Covid-19: An Exposé of Ageism in Western Culture

A Study of Senior Project

By

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Abstract:

This study focuses on the Covid-19 pandemic and how ageism contributed to how inefficiently the pandemic was handled in both America and neighboring countries. I make connections to already existing systemic social issues that implicitly reveal the maltreatment of older people in our society i.e. our hospital infrastructure and the lack of gerontology training. I emphasize how prevalent ageism is today by looking at the relationship between Covid-19 and the ageist rhetoric. My research interrogates ageism's contribution to how efficiently the pandemic was handled in both America and neighboring territories. I use content analysis of social media posts published on TikTok made before and during the pandemic. In order to elucidate the attitudes and beliefs of the 18-25 age cohort, I focus on the comments, captions and the video content itself. My goal was to garner an understanding of Gen Z's reactions and attitudes regarding the pandemic. They clearly are fully aware Covid-19 affects older people disproportionately. These TikTok revealed Gen-Z's inner thoughts and opinions regarding a pandemic, and I got additional insight through the top 10 liked comments in each video which allowed for a visual aid of what Gen-Z agreed with the most. Throughout my TikTok collection I saw how Gen-Z's most popular content and comments changed the further the pandemic progressed revealing the regret and sorrow they were experiencing as a result of not taking the pandemic seriously to begin with.

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Within Western culture the silent majority of individuals have set a blind eye to ageism, while focusing and prioritizing the dismantling of other factors plaguing our societies: racism and sexism. The mere lack of acknowledgment of the existence of ageism, outside of academia, is undeniably an example of how we have gradually abandoned our older counterparts. We

ignore their struggles, feelings and experiences. This is defined as senicide (Bloomberg, 2019), and I examine it further below. Ageism in its simplest form refers to discrimination an individual may face in society due to their older age. It has been to be the third "-ism" that prohibits social advancement (Rupp, pg. 335). During the pandemic it was evidently clear that ageism truly impeded America and other neighboring territories from successfully addressing and overcoming the pandemic.

One can argue that ageism can be the most harmful "-ism" of all due to its discrepancy and underlying existence, in contrast to its other counterparts which are easier to detect and prove as being legitimate social issues within our society. Other "-isms" such as racism have garnered national and global attention alongside protests which pushed for changes within government policies and expiring ideologies. Covid-19 was a global pandemic where both mass media outlets alongside the CDC emphasized that older adults were at a greater risk. Since ageism has been so obscure within our societies there was zero global uproar about the age discrimination that was being demonstrated by age-related policies that were ageist.

The Covid-19 influenced every infrastructure in America (similar in other neighboring territories): education, transportation, healthcare, public spaces, community support, public safety and others. The Covid-19 pandemic was the perfect stage to acknowledge how ageist our society is, and how disastrous the impacts of being a part of an ageist culture are. The most detrimental effect was clearly one's mortality. These impacts were a direct result of our mishandling of the pandemic in which older people died at disproportionately higher numbers. Had there been a pandemic that affected younger age cohorts at the same rate at which Covid-19 affected older adults, we would have seen a completely different approach to handling the pandemic. Among the 203 countries and territories which were affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, the earliest research about the Covid-19 pandemic provided by China in early January

2020 and Italy by late February 2020, revealed that older adults were deemed the highest risk age group for both mortality and health complications (Monanhan, 2020). This would later correlate with data found in the United States by early March. The overwhelming number of older adults dying as a result of contracting Covid-19 was ubiquitous in the wide array of countries that dealt with Covid-19. But approaches that were taken to handle this pandemic did not include the importance of saving these older lives. Rather, the approach taken was to abandon them: senicide, which refers to the killing of the elderly or their abandonment to death.

It was well-known and documented to the public that the most at-risk category was that of older adults. This meant that the necessary protocol to protect these individuals could have been implemented ahead of the peak of the pandemic. In Monahan's (2020) reports it was revealed that adults over age 60 presented with the worst symptoms: pneumonia, and a significantly higher mortality rate than younger individuals (Monahan, 2020).

Estimates suggested that the Covid-19 mortality rate was 15% for those over the age of 80, yet an astonishing 0% for those under the age of 10 (Ayalon, 2020). In more recent statistics provided by the CDC as of April 2022, elderly people over the age of 75 are 140 times more likely to die from Covid-19 than people in their 20s (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2022). Through these readily available statistics, we could see the clear differential outcome of a younger age cohort succumbing to the virus versus an older age cohort succumbing to the virus. During the pandemic there was evidently a loss of acknowledgement given to older adults that were dying at disastrously higher rates than their younger counterparts with the media only making them out to be the cause of Covid-19. There is no doubt that this resulted in resistance to following CDC guidelines and acknowledging the severity of the pandemic. Rather than older adults being protected, they were instead viewed as the problematic group of people who were responsible for the pandemic. This portrayal made it easier for politicians to blame our

older counterparts in our society for the pandemic, and initially gave them the task of handling it via self-sacrifice.

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared Covid-19 a pandemic. As a result, we saw the immediate reactions and decisions made by government leaders from a variety of countries. Just a day after this announcement was publicized, we saw how quickly government officials began to rely on ageist rhetoric to back up their quick, yet rushed, administration plans to combat the pandemic. On March 12, 2020, Boris Johnson, the prime minister of the United Kingdom, released his first official statement regarding Covid-19. It is important to note this occurred before the first official national lockdown was to take place on March 23, 2020. Although one expected a speech that demonstrated a real initiative to protect older adults, what was delivered was the complete opposite. Boris Johnson was too quick to let families know they were going to lose loved ones, in which he was more so implying that they were going to lose loved ones a part of the older population:

> I've got to be clear, we've all got to be clear, that this is the worst public health crisis for a generation...And it's going to spread further and I must level with you, level with the British public, many more families are going to lose loved ones before their time. And the Chief Scientific Adviser will set out the best information we have on that in a moment.
> (Boris Johnson, 2020).

That older individuals' lives were expendable was viewed as acceptable (Shimoni, 2020). In England alone, 88% of Covid-19 deaths were those aged 65 and over (Shimoni, 2020), this alarmingly high percentage of deaths could have been avoided, had their administration been focused on the well-being of their older population rather than instead focusing on the younger population, and keeping their lives minimally unchanged. Only 3 days after his first statement, Boris Johnson publicly indicated that adults over the age of 70 should self-isolate while having no clear instructions on what the younger population should do (Ayalon, 2020). UK health

secretary Matt Hancock was the first individual who alerted the British people ahead of time that this age-based policy would be put into effect. These statements inadvertently showed the bias between the protocols given to younger and older people in England regarding a global pandemic. These statements were directly imposed on older adults in England with an emphasis that these individuals protect themselves, rather than having a statement in which every individual regardless of their age protected themselves and others. Interchangeable ideas were found in other countries which stressed the importance of socially isolating older individuals rather than the entire population. This would result in the increasing rate of infection.

There was a clear agenda when it came to handling the pandemic for many of our world leaders, and it involved having different protocols for different age groups. The explanation for this approach being a constant throughout the pandemic is due to a recurring tool used by government leaders: Necropolitics (Mbembe, 2019). Necropolitics refers to a sociological framework that reveals how governments use their social and political power to dictate which lives are viewed as valuable and which are not (Mbembe, 2019). In the terms of the pandemic, older lives were viewed as invaluable, and hence worthy of dying, while younger lives were viewed as important, and necessary of preserving and protecting. Within a global pandemic, necropolitics played a strategic role in government officials' decisions regarding what to do and say to the larger public, especially since the pandemic resulted in an outstanding number of deaths. For many government officials, just as expressed by Boris Johnson, it was easier to allow older adults to die disproportionately than to come up with policies that all ages had to abide by. This same aged-based approach was reiterated in multiple countries including the United States where ageism was expressed even more explicitly by government officials. Ageism is a form of discrimination, yet government officials in America used calculated ageism to essentially excuse the fact that they were being discriminatory. Calculated ageism refers to a political figure

implying that older adults should sacrifice their lives if it will help mitigate the pandemic's economic damage to younger generations, directly relating to explicit examples of senicide and necropolitics displayed during the pandemic. In America we saw Texas Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick's (aged 69 at the time) suggestion of older people sacrificing themselves in an interview on Fox News Tucker Carlson Tonight show:

> No one reached out to me and said, "As a senior citizen, are you willing to take a chance on your survival in exchange for keeping the America that all America loves for your children and grandchildren?" And if that's the exchange, I'm all in. And that doesn't make me noble or brave or anything like that. I just think there are lots of grandparents out there in this country, like me, I have six grandchildren, that what we all care about and what we love more than any- thing are those children. And I want to live smart and see through this, but I don't want the whole country to be sacrificed. [...] So my message is "Let's get back to work, let's get back to living. Let's be smart about it and those of us who are 70-plus, we'll take care of ourselves. But don't sacrifice the country, don't do that, don't ruin this great American Dream." (Barrett, 2021).

What these two scenarios reveal is an ageist attitude that we consistently deny as a society. We view older people as other in comparison to other age groups, and that was undeniably taken advantage of by government leaders and officials when deciding how to handle a global pandemic. Although we can deny that ageism exists, research behind how the media operated throughout this time proves otherwise– it proves that ageism was highly rampant during the pandemic, and easily accepted by the larger majority.

WHY NOT LET THEM DIE? THEY'RE GOING TO ANYWAY

In my study I used examples of previous research conducted alongside a smaller content analysis of TikTok posts in order to further solidify the huge role ageism had, and how it drastically impacted the handling of the pandemic. To deny that our societies are filled with ageism would be ludicrous based on the profound ageist rhetoric found plaguing multiple well-respected mass media outlets. Research done on news coverage suggested that the Covid-19 pandemic exposed underlying societal ageism. Miller, Simpson, and colleagues (2021) examined

2,300 news articles addressing nursing homes in the most prominent and leading U.S. national newspapers between September 2018 and June 2020. Throughout their research it was revealed that the coverage of nursing homes during the first months of the pandemic increasingly became more prominent and negative (Fingerman, 2020). This served as an explicit example of ageism found amongst the media's portrayal of older adults and their false role in the pandemic. The press was not pointing out the role ageism played in the abandonment of older adults in these nursing homes during the pandemic, but rather adding on to the false narrative that older adults were infectious and carriers of disease [Covid-19] and using the rates of older people dying in these nursing homes as a plausible reason to be ageist.

Government officials undoubtedly took advantage of the notion that we already view older people through an ageist lens. This made it easier to point the blame towards the older population, while batting an eye at younger age groups. Despite younger individuals contributing more than their older counterparts to increasing the spread of Covid-19, due to their lack of willingness to follow CDC recommendations.

I examine the specific words or phrases that the media associates with older individuals, and how this contributes to viewing older adults as a homogenous group with the same attitudes and beliefs. The role of mass media during the pandemic made ageism easily accepted and normalized due to the popular media outlets emphasizing older adults to more likely be carriers, and spreaders. This allowed for the obvious examples of discrimination faced by older adults to also be dubbed as the normal, whereas any other "-ism" would have easily been labeled as clear discrimination. The overarching theme that is demonstrated throughout my study is how the handling of the pandemic was deeply rooted in ageism rather than logic. The reaction of the world to the pandemic reflected how ingrained ageism is. Age-based policies implemented to combat the pandemic proved to be deadly. Overall, the purpose of my study was to acknowledge

that 1) ageism is an incredibly dangerous "-ism" within our society and that 2) had there been a different approach taken to handle the pandemic, one that was not deeply rooted in ageism, we globally would have been able to combat the pandemic more efficiently. Covid-19 revealed how multiple institutions within our society were already permeated with ageism, and how they do not hold up in a pandemic where the most vulnerable are the same individuals that are routinely neglected.

Upon my initial research, I found it extremely difficult to find articles/sources for ageism in comparison to the number of findings I would get searching for "racism" and "sexism." This unintentionally revealed the difference in attention/care for acknowledging the existence of ageism in our societies. Although we do not acknowledge that ageism exists, the Covid-19 pandemic brought ageism to the forefront. The management of the pandemic clearly illustrated how much more effective we could have been at efficiently handling the pandemic, if it wasn't for the ageism that coincided with decision-making.

First, I discuss theory emphasizing an "us versus them" mentality that younger individuals have towards their older counterparts. I examined what caused this age-based separation to occur within our society, and how mass media manipulates what we ultimately decide being older symbolizes. Then, I made connections through real life examples of what popular politicians and government leaders vocalized during the pandemic which were rooted in ageism. Then I proceeded to examine how ageism manifests on an institutional level, and I used Biomedicalization theory to explain how Covid-19 revealed how ageist our societies are. Overall, the main argument I propose is that the Covid-19 pandemic would have been handled more efficiently had ageism not been involved in decision making regarding policies and medical protocols. Ageism played a crucial role in how Covid-19 was handled in both America and neighboring territories. With my content analysis of TikToks I was provided with real-life

examples of people's real time responses to the pandemic and its social lockdown. These real-life examples provide an illustration of how ageism contributed to the country's state, biomedical and individuals' response to the pandemic.

US VERSUS THEM MENTALITY

The act of being ageist towards our older adults in society has been explained through individual level theories as being an ego-protective function, one that protects us from people we consistently see being viewed as ``other ``or different". Using theoretical perspectives of ageism, based on pre-existing general psychology theories, we can formulate a significant foundation for understanding how younger counterparts view older individuals. Oftentimes, what causes this false portrayal has to do with the overwhelmingly incorrect portrayal of what being "old" signifies in Western culture. This ultimately leaves an irrational fear of older people in which being ageist towards them is acceptable (North and Fiske, 2012). During Covid-19 older individuals were associated with disease, and mortality within mass media, and in retrospect this caused younger individuals to associate themselves with health and vitality.

Social identity theory (SIT) explains why ageism functions as an ego-protective function. SIT allows us to understand the key role an individual's ego plays in the separation of two age cohorts. For an individual's ego to attain enough self-esteem or praise they formulate their own understanding between their own personal identity and connect that to an identity represented within their chosen group (North and Fiske, 2012). The goal is to find a group where one feels the most confident and secure about oneself. During the pandemic a younger individual may view themself as symbolizing immunity to Covid-19. and as a result of this they will choose to identify with other individuals who believe Covid-19 only affects older people only to ensure their values are validated. This serves as an ego protective function against the heightened

possibility of contracting Covid-19 and dying as death is more so commonly associated with older adults.

Terror Management Theory further solidifies the ageism expressed during the pandemic, by arguing that when confronted with the realization of their impending death, people tend to push away anything that may remind them of death ex. older people (North and Fiske, 2012):

> ...many characteristics that elicit stigmatizing responses are beyond personal control, such as frailty, forgetfulness, or nearness to death. A man in rural Norway expressed the experience of stigma following the death of his wife: "People treat me like a leper." (Hagestad, 2005).

Ageism within our societies alongside the fear of aging and death has long existed, however a global pandemic where older people were directly associated with mortality and being infectious only further exacerbated ageism due to this fear becoming a closer reality. Ageism functions as an ego protective function, and the dangers of categorizing an incredibly diverse group of people into a homogenous group within our society has been seen consistently throughout history in other marginalized groups: Jews, African Americans, women, etc.

For the duration of history, we have consistently seen the characterization of groups of similar people being grouped into one homogenous group. While these groups of people may be incredibly diverse, by having one similar attribute they are quickly regarded as being the same. For example, older adults' most unifying trait is their age therefore they are all seen as being the same. This homogenous model is used with one goal: to decide which individuals are viewed as being deviant and which are not. Sociologist Durkheim believed that deviance was necessary in order to have a successful society because he believed it served three key purposes: 1) it allowed individuals within a society to clarify norms and therefore increase conformity (sameness), 2) people having a similar reaction to deviancy resulted in stronger social bonds, and finally 3) he

believed it would lead to positive social change. In retrospect to Covid-19 false stereotypes and traits associated with older people resulted in them being viewed more defiantly. They were the most vulnerable in terms of mortality rates.

Cohen's theory of subculture reveals how our society was able to put all the blame and guilt associated with Covid-19 to the group that deserved it less. Cohen was previously influenced by Becker's labeling theory, and the ways that deviance is less about people's behavior and more about how a society has labels of what is normal and what is deviant (Pike, 2014). Society has labeled old age to be an abnormality, and therefore deviant. Cohen's theory of delinquent subculture offers the perspective that societies tend to assume that people who are seen as dangerous or a threat to our society as being a part of a certain subculture often reflect what the society despises (Pike, 2014).

THE OLDER POPULATIONS ASSOCIATION WITH HINDERING CAPITALISM

In Western culture older adults are associated with traits that hinder and get in the way of capitalism, and it is these traits that our larger society despises. The longer a body can work, the more they contribute to their society, a characteristic which realistically cannot occur in later stages of life. This is seen as deviant or abnormal in our societies and therefore a threat. Older people are seen as threats to a society's economy and welfare services:

> "In this paper, I further examine the meaning of these claims through an analysis of policy documents, reports and media articles which promote the perceived benefits of physical activity in later life…The documents I analyzed indicated an emergence of a moral panic, whereby a recognizable, stigmatized group who epitomizes a social problem, emerges (Cavanagh, 2007). These folk devils may not be clearly identifiable individuals, but are present in public consciousness as some kind of shadowy older person lurking in the old people's home, draining the health and social services and making no contribution to society." (Pike, 2011)

This coincides with what was expressed by Texas's Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick: the implication that older adults should sacrifice their lives if it will help mitigate the pandemic's economic damage to younger generations. Various politicians throughout the pandemic were in favor of spreading the disease if it meant preventing capitalism from collapsing. Capitalism is more valued than lives, especially older lives that are already viewed in a deviant nature. This relates to a concept in Van Dyk's: The othering of old age (2016). We see the authors attempt to recognize how those of older age are not a homogenous group and proceeds to divide older people into a group of third-agers and fourth-agers. They differentiate third-agers as being a group that is still viewed as being other, but in a more preferable way to society — a valued other. Third-agers are referred to as being young-old, while fourth-agers are just deemed as being the oldest old. During the pandemic there was no differentiating of older people, the pandemic didn't view older people as a dichotomous group and that is what made it clear that ageism does not discriminate on who it impacts. A third-ager is described as an individual who is applauded for participating in the same activities and social expectations as their younger counterparts:

> "They are held to possess wisdom and experience, to be loyal to employers and others, to be reliable in all respects, and patient and through as well as less competitive and more charitable than their younger contemporaries." (Van Dyk, 2016).

Third-agers are praised for upholding ideologies that are applauded in capitalistic societies such as America. Regardless of being a third ager or fourth ager, self-sacrifice is imposed on you. In retrospect to Covid-19, the ideal scenario for American politicians and leaders appeared to be a third-ager, however both third and fourth-agers were expected to sacrifice themselves for the sake of younger counterparts, and their economy.

Social security (1935) was initially well received within American society, as it represented a step toward providing individuals with economic security: one which would allow

future generations to continue to build upon (Altman, 2021). President Franklin Delano Roosevelt was quoted saying:

> This law...represents a cornerstone in a structure which is being built but is by no means complete... It is, in short, a law that will take care of human needs and at the same time provide the United States an economic structure of vastly greater soundness. (Roosevelt, 1935).

There was not a distinction between old and young because the government, during the Great Depression, recognized this would benefit all since we are all inevitably going to age and continue to be a part of society. From the late 1930s until the mid-1970s we saw the larger majority's overall support of social security which allowed for the expansion of protections, coverage, and monthly benefits. These included creating disability insurance protection in 1956 and establishing the very well-known Medicare and Medicaid in 1965 (Altman, 2021).

The shift in attitude towards social security occurred in the mid-1970s where the false narratives of older adults began being pushed onto the American public. This was accomplished through propaganda that was largely dependent on the 'Leninist Strategy.' Older adults were reassured their benefits would be left alone, yet politicians were simultaneously gaining the support of younger Americans by pushing the narrative that the program was unsustainable to begin with due to the increasing aging population (1983) (Altman, 2021). Older people were depicted as financially secure enough, and therefore undeserving of "extra" money from the government. The U.S government has been shown to allocate a disproportionate amount of health care dollars toward the over-65 population; despite this age group making up 12% of our population only one third of health care dollars goes toward them (U.S. DHHS, Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, 2011).

The repeated cuts to social security are causing a newfound crisis on our horizon. We are slowly facing a retirement income crisis with only a few high-income households having

accumulated small fortunes in 401ks or IRAs. This pending retirement income crisis will result in a current estimation of 100 million people (2018 statistics) of whom 59.3% of working age who will not have any retirement account savings (Altman, 2021). With these social security cuts, we see the racial and ethnic disparities present in the following: the holdings of White families (79,500), Lantinx families (23,000) and Black families (29,200) (Altman, 2021). With an estimation of more than 800,000 Americans with intellectual or developmental disabilities living with their parents or another caregiver who is older than age 60, this crisis becoming a reality is detrimental to their well-being (Pollack, 2015). Lower income communities, and those already part of marginalized groups were hit the hardest by Covid-19, and this was further exacerbated by ageist policies.

Working class people were five times more likely to die from Covid-19 than college graduates in 2020, and in California, essential workers continued to die at disproportionately higher rates even after vaccines were widely available (Yong, 2022). When examining the implications, one's social class and educational ranking had on their likelihood of death due to Covid-19, the numbers were staggering. If all adults had died at the same rates of college-educated white people, 71% fewer people of color would have died (Feldman, 2021). Those who were older, poorer, sicker, black and browner were treated as marginally in their death as they were when they were living.

OTHERING AND DISCARDING: AGEISM RATIONALE FOR COVID-19

During the pandemic the constant us versus them narrative used by politicians and mass media inevitably created more divide between age groups and increased ageism. Older adults were viewed as deviant, and therefore not allowed certain privileges. Senicide was disguised as medical protocol or a given, something unquestionable. Older adults also found themselves being the topic of public discourse in which they were blamed for Covid-19 which will later be

solidified through the obvious ageism shown throughout the media. In Bronwen's research (2021) public ageism was examined in official statements and debates over managing the crisis in the three English-speaking countries with different approaches to the Covid-19 pandemic. The common protocol for all these countries was to adopt age-segregated policies in order to protect older adults on a temporary basis until a "cure" was found; However, this resulted in the us versus them narrative being further pushed onto the larger public.

In Bronwen's research (2021) the first theme examined was the lockdown of nursing homes: nursing home visits had to be decreased because of the high-risk of death among residents who contracted the virus. The second theme found in these countries was the isolation of older adults affecting anyone over the ages of 65 in Australia and 70 in the UK. Unlike Australia and the UK, the United States was extremely strict and defined old as anyone being over 60 (Bronwen, 2021). In all three countries older adults were depicted as demented and already medically compromised although many older adults disagreed with this. The media depicted them as irresponsible and being less likely to adhere to CDC regulations, although surveys showed they were the group more likely to avoid visiting family, grocery stores and parties (Bronwen, 2021). Finally, the last theme found in this study was that of "herd immunity" which further emphasized that older people were different than younger people and were unable of attaining this immunity ex. older people viewed as deviant or other since they did not possess this believed immunity that only younger people could have. Younger people believed getting rid of older counterparts in society could potentially make herd immunity possible within the rest of the population.

During Covid-19 mass media shaped the way individuals formulated their concept of what being an older adult is, and it was these negative associations to older people that inevitably led younger people to treat their older counterparts negatively. The theories provided within this

section have allowed for an understanding behind this other view we often have of older people, and how it serves as a power mechanism in controlling an entire society. During the pandemic ageism was unquestionably taken advantage of by world leaders and politicians in order to make decisions regarding the handling of the pandemic. Mass media played a strategic role in making these decisions seem acceptable despite their ill nature. In the following section, I briefly explain the role media played throughout the pandemic, and the ageist attitudes that were expressed throughout social media. These ageist attitudes ultimately surged on March 11, 2020, when the World Health Organization declared Covid-19 as a pandemic.

OLD NEWS

We are constantly consuming multiple methods of entertainment which results in unconsciously learning what we see on our screens, this is known as the Theory of Mind (Rogers, 2016). Stereotype Embodiment Theory refers to a phenomenon in which negative age stereotypes become ingrained within individuals of varying ages. This results in people carrying the same stereotypes about themselves when they are experiencing the process of aging or old age (Ayalon, 2021). In Western culture we are known as a "youth-centric" culture, one where younger people are represented much more than their older counterparts– only further alienating older individuals. Even the connotation behind the word "youth" in comparison to the word "old" is problematic once we consider the role our language determines in adding on to the way older people are constantly being viewed as the "other" in our society (Hagestad, 2005).

In a study by Xialing (2021) it was revealed that news items and postings on age segregation peaked in March-April 2020, when cases kept surging, leader officials were frantic, and people feared the onslaught of a deadly virus that appeared to be out of control. Ageist content was the highest on March 11, 2020 (52.8%) when the World Health Organization declared it as a pandemic (Xialing, 2021). This revealed the detrimental impact of the media

reinforcing the “us” versus “them” narrative. Xianling (2021) study revealed that out of 82, 627 the top words in the tweets were “elderly” (68/2 %). This term was most used alongside other terms used for older people: “old people” “baby boomer” and “senior citizens” (Xialing, 2021). Older people were commonly talked about in public discourses online regarding the pandemic, and the prevalent word usage of “elderly” implies other negative stereotypes such as being fragile or weak. Other common phrases or words used were “personal opinions” which was used as a barrier to excuse ageist remarks/actions. This parallels what was found in my study through TikTok. Furthermore, many online referred to Covid-19 as being a “boomer remover” essentially referring to the deaths as being justifiable. This was due to the older generation being associated with ruining the planet, being racist, and allowing former United States president Donald Trump to win (Xialing, 2021).

These opinions and false beliefs regarding older people have always existed, yet the pandemic made them much more discussed and overt. With the hostility of a global pandemic being pointed at older individuals it was much easier for world leaders to incorporate ageism into the handling of the pandemic. The uniform response that countries such as Australia and the United Kingdom had to controlling the Covid-19 pandemic was to implement age-related policies that were undeniably ageist (Xialing, 2021). The media further exhausted the ageism we view as acceptable and allowed for further acceptance of the way the pandemic was handled. In the following section l examine the ageism exhibited within our healthcare systems throughout the pandemic while making connections to the past before Covid-19. These connections will reveal a healthcare system that was never made to be accommodating for older bodies, and rather viewed older bodies as being less important than younger counterparts.

BIOMEDICALIZATION & SENICIDE DURING COVID=19: NATURAL SELECTION

It is evidently clear that the act of grouping people together based on one similar trait and viewing them as a homogenous group can be tactical upon looking for ways to control people within a society. This was proven in a pandemic where it was common knowledge that older people were more at risk than their younger counterparts. The pandemic validates the ageism that older people have continuously experienced through the faults within our healthcare that we saw occur amidst the pandemic.

When examining institutions within our healthcare system such as hospitals and nursing homes were able to exemplify the theory of biomedicalization through their specific procedures or attitudes regarding both the aging body and the soon-to-be aging body. The suffix of biomedicalization is medicalization; Medicalization is the process by which human conditions and problems come to only be defined through medical conditions, and through this process we see the recurring theme: a body becoming a subject of a medical study, a diagnosis being formulated and finally that diagnosis being used to find some form of treatment or prevention (Clarke, 2010). In contrast, biomedicalization theory, in the context of aging, refers to the treatment of aging as biological or medical problem that must be dealt with or "cured" (Kaufman, 2004); We can easily see the consequences of biomedicalization since it allows for a society that believes science is the only way to undo or prevent aging through more consumption and more expensive medical services and technologies. However, this arises the question that we specifically dealt with during the pandemic: What happens when there is no adequate or efficient medical services/technology to rely on? When there is no technology to depend on, how will we efficiently deal with a problem that targets individuals that have been treated as a medical nuisance? Throughout the pandemic these challenges arise.

The biomedicalization of older adults has played a crucial role in determining which older adults get adequate care and services, and which of those do not. The biomedicalization

model, which depends on technology, does not allow for all older individuals to get the same care. If high-technology and event-based only approaches to care continue without geriatrics/ gerontology expertise and valued input, we will proceed to see the costs of care for this population increase to eventually financially unsustainable levels. In 2008, an estimated 1.9% of advanced practice nurses were certified in gerontological nursing (Bragg, E. & Hansen, 2011). This would leave 98.1% of nurses in America that haven't been trained in treating an older patient which is vastly different from a younger patient. The biomedicalization of aging (which is the predominant model followed within America's infrastructure) offers little to no help for those who cannot afford it, which is the overwhelming majority. According to a recent National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine report, this disparity is continuously rising with the overall gap in life expectancy between the lowest and highest income quintiles growing from 5.1 to 12.7 years among men and from 3.9 to 13.6 years among women (Tipermeni, 2018). This vast difference that is dependent on one's income is troubling within a growing population that will soon face older age, especially with the uncertainties of potential long-lasting side effects of those who contracted Covid-19 and recovered. The biomedicalization model seems to coincide with closely related "-isms" that cause ageism to be amplified such as one's race and gender (racism and sexism), and it reveals how Medicare has contributed to being an institutionalized facet that upholds ageism within our society.

Ageism is reinforced within the healthcare system and the money that is allocated to geriatric care and training. This ageism becomes heightened the more deviant you appear to be within a society based on your race and economic status. Older adults who identify as White, well-educated and more affluent often share the experience of having good health, while older adults who are Hispanic, African American, less educated are less likely to report having good health (Tipermini, 2018). Upon looking at the groups of people who were most likely to die from

Covid-19 we recognize that factors such as race furthered the chances of an older patient dying, and this is representative of the connection that Robert N. Butler made in his comparison of ageism reflecting the same ideas that racism and sexism do within our society.

The problems within our healthcare system often reflect other systematic issues to be found in our society. The obvious disparities between these groups create health issues that would make these marginalized individuals getting coronavirus more vulnerable to death ex. an individual's cardiovascular health. While we see improvements in cardiovascular risk factors among high-income U.S adults in the past 15 years, the same result is not found within those of lower income, which results in the disparity getting even wider between low income and high income (Timpermini, 2018).

The pre-existing fears of what ageism could potentially cause within the U.S were made a reality during Covid-19. Without Covid-19 many of our failures within our infrastructures would've continued to be swept under the rug. These include our failing healthcare system, and all this stems back to the detrimental impacts of being a part of a society whose institutions are all reinforced with ageism. We saw ageism being explicitly expressed in countries such as China and Italy, who alongside the United States, also faced overcapacity and shortages of supplies in hospitals, before the United States, implemented medical protocol where older adults were considered the lowest priority for both care and access to resources that would save their life. This is a direct example of the effects of ageism and Covid-19. In Italy, healthcare providers vocalized "We have to decide who must die and whom we shall keep alive," often stating how a patient's age decides who remains alive and unalive (Monahan, 2020). These healthcare providers were directly acting upon a term previously defined as necropolitics (Mbembe, 2019): in this context we as individuals are socialized into viewing older counterparts as less worthy of medical attention, and resources.

Through the biomedicalization model we treat a failing older body as making unreasonable demands on social and health services, unless an individual takes care of themself enough to not become that burden. However, with Covid-19 an individual was unable to do anything to prevent possible contagion. Politicians may have publicized preventive measures to avoid contagion yet the younger population viewing it as a disease of the old did not oblige and caused further instability in our health and social services. In more recent statistics we are shown that 95% of Americans who died of Covid-19 were aged older than 50, despite most positive cases being for people under the age of 50 (Sorell, 2021). Furthermore, many of these preventive measures were imposed on older adults rather than the entirety of our population, hence revealing an age-related bias.

In the United States there were protocols already put in place that were meant to disadvantage older adults with one outlined proposal to giving their priority to those expected to live the longest i.e., younger individuals. (Monahan, 2020). Older adults living in care facilities were facing increasing mortality rates and worsening care which was due in part to the already unsupportive and discriminatory practices that were normalized in our ageist society. On June 1, 2020, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services reported that there were approximately 26,000 deaths attributable to Covid-19 in long term care facilities, representing nearly a quarter of overall pandemic-related deaths in the United States (Monahan, 2020). However, the media was quick to under-report the deaths that occurred in nursing homes which can be attributed to the key difference in how societies place value on older people's lives versus younger people's lives. The complete acknowledgment of the real impact Covid-19 had in care homes and the excluding or erasing of nursing home residents from official death counts "could lead the public to conclude that their deaths were insignificant and to be expected." (Fraser, 2020). We once again can see the expectation that is put onto older adults despite them possibly, and rightfully

so, being against this narrative of having to sacrifice themselves for the sake of the younger generation.

There was an emphasis on the lack of psychosocial needs of the residents in the nursing homes (communication and community) and that without visitors or volunteers it was extremely detrimental to residents (Miller, 2021). This burden of not being able to provide their nursing home residents these necessities was commonly expressed amongst social workers; In a study done by Miller (2021) they often expressed how their staff was anxious, scared, mean and unprofessional- oftentimes this resulted in multiple people quitting. Rather than offering support many expressed executive directors in their nursing homes micromanaging and writing people up (Miller, 2021).

Many countries followed this same format and did not allow any visitors to nursing homes during this time, and Nosraty (2015) studies revealed what older people constituted as being a part of a good aging proceeds corresponded to many of the things lost during the pandemic. One of the major components to a good aging process that was constantly mentioned during these interviews was independence or self-autonomy in the following: physical independence, financial independence, autonomy, decision making and self-mastery (Nosraty, 2015). During the pandemic older people essentially lost most of these rights, especially decision making. During the pandemic medical personnel oversaw deciding who was to receive and who was to be taken off ventilators, and they were essentially taught to kill off older people for their younger counterparts (Nosrary, 2015). The act of choosing to kill off an older life versus a younger life was viewed as being self-sacrificial, despite older people not being able to consent. In Nosraty's study (2015) we saw the more common fears of older people. Many individuals interviewed feared their mental health deteriorating, most specifically their memory. For many nursing home residents this meant the possibility of having some type of dementia such as

Alzheimer's. Those who endured the pandemic without the capability to grasp what was going on: the loss of people and the restrictions due to their mental state only resulted in worsening health conditions (Miller, 2021). Many older adults who died from COVID-19 in nursing homes experienced extreme changes in their daily routines as lockdown policies began to take effect. Activities that were expected were suddenly made obsolete and against the rules enforced by law officials such as family visits, and group activities that were often the only social contact and interactions older adults had. Lockdowns and visitor restrictions that were meant to protect nursing home residents allowed for the isolation that led to declining health and in most dire cases mortality. Without the proper resources this was once again another example of how we failed to protect (physically and mentally) the well-being of older people during the pandemic.

Khimm (2020) wrote about the firsthand experience of Tammy Roberg, whose father had Alzheimer's but despite this was still relatively healthy and depended on the social aspects that were provided through the nursing home. These activities appear mundane, such as being able to converse with other residents in the lunchroom, yet they were incredibly crucial to her father's wellbeing. When the immediate lockdown occurred in March 2020, she was assured by the nursing home staff that he was doing well and without visitation being allowed she had to blindly accept this to be true. In May it was revealed to her that he had tested positive for Covid-19 yet was asymptotic. Later in that month she was alerted that her father's overall positive attitude and behavior had drastically changed; She was told that his perky and chatty self-had diminished completely alongside his appetite. This change occurred only within 3 months of their separation due to lockdown policies, and on June 2nd she was told to come immediately as it appeared he was on the verge of dying. That morning her father ended up passing away, and Roberg expressed how shocked she was at how deteriorated his body had managed to become in the span of those months. In his death certificate the causes of death listed were the progression of

Alzheimer's disease and "social isolation/failure to thrive under Covid-19 restrictions." (Khimm, 2020). For many Americans with an older grandparent or parent in a nursing home this was their reality, a lack of certainty in the official cause of death during the pandemic.

A true depiction of these deaths was personified in The Washington Post in which 51 portraits of older adults who had died in nursing homes during the pandemic also included those they had left behind. It was later found that 51 of these older adults had left behind at least 129 children, 230 grandchildren and 41 great grandchildren (Sorell, 2021). The humanization of these older adults reveals an aspect many Americans don't consider when talking negatively about them— the fact that they were more than their age. This lost generation which was depicted as being expendable was counteracted by showing the contributions which were made by these older individuals before we abandoned them during the pandemic (senicide). A brief example is the personified death of Henrietta Woods who worked to help make voting more accessible for low-income families in St. Louis (Sorell, 2021). This counteracted the more advertised ageist attitudes during this time which made older adults' lives expendable and worthless. It reveals that these were people with goals, families, careers and overall, very valuable members to our society that we had abandoned amidst a pandemic.

The Covid-19 pandemic undeniably revealed how deeply ingrained and accepted ageism is within our society. Through theories such as social identity theory we were able to recognize the reasoning behind our deeply internalized ageism, and how we tend to push away any reminders of what being older entails: the inevitability of dying. Throughout the pandemic the possibility of facing mortality became increasingly real, and as a result we abandoned older people who had been subjected to being viewed as infectious or carriers of Covid-19. Mass media further normalized false stereotypes and perceptions of older people, and during the pandemic this only skyrocketed with an alarming spike in ageist content that associated older

adults to Covid-19. Political leaders further added on to ageist rhetoric upon vocalizing their plans for combatting a pandemic that would have disastrous effects to capitalism which was shown to be more valuable than the lives of older adults. Lastly, our healthcare system which heavily relies on a biomedical model became immensely overwhelmed during a pandemic where older adults disproportionately died from Covid-19. The medical protocols and actions revealed an underlying senicide (Bloomberg, 2019) approach to handling a pandemic in a society where older adults are already viewed as deviant and proved the handling of the pandemic was rooted in ageism.

Attempting to combat the pandemic with ageism proved to be counterintuitive as it caused more deaths to occur (both old and young); With a recent statistic stating that every American who died of Covid-19 left an average of nine close relatives bereaved– amounting to roughly 9 million people (3 percent of the population) who now struggle with a permanent loss that was once filled by a sibling, spouse, grandparent, child or parent (Verdery, 2020)

METHODOLOGY

For my study I conducted a content analysis of social media posts made on the popular app: TikTok. The sole purpose for only using TikTok in my content analysis was since its users are predominantly Gen-Z'ers, and because during the pandemic and lockdown the app's popularity boosted allowing for more Covid-19 related TikToks to be made. TikTok provided me with a lot of content and findings that I was able to connect back to my key research question. I used the images/video clips used within the TikToks and proceeded to write down transcripts of everything the video entailed including the environment in which the video was made and the age of the users posting these videos. The selection of TikToks was primarily based on TikToks that came up on my FYP between March 2020- February 2022, I essentially narrowed it down to TikToks that provided me with the most engagement in the terms of likes, comments and views.

A majority of the TikTok videos I collected were either a part of Gen-Z or Millennials. In the TikToks I examined specific caption choices, audio choices, hashtags and the content presented within the video. On TikTok whenever the creator of the video likes a comment it automatically appears above all other comments which allows the ability to see what points of views or perspectives the creator of a video believes in the most. Those "liked by the creator" comments were viewed much faster and garnered more likes, attention and comments since they were automatically put above all other comments– all of which were analyzed. Many users on TikTok took advantage of this feature in order to deter the larger audience from recognizing comments that oftentimes are reacting negatively to their post rather than positive. Throughout these TikToks there were smaller portions of videos where younger individuals are actually against the ageism being normalized, and these were analyzed as well to see the discourse found when an age cohort does not follow the grind of ageism. TikTok was able to provide a representation of overall feelings, thoughts and concerns of people (mostly Gen-Zers) during Covid-19. My research question is tackling ageism in retrospect to Covid-19 therefore this was the best method since it allowed for digital manifestations of those ideas. As we all know a digital imprint is very hard to get rid of, and there is more than just the post. There are comments, likes and shares that one can easily use to further solidify the ageist rhetoric that is found in American culture. I collected 20 units of observation using TikTok videos in order to see if there is a common attitude to be found amongst the generation that was mainly posting these videos: Gen Z. For each video I then collected the top 10 liked comments which resulted in analyzing 200 comments in total. For this research project I used grounded theory methods (Charmaz, 2014) since I did a content analysis which pertained to going back and forth in hopes of finding recurring codes or patterns; these patterns further solidified my argument: Ageism is still prevalent to a society, and its most detrimental effects were shown through the pandemic: Covid-19. During the pandemic

we have heard from multiple sides not just one, therefore it is important to remember that when it comes to the writing of the paper and findings.

Findings:

Table 1: Video Format of TikTok Covid-19 related videos. (N=20)

Variables	Operational definitions	n (%)
Subtitle	The video includes a piece of text that repeats the auditory messages.	1 (5%)
Texts	A piece of text is added to the video that transcribes the dialogue or narrative.	18 (90%)
Caption	A piece of text that accompanies video on social media. Captions can include emojis, text, hashtags, @ mentions, and emojis.	20 (100%)
Music	Background music is used in the video	19 (95%)
Spoken Language	A language is verbally spoken in the video	3 (15%)
Video Length	The length of the video	?
Hashtag	The video includes a word of phrase precede by the symbol # that classifies or categorizes the accompanying text	16 (80%)

Overview

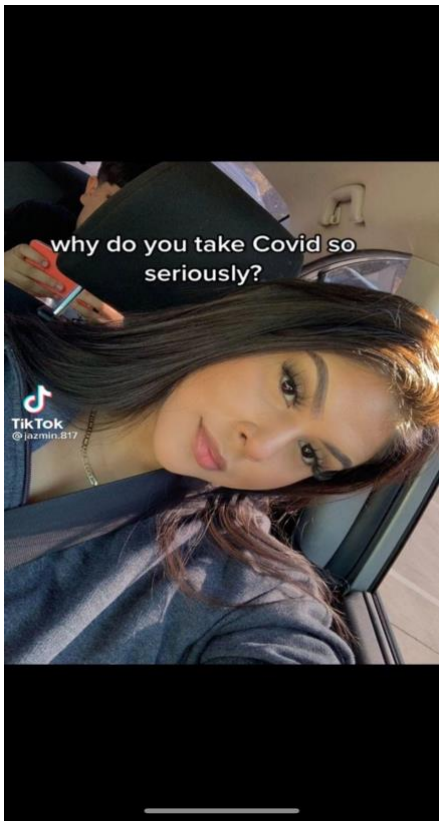
Through the app TikTok users are easily equipped with a range of features to use in their videos, these include the option to use automated subtitles within their video, the text feature, captions, music and hashtags. In my data collection I was able to recognize which features were the most used, and their purpose. Oftentimes the text feature was used as a method of storytelling (both fiction and non-fiction scenarios) in these Covid-19 related TikToks. The text feature was used to further emphasize the emotions depicted within certain TikToks whether they were angry, sorrowful and regretful. Oftentimes the music would match the content of the TikTok, with melancholic music choices being prevalent in Covid-19 related deaths TikToks. In the following section I examine the features, and what I found to be the most consistent in them all.

Text

Upon examining the video formats of TikTok Covid-19 related videos I was able to distinguish an indication as to what makes some videos more successful than others in terms of engagement and viewership. I was also able to see the features used within TikTok that help content creators to curate their main ideas to their target audience. The text feature on TikTok was occasionally used to demonstrate a sort of dialogue between two distinct generational groups: Gen-Z and Baby Boomers. In a video published by user @sarahwandrie we see an example of the stark portrayal of Gen-Z and Baby Boomers. This video accumulated 1.5m views and 365.4k likes, and both features are representative of the users who agreed and related to this content. Within this video her usage of captions allows for a specific story to be told, one in which the text "Baby boomers finding out coronavirus" on the upper middle corner of the video remains, while the user portrays and acts the way she felt baby boomers were acting on the onset on the pandemic: using face masks automatically, overusing hand sanitizer, isolating themselves and spraying disinfect all over them. A few seconds later, the text and the acts change to reveal how millennials and gen-z reacted with a caption now saying, "millennials and gen z on vacation for 3$." while the creator uses a green-screen feature to portray these individuals relaxing at a beach with drink in hand having a carefree attitude towards the epidemic. In TikTok where a form of acting or dialogue is portrayed oftentimes the texts are used to distinguish the acts, feelings or thoughts of a baby boomer versus a Gen-Zer.

Texts were also used in other videos to demonstrate a story being told in a chronological manner through other simultaneous video changes: pictures, videos, screenshots etc. Multiple users used the texts to show a real-life event ex: The gradual progression of someone being healthy, contracting Covid-19 and then passing away. The video with the most likes within this data collection, accumulating 3.2m likes, was published by user @issacchris. In this video, the

content creator used the texts to reveal how his mother went from being alive and taking all precautions to not get Covid to being in a grave after contracting Covid-19 and dying. This video mirrors more videos I found in which the same format is demonstrated such as users: @jazmin.817 and @darryllyn. In these videos the texts show the moments/memories that lead up these users' loved ones' deaths– all of which are associated to Covid-19. The texts allow for users to both physically and verbally understand what is being portrayed to them, since with photos/videos alone it would be hard to analyze. An example of this chronological storytelling can be found below:



For other content creators texts were used to label specific individuals close to them that had passed away upon contracting Covid-19. Through the text feature the deceased individuals were just categorized as being friends, uncles, grandpas, grandmas and siblings. In the popular audio "you took away my friend - @✨Ave✨" we see how the text mirrors the audio which says, "You took away my friend, my buddy, what's the softest way to say you took away my friend." In every instance of which the audio says friend or buddy we see a new individual appearing alongside the text. It is important to note this specific audio created a trend where content creators used the same format within their videos hence the mirroring audio and texts found.

In contrast, content creator @naturalnasty used the text feature to type out her opinions/beliefs regarding the Covid-19 pandemic which were deeply rooted in ageism and hatred for the older generation. Similarly, others used the feature to type out experiences they had with baby boomers. 90 % of videos contained texts and it shows the importance of having texts to demonstrate a story and real-life events.

Audio

95% of the TikToks I collected included audio. It is plausible to infer that content creators use trending audios associated with trending video ideas in order to garner more views, and to increase the chances of showing up on the "For You Page." These audios are much more emotive and sadder than the audios that were being used in the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. Certain audios were associated with specific trends on the platform, most popularly audios such as "you took away my friend - @✨Ave✨", "Lights Are On- @Tom Rosenthal," and "Je te laissserai des mots - @Patrick Watson." These trends, which were created in association to these audios, depicted individuals who had passed away by Covid-19, and

oftentimes we see the creator urging people to take Covid-19 seriously as a result of the loss they experienced. These audios are similar in the sense that they all share a melancholic sound, often alluding to emotions such as grief or sorrow.

An audio that was trending in the earlier onset of the Covid-19 pandemic was "F THE CORONA (Contains music from: F**ck the corona- Gotty Boi Chris & Dizz)." The videos found under this audio featured individuals lip synching the audio which said "Bitch fuck the corona" on a continuous loop, displaying Gen-Z distaste and annoyance towards the Covid-19 pandemic. Other audios were from movies/tv-shows in which a dialogue is occurring, and these were prevalent among TikToks where individuals were acting. A portion of audios held no real significance as they were audios that were trending in the given moment that they were posted.

Caption

100% of the videos collected contained a caption. Some captions made it obvious the video was going to demonstrate a tone-deaf attitude associated to Covid-19, with captions saying: "i bought flights to harryween and they were only like $200 round trip we love to see it." While other captions juxtaposed this and revealed the content creator bringing awareness to the reality of Covid-19: "covid is serious, don't be an oblivious asshole." Many of the captions alluded to what was going to be shown in the video, while a handful of captions contained a random spew of hashtags that had nothing to do with the video content. Content creators had random hashtags that were popularized for their video to have a greater probability of being found or viewed, like the specific trending audio choices made. The most popular hashtag being #fyp which is an acronym for "for you page." In TikTok videos where content creators were making fun of older adults it was more common to find hashtags such as: #babyboomers and #boomers. While content creators who had videos trying to raise awareness to Covid-19 had hashtags such as #covid, #covidvaccine, #getvaccinated, #covid is real and #covidconsequences.

Table 2: Emotions conveyed in Covid-19 related videos (N=20)

Categories	Operational Definitions	Examples	n (%)
Indifference	A video in which the creators show a lack of concern or sympathy for the Covid-19 epidemic.	https://vm.tiktok.com/TTPdSbfMDc/	6
Grief	A video in which the creator displays their deep sorrow caused by the death/multiple deaths of loved ones due to Covid-19.	https://vm.tiktok.com/TTPdSQCk9S/ https://vm.tiktok.com/TTPdB7tHGv/	8
Mockery	A video that displays the creator mocking the severity of Covid-19, most specifically teasing the behaviors of a particular person.	https://vm.tiktok.com/TTPdSbPEvM/ https://vm.tiktok.com/TTPdBjNaeU/	2
Vengeful	A video in which the creator is seeking to harm an individual/ group of people in return for a perceived offense.	https://vm.tiktok.com/TTPdSbf6Eb/ https://vm.tiktok.com/TTPdB7T6nc/	3
Humor	A video in which an unexpected amusing or comical effect of Covid-19 is displayed.	https://vm.tiktok.com/TTPdB2TmJd/	1

Overview

During the collection of the Covid-19 related TikToks, I was able to pick out the most prevalent emotions, those of which included: humor, vengeful, grief, mockery and indifference. Through observing the various TikTok videos I saw Gen-Z's initial reaction to the pandemic as well as gained insight on how those reactions changed as the pandemic progressed. In the beginning of the pandemic users were more likely to make content displaying humor, indifference, mockery and vengefulness towards the gravity of Covid-19. These videos included users explicitly voicing out their opinions, making fun of older adults for their reactions and

making jokes about how Covid-19 could change their [American] society. Later on, we would see a shift in content, one where users were now expressing their grief upon losing a loved one to Covid-19 in their TikTok video.

Emotions depicted in early pandemic

In earlier TikToks (circa March 2020) it was clear that many content creators shared a similar perspective on the pandemic, most specifically on the older population. In earlier TikToks I saw how indifferent Gen-Z was to Covid-19. In a TikTok made by user @jonquilfreedman on March 10, 2020, we saw the content creator depicting Baby Boomers as being accepting of travel being discouraged due to Covid-19, but then we would see the juxtaposition of Gen-Z's reaction to hearing that plane tickets were cheaper and that they had the possibility to die as a plus. In this TikTok, Gen-Z was initially making a mockery of the situation and making the chances of death comical and even beneficial. This dark humor associated with the heightened possibility of death was also seen in a TikTok by user @sapphic.sar whose video was posted on March 15, 2020. In this video the user boasts about how Gen-Z doesn't care if baby boomers or they [Gen-Z] die, and it reveals a frightening sense of indifference– an indifference that would have detrimental impacts on vulnerable people during the pandemic. Indifference was also demonstrated by individuals during the pandemic through voluntary choice in posting content where they made it clear that were going against CDC recommendations. In these videos content creators willingly posted videos where they were boasting about hanging out in large gatherings without masks or social distancing. In a specific video user @girls.can.have.fun.too, the content creator went as far as to post a TikTok video in which she stated that she and her friends decided to host an illegal rave with the caption emphasizing their entitlement and selfishness: "That was one of the most legendary parties, sorry corona but we need this…" – this occurred in July 2020. The idea that Gen-Z was in desperate need of partying

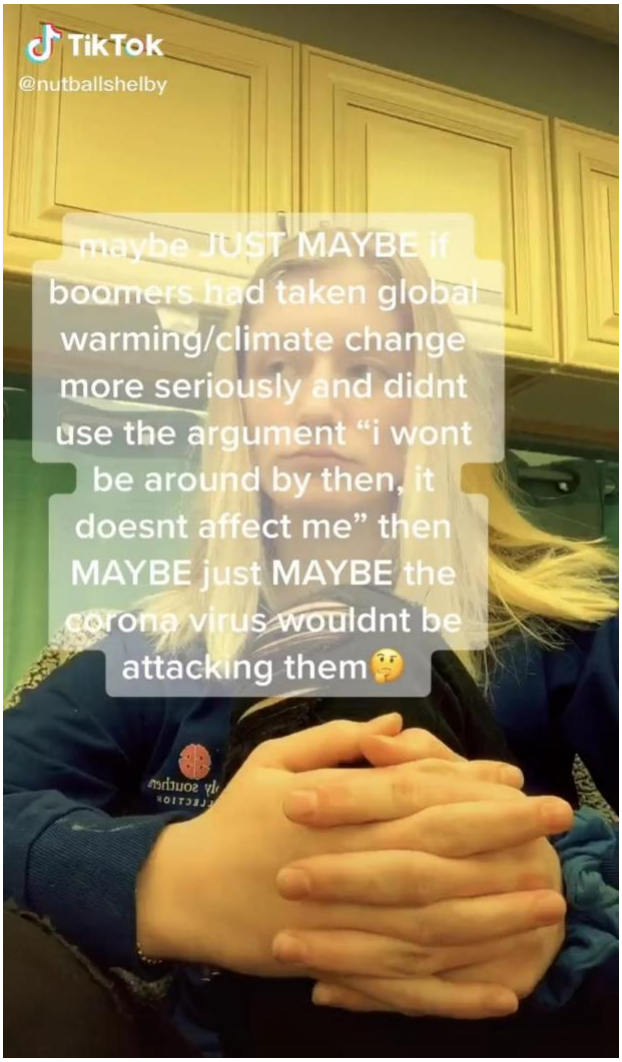
during a pandemic speaks volume about their lack of compassion for older adults and vulnerable individuals.

Additionally, in earlier TikToks we saw vengefulness expressed by Gen-Z towards older adults for reasons associated with stereotypes that pertain to older adults. In a TikTok created by user @naturalnasty on March 11, 2020, the user recorded herself looking at the screen with the text overlap stating: “maybe JUST MAYBE if boomers had taken global warming/climate change more seriously and didnt use the argument “i wont be around by then. It doesnt affect me” then MAYBE just MAYBE the corona virus attack wouldnt be attacking them 😉 .” The belief that older adults, as a homogenous group, didn’t care about global warming affecting their younger counterparts was used as a way of justifying Gen-Z’s actions and ageist attitudes pertaining to Covid-19. This same rhetoric was seen in content creators @originalkontent’s TikTok video where he depicted Gen-Z partying during the pandemic, because it was “not going to affect them” just as their older counterparts had said previously about global warming. The last scene in this TikTok depicts the content creator wearing an old white man mask convulsing on a bed with the caption: “Boomers getting infected and dying.” In these videos, Gen-Z expressed their approval of Covid-19 harming the older population in return for their perceived role in global warming and polluting of the Earth. Similarly, user @grung3princ3ss boasted how happy she was knowing that “corona virus is silencing boomers that constantly give me dirty looks for my fashion in public 😊 “We see how older adults are viewed as being judgmental,

old-fashioned and inconsiderate of the younger population. Ironically, these stereotypes were used to justify Gen-Z being inconsiderate and judgmental of older adults during the pandemic.

Covid-19 Grief Aftermath

Within my data collection I saw a shift in Covid-19 related TikToks a year into the pandemic; In these TikToks the most popular emotion displayed was grief. Content creators used TikTok to display their deep sorrow caused by the death/deaths of loved ones due to Covid-19. This emotion is a very stark contrast to earlier emotions displayed: indifference, mockery and vengefulness. In these emotions we would see content creators at their most vulnerable, often starting the videos teary-eyed and being vividly shaken up before displaying pictures/videos of their loved ones who had passed. This revealed a more vulnerable and compassionate side of Gen-Z that was overwhelmingly amiss in earlier TikToks regarding the pandemic. Their vulnerability was shown in their videos which displayed detailed private text conversations to pictures/videos of their loved ones in the hospital. In content creator @darryllyn's TikTok we were shown a slideshow of texts which gave the viewer insight of what her father was going through while in the hospital fighting Covid-19. In these text messages we were shown text messages that come from her



father saying “Hi Darryl… I’m so sick and I can’t sleep.” followed by “I’m very sic [sick] atm.” (Atm is an acronym for at the moment). The user reveals her vulnerability in messages where she was expressing how much she misses and loves her dad, with a text message on her end saying “I love you with all my heart. You’re my favorite person in the entire world. I hope I can come see you soon no matter where the hospital is.”

This display of vulnerability is what allowed for viewers to fully understand the gravity of Covid-19 and led to a decrease in the ageism that was prevalent beforehand. In a video made by @jessicamorin02, one of the videos within the TikTok revealed the content creator speaking while sobbing on Facetime as they say “...do a miracle so you can come home to us..” In this clip we can see she is speaking to Eleazar [her father] as he is fully intubated, and in a coma. Clips like these made it extremely hard to not feel some type of compassion and empathy for the individuals who were sharing their story. In these TikToks it was not uncommon for content creators to show family photos or photos specifically of the deceased before Covid-19 ravished their bodies. These photos allowed for the viewer to feel even more empathy as it personified the victims, especially for individuals who had not experienced a loss of a loved one due to Covid-19. This display of grief was important not only to reveal the reality behind Covid-19, but to allow these individuals who were posting the content to feel some sort of relief. Through their grievance viewers were able to recognize that a part of grieving is not forgetting, in this case not forgetting the detrimental and real affects Covid-19 had on millions of people.

Table 3: Themes Found in Comments of Covid-19 Related Videos (N=200)

Categories	Operational Definition	Examples	n (%)
Empathy/ Sympathy Connection	Comments that demonstrate a users’ empathy and sympathy for those impacted by Covid-19, often mentioning they have been through the same experience of grief or stress with a friend or family member	@alyssa.almen : Keep talking to him ❤️ even though he is intubated right now he can hear	40

	who also contracted Covid-19.	everything you tell him! Tell him to keep fighting! Sending love and prayers	
Ageism	Comments that mention old people being deserving of death due to age-related stereotypes.	@looelyfe: but like when climate change was a big thing and we were in danger they didn't care but now we are waisting our lives to protect them	22
Bullying/Hate Comments	Comments that call out individuals who aren't taking the pandemic seriously (such as believing it is a hoax) or insulting specific others (older adults).	@pepe_marton：i hope each and everyone one of you gets covid @morganswifey4lyfe: Chile it's embarrassing to be uneducated and heartless	20
Concern	Comments explicitly stating how serious Covid-19 is.	@c.margs.allen：Plz stay inside guys these memes are great but ppl are still dying, sometimes teens. That's all, thanks for coming to my ted talk	17

Overview:

The most telling feature of TikTok is the comment section where users are allowed to comment their opinion or thoughts regarding the video they watched. Oftentimes the creators of the videos can manipulate which comments are viewed more frequently by utilizing the "liked by creator" feature that TikTok offers. A user can like a comment/s, and by doing so they automatically moved higher up on the comment section and branded with a small blurb underneath that says, "liked by creator." Generally, the "liked by creator" comments reveal opinions or attitudes that the creator of the video agrees with or seemingly wants to promote to the audience. I looked at top 10 liked comments (n of comments = 200), in order to avoid

comments that were irrelevant to my study. Through the top 10 likes I got an understanding of the views/opinions held by Gen-Z. What was revealed through the comment section was a society where it was easier to insult and blame an entire generation for the initial start of Covid-19: Baby Boomers, in part because of their age. As the TikToks were posted farther away from March 2020 (the month in which Covid-19 was declared a pandemic in the U.S.) we saw a much different attitude from the same Gen-Z audience. The comments were filled with individuals expressing their empathy/sympathy for people who had lost family members or friends to Covid-19, often relaying how regretful they were in people not taking Covid-19 seriously prior. In the following section I talk about each theme found in specific detail and relate back to how ageist our society was at the beginning of Covid-19 and how this nonchalant attitude ultimately resulted in the number of deaths during the pandemic.

Ageist Comments

The comment section in March 2020 to the latest video I collected from February 2022 reveals a much different society. A large portion of ageist comments found within these TikToks revealed a stereotypical way of viewing an entire generation of Baby Boomers who were dubbed as being: judgmental, ignorant and disrespectful. The comment section would consistently include a mention of Covid-19 being "The Boomer Remover." Furthermore, within these comments there was a clear resentment and anger Gen-Z held against baby boomers and this anger was used to justify their reasoning for not caring about the pandemic. In these comment sections multiple users claimed that baby boomers were facing the consequences, with one user dubbing Covid-19 as karma for their involvement in causing global warming. In the comment section Gen-Zers would use the excuse that Baby Boomers did not care when they [Gen-Z] were trying to bring awareness to global warming, because it "was not going to affect them" and

therefore Gen-Z did not care about Covid-19 because it also "did not affect them.": @looelyfe: "but like when climate change was a big thing and we were in danger they didn't care but now we are waisting our lives to protect them." (2213 likes)

The generalization of older adults not caring about global warming was used to further justify Gen-Z's animosity and hatred for the older adult population for causing Covid-19. In the comment section Gen-Z spoke about their frustration in protecting Baby Boomers who they were already not fond of with comments stating that they felt the older population was undeserving of their respect, because they had not won it. The pandemic being viewed as karma for older adults was solidified by the misconception that Covid-19 only affected older adults, and therefore must have only been affecting older adults because of mystical outside force, such as the universe. Users in these comment sections expressed how Covid-19 was natural selection, and that baby boomers were getting back the negative energy they put into the world, with some comments as cruel as user @universityofwinnipeg comment: "They really do be getting the same vibes they put out. And they deserve it." Even more shocking was the overall satisfaction Gen-Z felt over the possibility of Covid-19 completely decimating an entire generation.

In videos uploaded months after the initial start of the pandemic we still saw a comment section that reflected animosity towards Baby Boomers in which users commented how much they enjoyed the concept of Covid-19 being a disease in which older adults were the only victims of mortality: @quillbo:" nah, it's still the boomer remover in my heart 😌." (296 likes) and @ashleymuckle25 ： " Boomer remover was such a good term tho it just sounds /nice/ "(182 likes). These comments were reflective of Gen-Z wanting to blame older adults for Covid-19 disrupting their everyday lives, rather than acknowledging that older adults played no specific role in Covid-19 being as dangerous and serious as it was. Overall, these comments reflected a

generation that in the beginning of the pandemic reeked of entitlement issues and a lack of humanity. In these comment sections younger individuals viewed themselves as invincible and immune to Covid-19, and therefore felt entitled to not take the pandemic seriously (even if it still meant the older population was more at risk for dying.)

Bullying/Hate Comments

While ageism was extremely prevalent within the comments at the very beginning of the pandemic, we also saw a few individuals who were going against the popular narrative at the time– people who were defending older adults and advocating for the need to take it seriously. Hate comments were predominantly found in videos where users would post themselves hanging out with their friends in an enclosed area, despite the CDC urging people to quarantine and avoid large gatherings. Within these videos we would see no usage of masks or social distancing. In these comments users hoped that the individuals who posted the videos would catch Covid-19, and they would also insult their character with the content creators being associated with words such as "selfish" and "uneducated". Content creators were called out for their ignorance, and these comments would often trump the comments that agreed with what they posted. Some comments would label these individuals as potential killers who would unknowingly spread Covid-19 and accidentally kill someone's grandparents ex: "@austinzajurlife:So selfish. Thanks for killing someone's grandma." Other users would choose to directly insult the people in the video based on their appearance, calling the group of people present in the video "musty" or making remarks such as "it's always those kind of people." Oftentimes generalizing the group of individuals who were shown in the video.

Empathy/Sympathy Connection

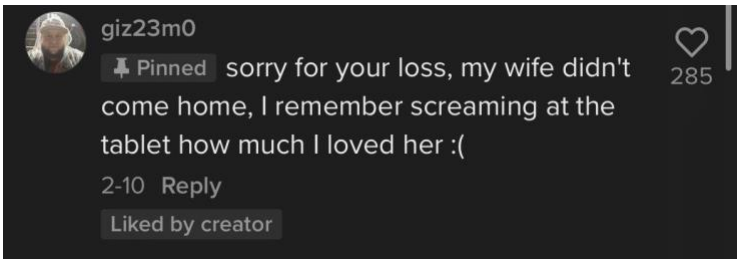
As the pandemic progressed, I saw a shift in both the content being posted and the comment section. At the start of Covid-19, people were incredibly unaware of who was going to

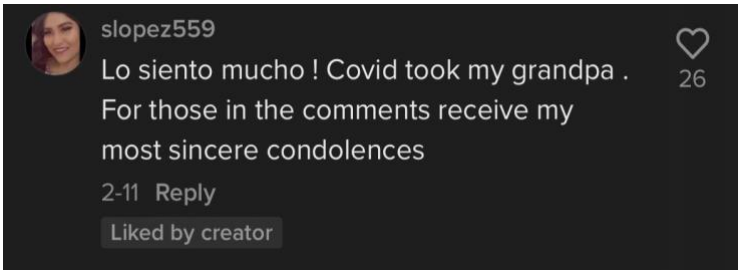
be impacted and killed by Covid-19, and this can be attested to the media's role in making the larger public assume it was an “old people only disease.” As Covid-19 progressed we saw that Covid-19 did not discriminate when it came to who was infected, and who died. An interesting comment that alluded to this change in content was by user @the_hubers who commented: “And this is the story of how millennials and gen z’s will kill all the boomers than post tearful tiktoks in remembrance of their dead grandparents,” on a TikTok video that was posted in March 2020 which was incredibly ageist. Unknowingly this user ultimately predicted trends we would see almost a year after the Covid-19 was announced to be a pandemic. These comments, unlike many comments that were found earlier in the pandemic, showed users expressing both their empathy and sympathy to the creators publishing their memorial-esque videos. In these comment sections users expressed their understanding of the grief/sorrow the creator was feeling through their own perspective. In slight contrast, other users who had no experience losing a loved one were able to express their empathy by putting themselves in the creator’s shoes and understanding why they had these emotions/feelings.

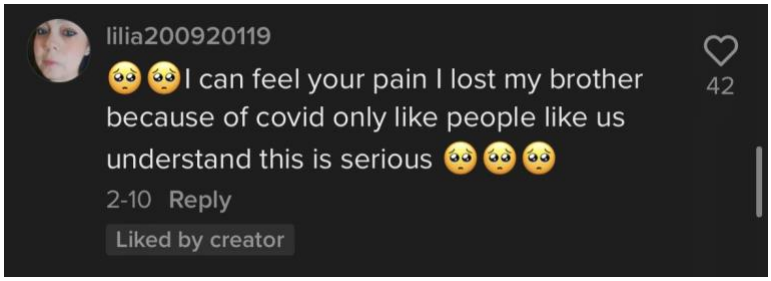
Many users went to the comments to vocalize how sorry they felt for what the creator was going through, and oftentimes they would recount how they too had lost a family member to Covid-19 in order to emphasize just how much they understood what the creator was going through. Within these comments we see a group of Gen-Z that is far different from earlier comment sections that were taking Covid-19 as a mockery and expressing how they wanted older adults to die. These comments reflect a group of individuals who have lived far into a pandemic to recognize why it was so serious to begin with, often expressing their regret in waiting too long to take Covid-19 seriously. Unfortunately, though, it took living through a pandemic and experiencing large amounts of loss/grief to see Covid-19 through that lens. In these comments users were able to sympathize with the creators by detailing specific events they

also went through during the pandemic. These details include their own painful memories of dealing with loved ones being in the hospital with Covid-19, with some as graphic as user @giz23m0 who detailed how they were screaming at their wife through a tablet as she was hospitalized for Covid-19. People in these comments often expressed that only people who have gone through loss due to Covid-19 are fully capable of understanding how serious Covid-19 is.

Those who had never experienced the real-life effects of Covid-19 were still able to express their empathy to the creators of the videos with the top comment on user @issacchris being by @bodybydreaa: “This tore my heart apart. I’m so sorry for your loss.” which amounted to 70.7 thousand likes. Users overwhelmingly expressed their condolences within these videos, regardless of whether they had experienced the same reality. The comments which detailed Gen-Z’s hatred for older adults shifted to Gen-Z for example feeling empathy for user @issacchris that had detailed losing his mother who happened to be 74 years old. In TikToks older adults were humanized and shown to be more than the narrow stereotypes associated with them. For user @issacchris the Baby Boomer that people were bashing in the beginning of the pandemic was his mother, and to others the concept of Covid-19 only being “The Boomer Remover " was also insensitive to their real-life experiences.







Concern

Like themes such as sympathy/empathy, we saw users expressing their concern over Covid-19 and urging other people to take it seriously. These comments could be found from the beginning of the pandemic to the latest TikTok in this study which was posted in February 2022. In the earlier TikToks we could see a few individuals commenting on the notion that Covid-19 wasn't going to affect only older adults, but rather that it could also affect immuno-compromised people; this was a way of attempting to bring awareness into the reality of who was going to be affected by Covid-19. User @provampirism commented that Covid-19 would not only affect older adults, but that it would also disproportionately affect the poor. Most of the comments that came out of concern mainly expressed the fact that Covid-19 would impact everyone, not just older adults. Earlier in the pandemic users outside of America were also urging to take Covid-19 seriously due to what they were experiencing in that moment, with a user from Italy commenting on a TikTok published in March 2020, emphasizing how Italians had also not taken the pandemic seriously and that in a matter of days they were under lockdown and considered a red zone country.

Table 4: Frequency Table of Most Common Emojis in Comments (N=200)

Emojis	Operational Definitions	Examples	n (%)
❤️	The red heart emoji which is usually used in warm emotional contexts. It can be used to express love, gratitude, hope or empathy/sympathy.	@mexicangal：COVID is not just a cough or a cold. It causes emotional, physical damage & depression & anxiety. It kills. Its real! Sorry for your loss ❤️	11
😭	The loudly crying emoji which is meant to symbolize uncontrollable /overwhelming feelings and sentiments. This can range from grief to hilarity and joy.	@krispy.cass：Everyone in the comments are pressed, I just want to know the song 😭 😭	7
🥺	The pleading face emoji which depicts a	@dezzcastremenda：Made me cry	7

	yellow face with large puppy dog eyes and adorns a frown. It is meant to represent pleading and/or trying to win ones' compassion or sympathy.	I'm soo soo sorry my mom was sick bad with Covid 🥺	
😂	The face with tears of joy emoji represents someone who is laughing so hard that tears are streaming down their face. It is used when something is funny or embarrassing.	@pidluvpooh: y'all seem musty anyways 😂	7

Overview

TikTok creators and users commonly used emojis in order to further demonstrate how they were feeling. For an individual who is unaware of how the younger age demographic uses emojis, many would be unaware that some popular emojis are used ironically and do not demonstrate what one would assume. Through my collection it was revealed that the most popular emoji used was the red heart emoji: ❤️ , and would later be followed by the loudly crying emoji:😭 , the pleading face emoji: 🥺 , and the tears of joy emoji: 😂 , all 7 times each. These emojis were predominantly used in a way that does not correspond to their original creation, and purpose; Many of these emojis inadvertently revealed more about how Gen-Z expresses their emotions and feelings– even some that were revealed to be much darker in nature. The purpose of clarifying these emojis, is to educate individuals on how their meaning can easily be manipulated, and to help with the age generational gap when it comes to knowing this information.

The Differentiating Meanings of: ❤️ , 😂 , 😭 , 🥺

In earlier TikTok videos it was more common to see the usage of the loudly crying emoji alongside the tears of joy emoji. While the loudly crying is described as representative of uncontrollable sadness hence the sobbing look it appears to have, many users used this emoji in an ironic way that symbolized they were laughing so hard that they were sobbing. An individual

without this information would look at a comment such as: @its_ya_boi_mitchell: Them getting the vaccines first too 😭 , to be representative of an individual being so upset that older adults are getting vaccines first that he is loudly crying, however this user is using this emoji as a way to express how funny he finds it that older adults were initially getting the vaccines first. Gen-Z has manipulated many of these crying-like emojis such as the tears of joy one over the years to change their meaning from predominantly being representative of sadness to hilarity. The tears of joy emoji: 😂 , at first glance may appear to be an emoji used in a sad context but throughout the comments it was used as a way of laughing. This emoji was overwhelmingly found in TikToks where users were making a mockery out of Covid-19 with comments such as: @laylee334:My grandparents just flew to Arizona and my grandpa said he hopes he catches the corona virus 😂 , being used to shoe how much of a joke Covid-19 was originally treated within America. The user @laylee334 is not crying over the fact her grandpa is still traveling despite CDC recommendations, but rather finding it laughable. In slight contrast, some users used the tears of joy emoji to emphasize how wrong individuals were in taking Covid-19 as a joke, with comments such as: @charleroux_late：But... But... Italy's literally on lock down 😂 .

In contrast some users used this loudly crying emoji to symbolize how much they empathized with content creators who posted videos associated with the death of a loved one and/or a content creator documenting their experience with Covid-19. Among these comments I saw that users used this emoji within their comments to emote an overwhelming amount of sadness and empathy/sympathy to content creators who posted these types of videos. Users used the loudly crying emotion to symbolize the user's almost hysterical sadness to viewing the video, a complete contrast from users who were using this emoji in a laughable manner before. The usage of this emoji revealed a Gen-Z that could understand the severity of Covid-19; however,

this took almost a year into the pandemic as more individuals (that did not fit the label of old and vulnerable) contracted Covid-19.

Similarly, users used the red heart emoji: 💔 , as a symbol of support and love to the content creators who had posted these videos. The red heart emoji served as a distinct way of showing empathy/sympathy for content creators who were experiencing grief/loss, with comments such as: @mexicangal:COVID is not just a cough or a cold. It causes emotional, physical damage & depression & anxiety. It kills. Its real! Sorry for your loss 💔 and @buttcrevice:she seems like she was the sweetest most heartwarming woman 💔 . Additionally, the emoji was used as an additional symbol of sending love and support. Adding onto an emotion of empathy, an emoji used in association to the red heart emoji was the pleading face emoji: 🥺 . This emoji is representative of an individual pleading and is often used to replicate someone on the verge of tears. The main goal in using this emoji is to achieve gaining one's sympathy or compassion. Users used the pleading face emoji to further prove how sorry they felt for content creators with comments such as: @lilia200920119: i🥺 🥺 I can feel your pain I lost my brother because of covid only like people like us understand this is serious 🥺 🥺 🥺. User @lilia200920119 used this emoji to symbolize her compassion and ultimate sympathy since she too had lost her brother to Covid-19. The pleading face emoji was used to demonstrate a variety of emotions: pity, empathy, sympathy and support.

Analysis & Conclusion

In my study the major goal was to prove how ageism within our society is often disregarded and ignored to be a valid "-ism," while we see the validations of other dangerous "-isms" such as sexism and racism. Prior to Covid-19, we had not had an exact history in time where we could see such obvious displays of ageism. In March 2020, Covid-19 was announced

as a pandemic, and a combination of public health officials and government leaders made it abundantly clear that older adults were the most at-risk category– often using the word "vulnerable" in association to old. During the pandemic the media emphasized the false narrative that Covid-19 would predominantly impact older people. Inevitably we saw a real-life manifestation of Theory of Mind which relates to unconsciously learning what we are shown through our mass media, as younger people were less likely to take Covid-19 seriously. TikTok allowed for real-life accounts of reactions to the pandemic, and it displayed ageism in a way that was not seen beforehand. Through my data collection I saw how the Covid-19 related content changed as the pandemic progressed, highlighting how Gen-Z's perspective on the pandemic changed as well.

When analyzing the TikToks made in the earlier onset of the pandemic there was a constant narrative found in both the TikTok content and the comment sections of those TikToks one that reflected Gen-Z'ers as having a sense of entitlement, and false perceived immunity to Covid-19. In these TikToks it was common to see content creators posting content that was blatantly ageist, and the most common narrative used to validate Gen-Z being accepting of Covid-19 potentially wiping out Baby Boomers went down to global warming. Gen-Z made claims that Baby Boomers cared less about global warming when it was brought up by their younger counterparts, because it "did not affect them." Gen-Z was quick to use this same excuse when ranting about how they were not fazed by Covid-19, because it was also "not going to affect them." The comments were often parallel to these videos, with users expressing their anger at Covid-19 changing their everyday lives and stating that older people deserved to die for their part in global warming. This was the most common argument used, but other comments were filled with stereotypes associated with older people that also made Gen-Z care less about their deaths– often referring to the pandemic as karma for older adults. In the most popular TikTok

videos around this time (March 2020-August 2020) it was more common to see videos that compared older adults to their younger counterparts during Covid-19. Baby Boomers were represented to be reacting in an almost overly exaggerated manner: wearing a mask right away, isolating themselves, disinfecting everything and overall being in a state of distress due to the announcement of Covid-19. Their younger counterparts were represented as being extremely lax, and essentially having a go with the flow type of attitude with depictions of Gen-Z booking cheap flights to the beach.

Through these TikToks we saw the real-life manifestation of Social Identity Theory, with younger individuals portraying themselves to be immune to Covid-19, and therefore free to reject CDC regulations. For Gen-Z it was easier to represent an identity with others who had these same attitudes in association with Covid-19, because it served as an ego-protective function to the possibility of impending death (North and Fiske, 2012). Older adults are already perceived in a negative manner due to what they represent: older = dying, and in a pandemic where death was a constant fear and reminder it served Gen-Z to believe they were immune and undeserving of attaining Covid-19 due to ageist reasons mentioned previously. Terror Management Theory further solidified the ageism expressed during the pandemic, by arguing that when confronted with the realization of their impending death, people tend to push away anything that reminds them of death, and in this scenario that was older adults (North and Fiske, 2012) It was evidently clear Gen-Z wanted to fit in with these same attitudes towards older adults and Covid-19 due to the traction these videos garnered in both views and likes, with user @sarahwandrie gaining 365k likes and 1.5 million views. In the earlier onset of videos, the comments reflected an astounding amount of hatred for older people who were classified as deviant and at fault for Covid-19 hence deserving of their death. Older adults' association to being viewed as deviant only made it easier for politicians to tackle Covid-19 through age-specific policies that were

deeply imbedded in ageism, as well as senicide that was disguised as medical protocols. However, much of this was unknown to the larger public who still accredited older adults to being causation of Covid-19 due to the same ageist manifestations found throughout mass media.

A year into the pandemic, I saw a shift in both the TikTok content that was the most relevant, as well as the comment section. The emotions depicted in these TikToks allowed to further solidify that Covid-19, initially, was viewed as a disease that would only impact the older generation. This false narrative led to ageism being normalized and manifested in earlier TikToks associated to Covid-19. In these TikToks Gen-Z would mock how serious older adults were taking Covid-19, and almost revel in the fact that Baby Boomers would be the ones most affected. The ageist content amplified as we saw the normalization of vengefulness against the older age population at risk, as well as the acceptance of indifference amongst the younger generations. Younger people displayed their strong emotions about believing they had every right not to care for the older population at risk and relaying the rhetoric that they deserved this. Younger people would make jokes out of the way Baby Boomers were reacting to the beginning of Covid-19 and continued to narrate how they [Gen-Z] were invincible to Covid-19. As the pandemic progressed, we were now equipped with the knowledge that Covid-19 was not just an "old person disease" but a disease that could impact both old, young and any individual in-between. The content creators that displayed their grief in very vulnerable TikToks allowed for the larger public to empathize and share the compassion that was missing in the beginning. These TikToks displayed victims of Covid-19 to be of differing ages, and even those who were older were still someone's sibling, parent, relative or friend.

Throughout the progression of the pandemic a shift in the comment section occurred that went from being inhumane and cruel to being predominantly filled with understanding and compassion of the people impacted by Covid-19. At the start of the pandemic a large amount of

Gen-Z had no real idea of the severity of Covid-19, and therefore were quick to find a scapegoat [Baby Boomers] to blame for the lockdown occurring. During this time, I recognized it was more common to use the loudly crying emoji: 😭, which was used in two different ways. In some comments the users used this emoji ironically, and to dub a TikTok making a mockery of Covid-19 to be so laughable that it would result in hysterically crying. Gen-Z was found to constantly switch the meaning of the loudly crying emoji depending on the context in which it was used. As the pandemic progressed, people were able to utilize TikTok as a platform where they could share their most intimate experiences associated with Covid-19, and this allowed for Gen-Z to have insight of the reality behind Covid-19, including the reality that Covid-19 impacted all. By having access to other people's experiences users were able to sympathize and offer even more real-life experiences associated to Covid-19. Furthermore, individuals who had never experienced loss due to Covid-19 were also able to express sadness and compassion through the creators personal and documented experience. Through the usage of the red heart emoji: ❤️ I was able to conclude that the red heart emoji served as a distinct way of showing empathy/sympathy for content creators who were experiencing grief/loss. Furthermore, it was also used as an additional symbol of sending love and support. Similarly, the usage of the pleading face emoji: 🥺, demonstrated a user trying to prove how sorry they felt and symbolized a variety of emotions including: pity, empathy, sympathy and support. In this later shift users also used emoji's differently with the loudly crying emoji being used to emphasize how much sorrow and empathy they felt for content creators. These TikTok videos will undeniably remain as permanent online memorials, and remainders of the effects of the pandemic. By personifying the range of victims in these TikToks they were essentially memorialized permanently via TikTok through these tribute-esque videos.

This change in TikTok content was a full circle moment for both Gen-Z and the larger public who at first believed Covid-19 would only impact older adults. Gen-Z recognized it should have been taken more seriously because of the different lives lost (including older adult figures). It shows the possibility of how different things would have turned out had the disease not been categorized as an old people only disease. Through my data collection I inevitably recognized the huge role mass media, and most specifically the app TikTok, had in influencing public opinions regarding the handling of Covid-19 amongst young people. On this app young people often shared their opinions on older adults being deserving or undeserving of death due to Covid-19. This study contributes not only to the field of ageism within sociology, but also to the real-life events that occurred during Covid-19 both virtually and in-person. It shows real life accounts of Gen-Z's reaction to the beginning of Covid-19 versus the aftermath. Through this collection of TikToks we can see how the media played a huge role in ageism being normalized, and the dangers of ageism when personified in an epidemic like Covid-19.

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