 1995). Existing research suggests that media often portrays aging individuals as less relevant to modern cultural trends, which contributes to a broader societal narrative that views aging as a period of decline and

irrelevance (Wangler & Jansky, 2023). Studies have shown that this portrayal not only affects societal attitudes but also influences how older adults perceive themselves, often leading to internalized ageism, reduced engagement with social and cultural activities, lower self-compassion, and reduced life satisfaction (Bratt & Fagerström, 2023; Wangler & Jansky, 2023). The process of social comparison, as described in Social Identity Theory, may further perpetuate these negative self-perceptions, as older adults are measured against youth-centric cultural ideals (Hogg et al., 1995). By normalizing these ageist stereotypes, popular media reinforces the idea that aging individuals are less capable of understanding or participating in “youth-oriented” spaces, such as reality television, thereby limiting public perceptions of their interests, capabilities, and roles within society (Lee et al., 2007). Thus, shows like *The Golden Bachelor* play a role in challenging exclusionary narratives by positioning older adults within youth-dominated cultural spaces, offering an opportunity to reframe societal perceptions of aging, albeit with the risk of introducing new complexities, such as benevolent ageism, in the process.

Benevolent ageism also emerged in our study, with some users reducing contestants’ stories to simplistic or pitying views, often seeing them as endearing but “past their prime”. This framing denies older adults’ individuality and agency, subtly reinforcing the notion that aging equates to a loss of personal complexity and social relevance (Vale et al., 2020). While benevolent ageism may stem from good intent, it can lead to grave consequences such as undermining older adults’ confidence in their memory (i.e., metamemory confidence), which in turn decreases their sense of control or competence in managing their environment and life (i.e., environmental mastery) (Sublett & Bisconti, 2023). In other words, being patronized can lead older adults to doubt their memory skills, and this self-doubt may result in feeling less capable or in control overall (Sublett & Bisconti, 2023). Similarly, by portraying older adults as asexual or aromantic, we risk diminishing their confidence in forming meaningful relationships, reinforcing limiting stereotypes that ultimately constrain how they see themselves and how society values them.

Maintaining youthful appearances also surfaced in online discussions about the contestants’ hair, makeup, and cosmetic choices, underscoring the persistent expectation that women’s value and romantic/sexual appeal remain tied to their physical appearance even in later life (Kilpela et al., 2015). This reveals how ageist and sexist standards intersect, placing a disproportionate burden on older women to defy natural aging in ways not expected of their male counterparts. Notably, the ‘double standard of aging’ was coined by Susan Sontag in 1972 in reference to the phenomenon where aging is perceived and judged differently for men and women, often resulting in harsher or more negative judgments of older women compared to older men (Sontag, 1997). This double standard reflects cultural attitudes that value youthfulness more strongly in women than in men, resulting in greater societal pressure on women to maintain a youthful appearance as they age (Sontag, 1997). Sontag’s work has highlighted the intersection of ageism and sexism, revealing how cultural expectations link women’s worth to youth and physical appearance, while allowing men to age without similar social penalties (Sontag, 1997). The double standard of aging is most evident in expectations around sexual desirability, which consistently disadvantage women. Women face stricter requirements related to appearance and age to be considered “eligible” in romantic or sexual contexts (Åberg et al., 2020). This societal pressure is reflected in the show through the visible use of Botox and the absence of grey hair among female contestants, which became a frequent focus of online commentary. These expectations not only reinforce the idea that women must resist aging to remain romantically viable but also reveal deeper cultural values that continue to diminish women’s worth as they grow older.

Users’ discussions reflected a tension between stereotypical assumptions about older adults’ romantic and sexual lives and a growing appreciation for the normalization of love and intimacy in later life. While skepticism about older contestants’ sexuality was evident and possibly rooted in negative social attitudes towards sexuality in older adults (Boyacıoğlu et al., 2023), many users also expressed admiration for the show’s portrayal of meaningful relationships, challenging reductive views on older adults’ emotional and romantic capacity. This may suggest a gradual shift in cultural narratives about the sexuality and romance between older adults, from lingering biases about their capacity, to a recognition of their sexual satisfaction, functioning, and interest (von Humboldt et al., 2021).

The discussions around “*The Golden Bachelor*” serve as a lens through which to view the challenges and evolving attitudes surrounding aging, revealing a nuanced landscape where respect, mockery, admiration, and prejudice coexist. Despite various forms of ageism described above, many Reddit users responded positively to the show’s ability to normalize aging by highlighting desirability among older adults, friendships in later life,

widowhood, and the significance of grandchildren. The show even sparked calls for similar programs featuring gay older adults and middle-aged cohorts. Media narratives reflect cultural assumptions and aspirations about aging and later-life lifestyles (Ylänne, 2015). Positive portrayals of older adults in the media have the potential to challenge and reshape societal biases (Ylänne, 2015). Figure 1, presented above, demonstrates the active online engagement and conversation surrounding the show, highlighting its cultural relevance and the impact it has had in sparking discussions about aging.

Strengths & Limitations

This study's strengths include its innovative approach to exploring the public discourse surrounding aging through the lens of "The Golden Bachelor" using qualitative content analysis. By employing Social Identity Theory, the study was able to contextualize ageist and counter-ageist narratives within broader generational perspectives, offering valuable insights into how individuals engage with age-related stereotypes and social relationships in media representations. The rigorous coding process, involving multiple coders and iterative refinement of the codebook, enhances the reliability of the findings. Additionally, the comprehensive data collection strategy, covering 4,000 posts from November 2023 to June 2024, ensures a broad representation of the discourse. However, the study has some limitations. First, the absence of metadata on Reddit users' locations and other demographic factors limits the ability to generalize the findings to specific geographic or cultural contexts, despite Reddit's user base being predominantly from the United States. Additionally, while the study focuses on ageism and counter-ageism, other potential themes or nuanced discussions within the posts may have been overlooked due to the predefined coding categories. Lastly, as the study is based on publicly available posts, it is important to consider that the data may not fully represent the diversity of opinions within the broader population, as online discourse is often skewed by the types of users who engage on platforms like Reddit.

5. Conclusion & Practical Implications

"The Golden Bachelor" offers a compelling case study of how media can shape and reflect societal attitudes towards aging, revealing a complex mix of admiration, prejudice, and evolving perspectives. The positive responses from Reddit users, alongside critical discussions, suggest that while ageist and sexist biases persist, there is also a growing willingness to see older adults as capable, multi-dimensional individuals with meaningful emotional, romantic, and sexual lives. This evolving discourse highlights the potential of popular media to challenge stereotypes, especially when it normalizes older adults' participation in activities traditionally seen as "youth-oriented," such as reality television. The Golden Bachelor serves as both a reflection of and a catalyst for shifting narratives about aging. As media increasingly portrays older adults in more nuanced and positive ways, it has the potential to challenge ingrained cultural biases, promoting a more inclusive and respectful view of aging across all stages of life. By showcasing older adults participating in a reality dating show, The Golden Bachelor opened the door to reimagining their inclusion in a broader range of invigorating popular cultural spaces, from romance and adventure to cooking shows or mystery programs. Research should examine whether positive portrayals, such as those in The Golden Bachelor, have lasting effects on public perceptions of aging and age-related stereotypes over time in an effort to reduce ageism and sexism in the broader population.

Statement of Researchers

Researchers' contribution rate statement:

Alixé Ménard: Conceptualization, data curation, methodology, project administration, investigation, writing- original draft preparation. **Alison L. Chasteen:** Conceptualization, formal analysis, writing- review and editing, investigation, validation. **Mateja van Gameren:** Formal analysis, writing- review and editing, investigation. **Nefissa Bedri:** Formal analysis, writing- review and editing, investigation. **Michelle Yang:** Formal analysis, writing- review and editing, investigation. **Christopher Belanger:** Software, writing- review and editing. **Sarah Fraser:** Conceptualization, supervision, methodology, project administration, writing- review and editing, investigation, validation.

Conflict statement:

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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Appendix 1. Codebook.

Exclude			Examples
CODE		DEFINITION	EX.
0	Irrelevant	Unclear/irrelevant (e.g., does not answer the research question; not enough context, etc.)	
Include			
Discrimination			
1	Personal or internalized ageism	Self-directed ageism: Older adults may internalize negative stereotypes about aging, leading to diminished self-esteem, self-efficacy, and a sense of worthlessness.	I can't believe he's trying to find love at his age. Isn't he too old for this kind of show? I feel like I'm past my prime for things like this too.
2	Intentional (explicit) or imperialist ageism	Practices that are carried out with the knowledge that they are discriminatory on the basis of older age / Imposing values and priorities from one age group onto another age group. "Act your age" (prescriptive ageism) NOTE: If the comment is intentionally ageist towards younger adults, please use the code "2(Y)".	Why is there even a show like The Golden Bachelor? Who wants to watch a bunch of old people trying to date?
3	Unintentional (implicit) ageism	Practices that are carried out without the knowledge that they are discriminatory on the basis of older age. NOTE: If the comment is unintentionally ageist towards younger adults, please use the code "3(Y)".	It's nice that they have activities suited for older people. They probably can't handle anything too intense. It's great to see older people getting out there and being active for their age.
4	Benevolent ageism	Involves seemingly positive stereotypes or attitudes towards older adults that, despite being well-intentioned, still contribute to the marginalization or infantilization of older individuals (e.g., "cute". "wholesome", "sweet grandpa").	It's so heartwarming to see older people still believing in love. Isn't it just adorable?

5	Gendered ageism	Disparities in age expectations between men and women.	The Golden Bachelor is great, but I bet they'd never do The Golden Bachelorette. No one wants to watch an older woman date.
6	Sexism	Sexist comments directed towards the women OR men on the show: ex. superiority of men over women (i.e., complementary gender differentiation); negative stereotyping (i.e., hostile sexism); paternalism or the purity of women (i.e., benevolent sexism); etc. For more information visit: Sexism Inventory . NOTE: If the comment is sexist towards men, please use the code "6(M)".	Maybe the women selected by the men on the show are supposed to be inferior or submissive looking . They should also know how to make a good sandwich! The men need to be protectors. This Gerry guy won't stop crying!!
7	Counter ageism/age inclusion	Comments made that counter ageist rhetoric, encouraging or normalizing aging / heterogeneity of aging (e.g., widowhood, wrinkles, etc)	It's nice to see older people getting a chance to date on TV. Usually, that's something for the younger crowd. Why should dating be limited by age? Everyone deserves the chance to find love, regardless of how old they are.
Romance, relationships & sexuality			
8A	Sexuality-positive	Positive reactions to sexuality in later life; nice to see sex being normalized among older adults, etc.	I think it's beautiful that we get to see Gerry and Theresa have a romantic night in the fantasy suite. It's nice to see love, romance and sexuality among an older population on tv. Let's normalize it!
8B	Sexuality-negative	Comments pertaining to erectile dysfunction (ED), viagra, diapers as a means to devalue the participants' sexuality, sexuality as being "gross" in older adults, etc.	I'm surprised the show isn't sponsored by Viagra! The night in the fantasy suite may be short lived... Is the show sponsored by Depends? It certainly should be!
Comments about the participants' appearances			
9A	Appearances-women	General comments about the appearances of the women on the show or of female viewers (e.g., Botox, hair, wrinkles, etc.). NOTE: Can be positive or negative. However, consider how the post fits under "ageism" or "sexuality" first.	The ladies on The Golden Bachelor are fabulous! Beautiful women! Makes me excited to age.
9B	Appearances-men	General comments about appearances of the men on the show (Gerry or the host, etc.) or of male viewers. NOTE: Can be positive or negative. However, consider how the post fits under "ageism" or "sexuality" first.	It's nice to see Gerry in all his glory with hearing aids! Showing that the body changes with age - including our hearing. He's very handsome!
Positive comments			
10A	Positive-women	Positive reactions to the women on the show.	I came for the love but stayed for the women! I can't wait to see them on reboots and maybe other shows!

10B	Positive-men	Positive reactions to the men on the show.	I love Gerry. He seems so genuine.
10C	Positive-show	Positive reactions to the show or ads about the show	I hope that in 2024 we get another The Golden Bachelor or The Golden Bachelorette! I doubt Joey's season can bring this infectious chaotic energy.
Negative comments			
11A	Negative-Gerry	Negative reactions to the Golden Bachelor, Gerry.	I am not a fan of Gerry. I knew he was too good to be true!
11B	Negative-show	Negative reactions to the show or ads about the show.	The Golden Bachelor ads are so annoying! Not interested in the show at all! Clearly BN is desperate at this point.