

# Going Gray, Failure to Hire, and the Ick Factor: Analyzing How Older Bloggers Talk about Ageism

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## ABSTRACT

Ageism is a pervasive, and often invisible, form of discrimination. Though it can affect people of all ages, older adults in particular face age-related stereotypes and bias in their everyday lives. In this paper, we describe the ways in which older bloggers articulate a collective narrative on ageism as it appears in their lives, develop a community with anti-ageist interests, and discuss strategies to navigate and change societal views and institutions. Bloggers criticize stereotypical notions that focus exclusively on losses that occur with age and advocate a view that takes into account the complexity and positive aspects of older adulthood. This paper contributes a unique case of online collective action among older adults while drawing on their online discourse as a way of understanding what ageism means for CSCW.

## Author Keywords

Ageism; older adults; blogging; collective action.

## ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper concerns the issue of ageism as told through the voices of older adults:

*"I learned years ago not to allow myself to miss out on things because of my age. If young people try to put me down, I look them straight in the eye and say, 'You are being shitty to me because I am old.' Much ageism is unconscious and part of a scornful, scapegoating attitude toward the elderly, so I believe it is up to me to set these young pups straight."* [B115]

The term ageism was coined in the 1960s, but it is becoming a more salient issue in the United States as well as other countries. The issue of ageism is a timely topic given the global demographic shift characterized by a dramatic

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increase in the proportion of older individuals compared to younger people [76]. Researchers in CSCW and HCI, however, have only recently begun to recognize the issue of stereotypes and myths about older adults [28,72]. We argue that the lack of attention on ageism poses two significant gaps in our current understanding of technology in older people's lives.

First, we know relatively little about whether and how older people are engaging in social movements in online spaces, particularly as growing numbers of older people are becoming active online [58]. Conventional narratives of generational differences in socio-political engagement view older adults as protesting in the streets and getting out to vote while being relatively silent online compared to their younger counterparts [59,78]. This echoes narratives that see older adults as passive and disinterested in technology that pervade literature [28,30,72], which ultimately perpetuate ageist stereotypes. Understanding how older people engage in social and political discourse online, particularly around the issue of ageism, challenges these narratives and reveals new forms of online participation among older adults.

Second, prior work tends to focus on the role of technology in particular facets of older adulthood, such as new systems for staying socially connected [9,19,24,73], technologies for medication management [39,41,54], and making technology accessible [37,57]. As Vines et al [72] articulate, we often inadvertently problematize aging as something to be 'solved' through technology. This has artificially constrained the types of issues that researchers seek to study. More importantly, without foregrounding ageism, we risk continuing to inscribe values and positions in our research agenda that neglect the growth, creativity, and development that occurs in older adulthood [12,61].

This paper helps bridge these gaps through a study of older adult bloggers. We analyze over 12 years of blog posts by 189 older bloggers to understand the ways in which these individuals talk about ageism. Our analysis contributes a case of how their public discourse develops and elaborates a *collective action frame* for ageism. This notion of *framing* derives from Goffman [32] and has been widely adopted within the literature on social movements [8] and within CSCW (e.g., [25,40]). Framing is an active process of meaning construction involving the generation of interpretive positions (e.g., racism, feminism) that differ from and challenge existing dominant societal narratives.

With this theoretical lens, we identify ways these bloggers engage in the discursive practices of framing ageism.

The second contribution of this paper involves opening up a discussion about what ageism as a social issue means for research within CSCW, and how we can change our own research practice and direction based on older adults' views on ageism. Social justice and feminist perspectives, for example, provide lenses for understanding values motivating technology design and encourage deep involvement of community members. Ageism sheds light on the 'othering' [60] and stereotypes that can seep into our research practices. Further, reflecting on this discourse around ageism reveals the relative, individual, and subjective nature of age as well as underexplored topics of workplace discrimination, sexuality, and media bias involving older people.

### **RELATED WORK**

As a way of understanding older adults' online discourse, this paper brings together literature on ageism, the social practice of blogging, and online forms of collective action.

#### **Ageism and Its Adoption in CSCW and HCI**

The term "ageism" was coined in 1968 by Robert Butler [28] to describe the stereotyping, dehumanization, and discrimination of people based on their age. Butler explained that ageism "takes shape in stereotypes and myths, outright disdain and dislike, sarcasm and scorn, subtle avoidance and discriminatory practices in housing, employment, pension arrangements, health care, and other services." He describes the forms of abuse that older adults are subject to (e.g. physical, social, financial) and how prejudice exists in regard to older adults' ability to engage in work and sexual intimacy [14]. Ageism occurs in a range of settings, which can be enacted interpersonally (discrimination by individuals) or institutionally (a policy of an institution or organization that discriminates against older adults) [55]. Older adults experience negative outcomes when they internalize ageist messages [20,42], and a positive attitude towards aging is associated with positive health outcomes [43].

Although ageism has been recognized for several decades, researchers within CSCW and HCI have only recently begun to discuss the relevance of stereotypes of older adults to the design and study of technology. Lindley et al unpack myths about the relationships older adults desire with others [46]. Durick et al highlight and challenge myths that exist in HCI and gerontology literature about older adults, such as that they are all the same, unable to use technology, and a burden on society [28]. These stereotypes treat ageing as a 'problem' that researchers can address through technology [72]. That is, research often narrows its focus of the experience of aging to symptoms related to motor ability, memory, or loneliness as problems that can be improved through technology. Recent work has begun to counter the myth of older adults as passive consumers of technology by engaging older adults in creative activities and online sharing with family and friends [13,61,73]. This body of work collectively identifies and dispels myths and stereotypes around aging as they

appear in HCI research, but has not explicitly examined older adults' experiences with or perspectives on ageism.

#### **Community and Self-Expression through Blogging**

Recent work is becoming more mindful of age stereotypes and seeking opportunities to embrace the rich and diverse experience of older adulthood. Examples of how older adults contribute content online (e.g., [36,73]) conveys their diversity of interests and the complexity of their experience of aging. Older adults blog as a way of negotiating their changing identity around new roles in life, finding meaningful engagement post-retirement, and connecting with new, like-minded peers [12,77]. Further, blogging may be a way in which older people express their views on important but sensitive topics such as ageism [12].

Blogging can empower individuals who are marginalized by society [53] and provide an online space for self-disclosure and affiliating with like-minded others [16]. For example, individuals aiming to lose weight were empowered through blogging because of their ability to voluntarily share their experience with others with a similar goal [53]. Additionally, Chen [16] found that the need for self-disclosure and affiliation motivates some women to blog. Still other studies report the benefits of blogging among groups of people with specific health conditions, such as chronic pain [23] and cancer [18]. Blogs foster community and give voice to populations whose views may not be well represented in broader societal norms, thus strengthening the blogger's attachment to a blogging community and self-esteem [53].

#### **Social Movements and Online Interaction**

A growing body of work examines the ways in which people interact online as part of social movements, often focusing on how people use blogs and social media sites to mobilize and provide a collective voice on a range of issues including the Egyptian uprising [2,67] and Occupy Wall Street [35] as well as to articulate and deliberate local issues of community resources [21]. Al-Ani et al.'s work on the Egyptian revolution [2] describes how blogs provide a platform for articulating narratives that run counter to dominant frames of society. Other work examines how new online tools enable discursive practices associated with activism around physical harassment and abuse [25] and health promotion [56]. Taken together, this body of work examines the socio-political discourse on and through online social platforms, asserting that interaction in these online spaces creates a networked public [22,25,26] that can broaden participation in activism and support alternative forms of discourse [21]. Some work has raised questions about what constitutes meaningful social change through online activity on these platforms [17,51,62], with Gladwell [31] questioning the overstated enthusiasm of activism online without change occurring offline and whether a true social movement can be mediated by the Internet alone. The body of work examining social movements online, however, has neglected to study the involvement of the ways older adults in particular discuss social issues in online spaces [69]. Understanding this area

can help reveal the role of technology in negotiating social issues more broadly while deepening our understanding of their unique views on pressing social issues.

## **METHOD**

This paper primarily concerns ageism from the perspective of older people in online spaces. Given that blogs are a space in which older adults may feel more comfortable expressing personal viewpoints than social network sites [12], we focus our analysis on older adult bloggers. We first collected a list of publicly-available blogs written in English by older adults by searching online and snowball sampling through blogrolls that specified that they were composed of links to older adults' blogs. We identified 298 potential blogs to include in our analysis. We then manually visited each of these blogs and excluded blogs that were not (a) written by an individual age 50 or older through profile information or stated within posts (e.g., mentions a birthday milestone), and (b) primarily written by a single individual author (i.e., rather than an organization or multiple people). The majority of the blogs we analyzed are still active, although some have not been maintained recently.

During April and May 2016, we scraped 189 of these blogs, resulting in 219,654 unique posts published between 2004 and 2016. For each blog, we captured the entire post archive, including the title, date, and text of each post, but not media (images, video), post comments, or blogrolls. Five researchers read a wide sampling of the blog posts and iteratively identified a set of keywords that relate to the concept of ageism. While we could have searched only for posts that contain the terms "ageism" or "ageist", we found it important to initially include a variety of terms in order to capture posts in which older adults talk about ageism without using that term specifically. The final list of keywords included: ageism, ageist, bias, discriminate, infantilize, marginalize, myth, stereotype, trivialize (and alternate derivatives). We then identified all blog posts within our sample that had at least one of these keywords, which resulted in 4,150 blog posts.

Our process draws on analytic techniques characteristic of grounded theory involving constant comparison of data, iterative coding, and reflection on our stance as researchers in interpreting the data [15]. Starting with a random sample of 100 of these blog posts, the research team began a process of open coding by reading and discussing the posts. We began to identify the ways in which older adult bloggers talk about ageism, the contexts in which they observe ageism occurring, and the actions they take or solutions they propose to issues of ageism. Some of the initial codes included 'policy,' 'products/services', and 'workplace discrimination,' which related to the high-level theme of 'how people recognize ageism'. With these initial themes in mind, we then coded 500 randomly selected posts from the 4,150 that were identified in the keyword search (this 500 is inclusive of the initial 100 random posts, which we revisited in a second coding pass). Throughout our coding process, we

excluded false positive posts (e.g., includes the word "bias" or "discriminate" without explicitly discussing ageism). Two researchers read each post, identified whether it related to ageism, and then coded it according to our emerging themes. As part of our process, we were mindful of the perspectives that may be overrepresented or marginalized by our sampling techniques. For example, in our initial keyword search, several prominent bloggers appeared frequently in our dataset. To help ensure representation of the views of individuals who blogged less frequently about ageism, we then analyzed another random sample of 100 posts that explicitly mention "ageism" or "ageist" authored by people other than the most prominent bloggers.

Multiple researchers reviewed and discussed the data, at which point the themes were extended and revised to more robustly characterize the underlying concepts. As part of our analytic process, we began to view the concept of a collective action frame [8] as a useful theoretical lens on our data. Specifically, our iterative coding process led to the identification of four ways in which these older adults are participating in the work of framing ageism: negotiating individual views on ageism and forming a community; highlighting and critiquing ageist messaging from the outgroup; calls for action to change societal views on ageism; and sharing strategies to navigate ageism in everyday life.

## **Limitations**

When interpreting these findings, it is important to keep in mind that we draw from blogs that are public, and thus, personal viewpoints on ageism expressed on private blogs are not incorporated here. Additionally, we excluded blogs that were not written in English, and the blogs in this sample are primarily by authors located in the United States and United Kingdom. Therefore, the dominant societal view of ageism as well as the specific domains and instances ageism these bloggers describe and react to are deeply tied to their particular socio-cultural context. Conceptions of aging and older adults do appear to vary somewhat across cultures, for a variety of factors including family makeup [47] and the ways older adults participate differently in society (e.g. in paid or volunteer work [10]). Further, it is important to note that posts were written by active bloggers and technology users, which may not be representative of the broader older adult population, including many individuals who do not go online. Future work should examine the perceptions of ageism by people who do not blog and those who do not go online. Finally, we exclude additional interactions through the blog (e.g., comments, blogrolls) to limit the scope of analysis and to focus on the ways that the bloggers themselves talk about ageism. In prior interviews [12] older bloggers often described deleting comments that went against the tone of their blog, including comments that have ageist views, making it challenging to gain a full picture of the interactions these individuals have through their blogs. Nonetheless, excluding post comments and blogrolls from

analysis limits our understanding of the interactions between bloggers and how this community formed.

## RESULTS

In social movements, framing is described as the way individuals collectively construct a particular meaning and reality in order to give legitimacy to a movement and inspire action [8]. Below, we describe the ways these bloggers negotiate and articulate the frame of ageism by collecting and aligning events and experiences to articulate a unifying vision that inspires and legitimizes action.

### Negotiating Individual Views and Forming Community

Blogging is a way in which these older adults share their own experience with ageism and reflect on societal norms around ageism. Prior work suggests older people blog as part of negotiating their identity in this phase of life specific to retirement and becoming a grandparent [12], and we find that part of the framing process involves constructing one's identity as an older person in the context of ageism [65]. Bloggers are identifying and articulating their own experience in older adulthood, including how ageist messages underlie their self-perception, and how they perceive themselves in relation to other people around their age. Bloggers described becoming aware of the presence of ageism in their own views and those of other older adults, making comparisons based on chronological age and generational stereotypes.

*"In an ageist culture the next division is the old vis a vis the older. Personally I feel it in my seventies from women in their sixties. I sense its their fear about the future. Very understandable with so much media emphasis on bad news about the elderly."* [B14]

*"If you are a 50 plusser, do you bristle at being called old? And if you are old, how do you feel about the old-old? I mean, 73 isn't 86, right?"* [B102]

Bloggers explain that many older adults appear to have internalized ageist messages that prize youth and disparage signs of growing older. They describe coming to terms with being older and advocate for others to do the same, including advocating for being truthful about one's age:

*"Too long has becoming gray (in the larger sense of growing older) been something to avoid at all costs ... all of those hair coloring treatments and anti-aging creams, and even botox and plastic surgery. How much healthier to be gray and proud of it and all of the experience and wisdom it implies. Go Gray! [B140]"*

*"How are young people going to get past the cultural myths about old people if we don't show them? ... one [way] is be real about the number of years we have lived. If we lie about our age, we are telling our children and other young people that it is shameful to grow old..."* [B297]

People engage in identity construction at an individual and collective level through the course of identity talk within frame articulation [38], and the framing process is one way

in which individual and collective identities are brought into alignment [8]. With respect to collective identity, these individuals are also forming and labeling their community. Specifically, bloggers began referring to their own group as the "elderblogger" community. The development and naming of this collective identity is in part what constitutes the formation of a networked public [11,22,26]. As part of this, bloggers point to a "*leader of the 'elderblogger' community,*" particularly on issues of aging, and frequently mentioned their "fearless leader" (identified as B297, the author of the Time Goes By blog) [B14].

*"I don't know anyone who has documented the negative and prejudicial attitudes about aging better than [B297]."* [B140]

*"...blogging is about community, about finding a voice for yourself in that community and in [B297's] case becoming a voice for that community. Single handedly it seems she has ferretted out all those 'elderbloggers' who write from what must be a huge accumulated weight of experience, about the things that matter."* [B207]

*"I have gathered a few blogs and websites to share with you. First, please visit [B297's] fabulous blog about aging and ageism, her travels... and sundry topics."* [B138]

This blogger (B297) curates a list of other older adult bloggers who talk about the experience of aging and sometimes ageism, using 50 as the minimum age for a blogger to be included in her list. This individual has also blogged about news stories and media that cover the elderblogger community, further solidifying their collective identity. She also provides an elderblogger stamp that bloggers who she identifies through her blogroll can post as a blog badge on their site. By posting this badge on their site, bloggers could identify as a member of the ingroup as well as potentially their alignment with this blogger's orientation towards anti-ageism views. Confirming this collective identity and stance on ageism, one blogger wrote, "*The Elder-blogging community (particularly in the States) has been getting in a state about ageism on the net,*" [B283].

Bloggers mention regularly reading B297's blog Time Goes By, post responses, and state agreement with many of her ideas. B297 demonstrates an awareness of this community, writing:

*"... it is astounding to me that now, three-plus years later, readership is as large as it is and continues to grow almost daily... Sometimes I can hardly believe how lucky Time Goes By is to have such a large community of smart, wise, perceptive and often, funny people who take seriously what is written here and contribute so much to the conversation"*

As part of this conversation in the elderblogger community, many individuals express a view of aging as a normal and natural process, which inevitably involves certain changes. They acknowledge losses that are overemphasized in most discussions of aging and highlight personal experiences and

research articles that describe positive aspects of aging (e.g., wisdom, increased happiness). A contested view within the ingroup involves the notion of ‘successful aging’. Successful aging emphasizes ‘optimal’ aging under the ideal conditions [63]. Resonating with the perspective of successful aging, some bloggers shared examples of healthy, active, working adults as a way to push back against ageist stereotypes:

*“My family members have been and continue to be amazing achievers in life, but also in retirement... [one is] a retired professor, continued to work in the academic setting well past her 70th birthday...and was one of the super-volunteers in the Obama Presidential campaign... If you judge by appearances, what all of these people have in common is gray hair... But when you speak with them... they demonstrate intellectual curiosity, confidence, eagerness to learn new things, a keen desire to make the world a better place, and a love of interacting with others.”* [B24].

Though statements praising active and engaged older adults are empowering and expressive of the diversity of older individuals, others within this blogging community assert that such messages assume a ‘right’ way to age. Implicit in this argument is that those who do not enjoy staying active, learning new things, or being social are not aging the ‘right’ way; consequently, those who do not have the resources or ability to engage in these activities are further marginalized by the notion of successful aging [49]. One blogger wrote:

*“... we age at dramatically different rates and it is not a 50-year-old’s fault if he can’t run a marathon anymore while another - sometimes an 80-year-old - can... If this attitude is allowed to grow and take hold... ageism [will] increase. Those elders who are lucky enough to show little decline will be held up as paragon... those who slow down will be ignored and when not, they will become examples of wrong thinking who are to blame for their arthritis, heart disease, diabetes, stroke, etc.”* [B297]

These bloggers are all contributing to the larger ageism frame but are negotiating how successful aging fits into this view. As with this instance of bloggers discussing successful aging, social movements often involve contested processes such as internal frame disputes in which members of the ingroup must sort out different interpretations of an issue [8].

### **Articulating a Collective Narrative of Ageism**

Collectively, these older adults are using their blog as a platform to articulate instances of ageism within society and call attention to the ubiquity of ageism, noting that ageism is so pervasive and embedded in society that many people do not even realize it exists. As part of articulating their position, these bloggers explain how ageism intersects with other experiences of discrimination, particularly sexism and able-ism. One blogger noted that older male bloggers were taken much more seriously than older female bloggers, who were dismissed and excluded even by the “radicals who should ‘know better’,” [B66]. Bloggers connected their views on ageism with other social movement frames, such as

sexism and disability rights, and positioned age discrimination alongside social issues of gender, race, religion, and sexual orientation.

*“In today’s socially aware era, when diversity and egalitarian values have become an obsession of public discourse, very few groups and classes remain amenable to ridicule... Even in these hyper-vigilant times, one class of citizen still remains a favored ironic target of advertisers, a proverbial butt of the joke: our oldest old...”* [B41]

*“Why do some otherwise progressive, intelligent, articulate, inclusive, kind-, open- and generous-hearted religious bloggers and blog commenters who would not be caught dead engaging in classist, racist, (hetero)sexist, ethnicist, sizist, ageist or otherwise -isty language feel that it is perfectly fine to traffic in generalities about ‘baby boomers’?”* [B209]

*“Somehow, age has not entered that sacrosanct category of race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and all the other social justice status-labels.”* [B206]

Several bloggers brought up a test to see if something was ageist: replace the term referring to the older person with a term referring to a woman or someone of another group recognized as facing discrimination. If the sentence would be unacceptable, then it was not acceptable when it had referred to an older adult. This rhetorical strategy extends other accepted social movement frames (e.g., sexism, racism) to help pinpoint instances of ageism and validate why these instances are a form of discrimination.

A central aspect of developing a collective action frame involves the discursive practice of articulating shared experiences and events so that they form a coherent and compelling narrative [8]. Within this narrative, people share what are termed “stock” stories from the dominant group and “concealed” stories, which counter stock stories and are about how people have resisted and challenged dominant views [7]. Concealed stories offer ways to interrupt the status quo to work for change and call out those who are responsible [8]. In our analysis, we find that blogging provides a conversational space [2] for bringing together these stories and experiences in a way that offers a new interpretation or vantage point on aging specifically. These bloggers are identifying instances of ageism within a myriad of contexts, including the workplace, health care system, media, news, advertising, and even their own families.

Very commonly, these bloggers spoke about their own experiences facing age discrimination in the workplace, the difficulties they faced finding new jobs, and how interviews are set up to highlight the strengths of younger adults. This was attributed to companies having a “discriminatory desire to create a more youthful image,” [B8]. One person wrote, “Amongst all the talk of ending age discrimination in the workplace, as you get older the job you have is the only job you can expect,” [B91]. While laws exist in the US to prohibit age discrimination in the workplace [48], some

bloggers explain that age discrimination is “*very challenging to prove*,” [B102]. As an example of a concealed story, one blogger explained: “*There were repeated indications that my age, then 63, was a hindrance, but it is the hardest kind of ageism to prove - ‘failure to hire’...*” [B297]

Bloggers call attention to how age-related stigma appears in societal discussions of intimate relationships and sex in older adulthood. One blogger who wrote frequently about sex and aging termed this stigma the “*ick factor*,” which she defined as “*society’s view of aging women as either sexless or ludicrous and pathetic if they see themselves as sexy*” [B30]. Bloggers highlight movies and books that include older people as complex and full characters, including in intimate contexts. One blogger had a guest post from someone who wrote erotic fiction featuring older people and explained:

*“The ‘scientific’ journalistic report, which tends to focus on social and physical problems... promiscuity in the young and sexual boredom or dysfunction for older married couples... It’s probably no surprise that an erotic writer is attracted to the forbidden fantasies of her sexuality being seen and accepted by others...”* [Guest post on B30].

Bloggers frequently call out ageist media by sharing links to advertisements. Bloggers also critique certain products or services as being rife with ageist stereotypes and infantilizing, such as senior centers that offer only very stereotypical activities. Some blog about entire industries that inherently express ageist views, such as the cosmetic industry, which promotes youthfulness and talks about physical manifestations of aging such as wrinkles as something to be dreaded and masked or eliminated. Bloggers are also pointing out other instances in which products and advertising completely neglect older people, but for which older individuals would comprise a considerable market.

*“Ageism has held publishers back largely because of advertisers’ unwillingness to buy print ads in media associating their brands with adults in middle age and beyond... [This] article reinforces for about the 1000th time... ‘the 50-plus crowd now controls 50% of all U.S. discretionary income.’”* [B41]

These bloggers often analyze how the press stereotypes and marginalizes older people. Bloggers note that media may not reflect the actual opinions of younger people:

*“Oh, we old ladies who knit are really, really tired of being denigrated by publishers and media in their efforts to make knitting more palatable to 20 and 30-somethings. Just when, yours truly, clicking needles since the 1940s, when I’m so pleased by... the enthusiasm of younger women and men about the craft, THOSE PEOPLE decide to use “grandma” as a negative reference point... ‘Long viewed as the domain of grandmothers, needlework has undergone an image makeover...’... Most of the time I’ve discovered that knitters themselves are not caught up in the narrow age-skewed notions of the print media folks...”* [B14]

Ageism also exists within interpersonal interactions, such as in older adults’ own families in how their children may disregard the financial will of an older person or even steal from them – both of which are forms of elder abuse [1]. When older adults grant power of attorney to loved ones, they can become vulnerable to opportunistic family members who feel entitled to the finances they may eventually inherit. For older adults who depend on others to manage their finances, reporting and even detecting financial abuse can be difficult. Bloggers wrote about how others, even family members, sometimes do not speak to older adults in a “*normal voice*” [B24] and instead are dismissive or use infantilizing language or tones.

These bloggers are also articulating the ways in which policy can discriminate against older people, such as voter ID laws. B297 explains that older adults without a driver’s license may face “*almost insurmountable barriers*” going to the DMV to obtain an ID, as they will not be able to drive themselves. Bloggers discuss social security, which is designed to provide benefits to retired and unemployed individuals. They call out the view of social security weighing down the country as ageist, as this view implies that living long is resented as an economic burden.

Finally, bloggers raise the issue of ageism in research. Discussing interpretations of findings in a particular study, one person found “*ageist beliefs that could not help but affect the study and its interpretation by the researchers...*” and that because of this she “*can’t trust the study*,” [B297]. Additionally, these bloggers share research that does not promote ageist ideas, such as a story debunking myths that people get sadder as they age.

Though instances of ageism are clear to bloggers in many settings, they raise certain issues that were unclear cases as a way of discussing and negotiating the framing of ageism, such as whether data security efforts by companies are “*rooted in the same ageism*” [B127] and whether traffic signs alerting drivers to slow down for elders are “*ageist and not representative of today’s old people*,” [B297].

### **Taking Action and Discussing Change**

Blogging is one way in which these older adults are taking action against ageism and discussing change. The most salient way in which bloggers take action through their blogging is by calling attention to instances of ageism and raising awareness of age discrimination through their blog posts. One wrote, “*Raising public awareness is the main aim of this blog*” [B30], and another said, “*I’ve been arguing against ageist myths since I began my blog*” [B207]. They speak of the importance of extending the reach of their blogs to younger adults, with B14 asking, “*Could Elderbloggers figure out a way to get younger bloggers to read at least one blog by someone over 55 on a regular basis?*”

Bloggers are also taking action by increasing the visibility of their network of like-minded individuals by referring readers to other older adults who speak or write about ageism. They

refer to thought leaders who take a stand against ageism, particularly Robert Butler and his body of work. Further, they involved other individuals who spoke about ageism by attaching links to their posts (particularly to B297's posts), blogs, or books, often with commentary. Bloggers publish guest posts from other bloggers and interviews with these individuals, which helps spread this collective voice to their own readers. Making their own and others experiences with ageism visible to the public is an important step in their efforts to stop ageism. Indeed, several bloggers wrote about the idea that increased awareness will lead to change and discussed taking things they had learned through reading other older adults' blogs and then spreading awareness of ageist instances to others in their offline or off-blog life.

*"Yes, it was very very annoying to read I've aged out of internet service at 73... This was the report from Time Goes By [B297's blog] earlier this week. Elderbloggers known and unknown to me, visited the source of this bizarre news here and left comments... What to do? Make this ageist happening a centerpiece of conversations. Told a friend at lunch on Tuesday, forwarded it to others."* [B14]

In addition to raising awareness of ageism through blogging, these individuals wrote about the importance of using their blog as a platform for specifying the types of language and acceptance they desire. Bloggers are demarcating words that are appropriate to use to refer to older adults. They rail against the term "grandma" or "grandpa" to refer to an older adult outside of a familial context as being "ageist and condescending" [B30]. Others discuss rejecting the "s-word" (senior) [B14]. Another blogger shared a resource on appropriate language to use for individuals in care settings, such as "resident" rather than "patient" and "neighborhood" instead of "ward". Bloggers explain that seemingly innocent language contributes directly to age discrimination.

*"All these 'innocent' little jokes and innuendoes and othering leads to abuse... You're telling the whole world out there that all elders are feeble, simple and stupid and can't take care of themselves. And those 'funny' jokes reinforce that perception... giving those who 'care' for them the right to take over their lives, their possessions, their bank accounts, etc..."* [B202]

*"... people have heard ageist language all their lives, and when no one objected, when no one ever said, 'This is wrong,' it entered their belief system. Then the notion that elders are lesser beings became so ordinary, so deeply held, so ingrained, they don't even recognize its hatefulness... It is the constant denigration of elders in circumstances as small as this little sitcom, in all forms of media, that upholds and preserves age bias as an acceptable cultural norm."* [B297]

Although bloggers are calling for change in society more broadly, they place responsibility on the older adult community to object to ageist language and to refrain from making ageist jokes or perpetuating ageist myths, as they saw this discourse as being directly responsible for serious issues

of age discrimination. Part of this involves taking a stand through their participation in this online community.

*"Five years ago, when I first wrote about the extreme distaste that some opinion leaders harbor for Boomers, there wasn't much awareness or concern among Boomers. As myriad critics keep flinging their barbs, however, I sincerely hope that a greater number of those opposed to ageism and generational stereotyping will help challenge the bashers as they surface. It's clearly our final social revolution..."* [B41]

They spoke about using non-disparaging language and providing feedback to others who use ageist language as an important step in changing societal views of older adults.

*"I feel a personal responsibility to sharpen my senses, attune myself to the nuances of words, to carefully listen to what others say, to be aware when I encounter demeaning words about any group, including aged and older people. I also believe, whenever possible, making others aware of the significance of what they are saying, will gradually serve over time to increase the possibility a more positive view of older Americans will prevail."* [B16]

Bloggers write about speaking out against those responsible for ageist media such as television shows and newspapers. Several posted open letters, one to a newspaper columnist who had written a column called "Move along, you Boomers, what have you truly done?" These bloggers also discuss ways to push back against ageist policies and institutions that stereotype and marginalize them. And, bloggers identifying as Boomers speak about their large disposable income and how they will use it to shape the type of products and the ways they are marketed towards them. One blogger explained that as they age, Boomer celebrities will be:

*"demonstrative in their support of media and advertisers that celebrate, rather than shun, the 50+ lifestage. They will buy magazines at newsstands and through subscriptions that resonate around their evolving, active lifestyles..."* [B41]

These individuals also discuss the need for changing policies around voter ID laws, as well as creating laws and statutes that ensure the protection of older people as a vulnerable group the way other groups are protected legally from discrimination. Common across many of these calls for change is a rally for older people to be involved more centrally in these discussions, which has implications for how both industry and academic research involves older people. One blogger reposted the following comment from an article where a company had younger designers simulate various aspects of aging during an "empathy session":

*"Didn't it occur to you how stupid it was for GE and others to put these 'old' suits on 25 year olds when there are real baby boomers 62 and younger as well as some very sharp 70 year old people who have not only decades of experience, a ton of degrees that actually were hard to get and are sharp as a tack who would still love to work but because of ageism can't even get a job at Taco Bell with a PhD (?)"* [B7]

Another blogger explained that even though others may have the interest of older adults in mind, “I think we need as much as possible to speak for ourselves” [Guest post on B297]. Issues of power dynamics between researchers and researched are important here [71], and we return to this issue in the discussion section.

### **Sharing Strategies for Navigating Ageism**

Although these older adults are using their blog and the community of like-minded bloggers to recommend and take action on issues of ageism, some are also discussing and sharing resources on ways to successfully navigate the existing ageist views embedded into society. For example, bloggers are posting original content and curating external resources on how to survive in the workplace and get hired, often marking age 50 as a point at which people start to face age discrimination in the workplace:

*“I get many emails from 50 plussers who believe that they have fallen prey to ageism... youth [often] wins simply because it is appealing, less expensive and more malleable as a employee. So it means you have to be that much more resourceful than the average job seeker. Get your resume posted everywhere you can so you can be seen. Network like crazy. Do your research and target companies that interest you.... [links to career resources]”* [B102]

These tips are given to the ingroup as to how to “get in” and then “fit in” in workplaces that prize youthfulness. But they also share examples when this went wrong:

*“Behavior that served me well in my career back in the day... doesn't serve me at all in these post-menopause years... Take, for example, the get-acquainted meeting with the new boss last year. I brought along a resume and told her I was eager to ‘take on new challenges.’ ... [She] interpreted my desire to learn something new as dissatisfaction with my current job... I've begun to speculate that elders in the workplace are expected to behave differently than young people, different from even our younger selves...”* [Guest post on B297]

Another way these bloggers navigate ageism is by reducing its presence in their online lives. One blogger explained that, though she realized it might lead to reduced awareness of ageism, she was interested in reducing the presence of ageism by removing it from what she sees online:

*“I am glad, however, that Facebook has added a function that allows users to flag offensive ads, which I did with the ad that began, ‘Hey Grandma,’ so they will get the message! I am well aware of ageism and will keep this reality in mind even as I edit it out of my Internet life!”* [B115]

While blogging is a conversation space for discussing issues of ageism, the ways in which readers interpret and react to these experiences publicly through comments can have a damaging effect. One blogger had a particular experience of a coordinated effort of individuals to counter her anti-ageist message about intimacy in older adulthood:

*“I apologize profusely to any readers who were subjected to the dozens of nasty and profane comments... The listeners [of a radio show] apparently found the idea of joyful senior sex icky and set out to trash ‘the old lady sex blog,’ as they called it, by posting more than 40 obscene, racist, sexist, ageist, offensive messages... We might discuss their fears of aging and sexuality, and their need to keep us as the ‘other’... I've changed my settings so that now I'll moderate all comments before they appear.”* [B30]

Notably, most bloggers did not mention experiencing ageism through comments on their blogs (starkly in contrast to the pervasiveness of ageism in their offline and other online activities), yet this blogger experienced a clash between her anti-ageism stance and the dominant view of older adult sexuality as ‘icky,’ rather than natural and joyful. This blogger chose to moderate comments as a way of navigating (and ultimately eliminating) ageism on her site. Beyond this, we learned of one other blogger who met backlash for her postings from her own family members that she decided to start a new (and initially password-protected) blog where she could openly discuss her experience as an older adult.

In contrast to sharing ways for older adults to change to better fit into society or work around ageism, some of these bloggers feel that this sort of adaption or fitting in described above is giving in to ageism and placing all the responsibility on the older adult to change rather than attempting to repair an ageist society. B297 commented on how this occurs in the context of job discrimination:

*“...the most infuriating stroke is the advice givers' reversal of responsibility in hiring... they tacitly accept age discrimination as the norm... It is not the job applicant's responsibility to fool employers into thinking he or she is young... But it is the employer's responsibility to hire fairly... Isn't it time the blame for age discrimination is placed where it belongs and something is done about it?”*

Thus, this community of bloggers is still negotiating the tension between perspectives that encourage the individual to change to fit in versus pointing to ageism as a systemic problem that requires institutional and societal change.

### **DISCUSSION**

Our findings reveal that older adults are conveying their experiences of ageism through blogging, which provides an important space for making these narratives visible. Here, we discuss this unique case of collective action and reflect on the ways older adults are using blogging technology to form collective narratives online. Additionally, we articulate a research agenda for CSCW that recognizes ageism as a critical social issue. Turning our research focus towards ageism as a social issue suggests new ways to study and design technologies involving older people, such as more deeply understanding the views of older adults and attending to the ways our own views of older people and attitudes towards aging become embedded in and are perpetuated by the technologies that we create.



### **Learning from a Case of Collective Action**

This paper contributes an analysis of the work of collective action framing among older adults, through which we challenge contemporary narratives of generational differences in modes of civic and political engagement. Specifically, Putnam [59] depicts declining civic life in that young Americans are not embracing their parents' and grandparent's modes of civic engagement. In contrast, Zukin et al [78] assert that younger generations have not abandoned civic and political engagement but instead are participating through new modes of technology-mediated engagement. Indeed, a growing literature within CSCW examines the social and political engagement on online platforms that are popular among younger demographics (e.g. Facebook, Twitter) [32,46,63]. Work in the civic engagement sphere (e.g., [59,78]) focuses on the emerging online practices of younger generations, while the practices of older adults are largely conceived of as distinct from online social and political action. Through this particular case of older adult bloggers framing ageism, we provide a counter example of how older generations are engaging in collective action through online technology.

We observe how the 'elderblogger' community forms a networked public [22,26], which emerges in part when affected individuals form a collective identity distinctive enough to require recognition and a name. These bloggers are using blogging to create and disseminate alternative content and counter-discourses as part of this networked public [70]. They are curating and recommending important information, which is central to social movements [67]. Hence, this example not only demonstrates that older people are indeed participating in socially oriented online discourse but also helps to understand how these individuals engage in these discursive practices as part of frame articulation work [21,25], expressing solidarity [50,66–68], and developing counternarratives [2,50].

Specific to this particular case of collective action, we can view these individuals' blogging practices as challenging their 'invisibility' in society. The anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff uses the term 'death by invisibility' to explain the death of an 86-year-old who was run over by a cyclist who said "I didn't see her" in his defense. When members of the Senior Center protested, Myerhoff explained that they had moved from invisibility into the 'arena of visibility' ([52], cited in [74]). Similarly, through blogging, these individuals are moving their voices into the 'arena of visibility': they are making ageism visible by unpacking events and media (e.g., ads, news stories, movies) that have underlying messages of age bias or discrimination, calling attention to the pervasive and ubiquitous nature of ageism, and connecting diverse reflections and experiences into a cohesive narrative.

Yet, the ways in which these individuals achieve this is inherently tied to the affordances of blogging. While younger people who perceive political differences with their friends tend to avoid Facebook as a discussion platform [33], older

individuals may also turn to blogs rather than other social media platforms, particularly when discussion involves sensitive or taboo topics [12]. Being able to target specific audiences around a designated theme is likely one appeal of blogs as a conversational space, or a place in which new ideas and ideology can exist and take on new meanings. In fact, we learned of one instance in which a blogger needed a space that was distinctly separate from her family to fully express her views. Blogging may also foster an attractive conversational space because it supports composition and revision before posting and depth of thought through long-form writing, which prior work suggests is attractive to some older people who contribute content online [12]. The development of a conversational space is an important way social movements organize and achieve their goals [2], and blogs are at least one of the spaces in which older adults engage in the work of ageism frame development. Future studies should examine whether similar engagement among older people exists in other online spaces (e.g. Facebook, Twitter), which older demographics are using in greater numbers [58], and how their interactions on these platforms differ based on the affordances of these technologies [21,34]. For example, in this study, bloggers used blogrolls to link to other elderbloggers and the 'elderblogger' stamp to signify belonging to this group. Are there ways older adults are indicating affiliation with an ingroup on other platforms using different affordances? Older bloggers often remove inflammatory comments on their blog to preserve a safe space for discussion [12], and we learned of one blogger who began moderating comments in response to a coordinated onslaught of negative comments. Comment moderation is one way these individuals create a safe conversational space, but how might they perform similar actions on social media platforms with other mechanisms for moderating discourse?

### **A Research Agenda for CSCW**

While this instance of collective action is instructive, the more significant contribution here is the foregrounding of ageism as an important social issue for CSCW and HCI scholarship. Orienting towards and deconstructing social issues is a central aspect of social justice work [27], Feminist HCI [5,6], anti-oppressive design [64], and critical design [4]. These approaches share an emphasis on changing the status quo, foregrounding ethics, and cultivating participatory involvement. Our analysis resonates with this body of work in ways that point to future work. First, older adult bloggers encounter ageism as it is compounded by and intersects with other experiences, such as sexism and ableism. Although our analysis focuses on the frame articulation work older bloggers are performing, subsequent studies should examine intersectionality of ageism, sexism, ableism, and other social issues. The perspective of Feminist HCI is likely to provide a productive analytic lens [5,6]. Second, as researchers we recognize ageism as another instance of social injustice that can be addressed through Social Justice oriented design [27], providing a critical perspective as the field continues designing for older people.

Researchers have recognized the dangers of designing ‘for’ a population, which include ‘othering’ individuals and designing based on researchers’ conception of what is needed [72]. As older adults are both ‘othered’ and subjected to stereotypes that are likely held by even well-meaning researchers, it is particularly important to allow older adults themselves to actively participate in “setting the agenda” for research [6]. We suggest one way of doing so is to use blogs or other online discourse to learn about older adults’ experiences and calls for action. Traditional methods to understand needs (e.g., interviews, participatory design workshops) require individuals to quickly come up with answers rather than articulate positions emerging over time in dialogue with like-minded others. In focus groups, older adults often engage in discussion with others who are unknown and alike only along the dimension of numerical age (often with a 15-20 year spread). Hence, as researchers we must be mindful of the ways in which we ‘configure participation’ [71] and how that configuration enables understanding the aging experience. Analyzing blog posts written by older adults, for example, lets us learn from a variety of individuals’ firsthand experiences with ageism and their articulations of how their experiences and perceptions align with others. This approach attends to the complexity of older adulthood, both positive and negative experiences as they occur in everyday life, and allows for a variety of perspectives to convene around topics of interest. Drawing on the importance of community among these bloggers in discussing sensitive social issues, future work should consider convening groups of familiar peers as a way of engendering deeper discussion on the experience of aging. Gathering groups of familiar or like-minded individuals makes it possible to leverage their existing rapport and past frame development and alignments – ideally creating an effective conversation space for these individuals to reflect on and react to others’ views.

Further, as a research community we can learn from this collective voice on ageism. For starters, the term “older adult” or “older person” is most accepted. Some individuals consider “senior” and “elder” to be offensive while others do not. As a research community, we typically define older adults as being age 65 or older, yet identifying as an older adult is based on life events and is culturally and socially dependent rather than deriving only from chronological age [75]. The accepted definition of ‘older adult’ would miss that many individuals describe the age of 50 as when workers begin to experience age discrimination, and thus may begin to identify with the ingroup. Therefore, it may be appropriate in some contexts to put less emphasis on chronological age and use shared experiences or interests to identify individuals to comprise a study sample. Further, researchers should consider designing for experiences across the lifespan in ways that emphasize the relative and individual nature of age rather than a fixed, pre-defined category.

Ageism also demands reflection on how the systems we create constitute ‘successful’ activity in older adulthood. One

contested viewpoint within this blogger community regards ‘successful aging’. As a research community we must be mindful of the values inherent in how we define the ‘problems’ we study, whose perspective they represent, and the ways in which we characterize successful outcomes. This aligns with recent work in HCI [4,6,27,44], which calls for researcher reflexivity in terms of how one’s own beliefs and positions influence which values are advanced and which voices are amplified. For example, focusing on helping older adults stay socially connected and physically active implicitly makes a value judgement on the importance of doing these activities in older adulthood [45]. Although this work is well-intentioned and motivated by other research showing the health related benefits of, for example, social support (e.g., [29]), our actions as researchers can inscribe and perpetuate a particular view of ‘successful’ aging. Ageism activists assert that all aging is successful; otherwise there is only death [3]. Similarly, focusing on staying socially connected and managing health conditions has left other important issues open: abuse, job discrimination, sexuality, and bias in the media are all topics that CSCW and HCI researchers have explored for other populations but not fully for older people. As we begin to explore these areas, however, we should also be mindful of whether new systems impose a position of ‘changing the individual’ or ‘changing the institution’, both of which bloggers described in their action towards ageism but imply different social and political responsibilities. Oriented towards changing the institution, researchers should consider designing technologies that help counter ageism explicitly as a valuable next step.

## CONCLUSION

Older adults are using blogs as a conversational space to negotiate individual views on ageism and participate in a community as well as highlight and critique ageist messaging from all aspects of society. Through blogging, they are calling for action to change societal views on ageism and also sharing strategies to navigate ageism in their everyday lives. From these bloggers, we can learn to focus on areas that are important to older adults but have thus far been unexamined, explore methods that capitalize on the deep reflection these bloggers are doing, and be mindful of the ways we implicitly value certain ways of aging more than others. Though ageism is pervasive, ubiquitous, and at times even invisible, we aim in this paper to provide a platform for the voices of the bloggers who are framing this important social movement.

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