

# Ageism – an Invisible Challenge in User Research of Information Science?

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## **Abstract**

Information behavior researchers focus on the human aspects of information interactions and tend to categorize participants with descriptive variables to uncover relationships between behaviors and study participants. Age is a common demographic variable in information science research. However, using age as the sole variable can lead to stereotypical perceptions and ageist beliefs. This study aims to explore the stereotypical assessment of the age group 60+ in relation to technical competence. Quantitative data on the assessment of different age groups were collected from 262 individuals through an online survey. The data were summarized using descriptive statistics. *t*-tests were used to reveal differences in demographics and the average estimation of age groups. The results show a strong indication of other-directed ageism, but no self-directed ageism for technical competence. Additionally, a strong sexist perception of femininity and technical competence became evident in the analysis. This result is a product of self-directed sexism, as female participants rated themselves lower in technical competence. The mean assessment of technical competence varies more between the age and gender groups than the results of social and organizational competence, indicating that stereotypical negative ideas of age and gender are present especially in technical competence. The findings of this study show stereotypical assessment of individuals based on the perceived age of the other person. This is particularly strong in the technical area and is reinforced by gender to the disadvantage of older adults. It remains a challenge to limit the effects of ageism and other forms of discrimination in the research design of user studies in HCI or information science. However, as a researcher investigating user behavior, it is important to identify and address them.

**Keywords:** user study, user research, ageism, age, older adults, information behavior, human-computer interaction, HCI

## 1 Introduction

In a literature review, Hillebrand (2022) examined empirical studies in information behavior research on the information needs and usage of information and communication technology (ICT) among older adults. Of the papers reviewed, 69% focused on health-related topics. The study confirmed that there is still limited research on older adults outside of health-relevant issues (Asla et al., 2006). Furthermore, the results support the deficit discourse on older adults that Vines et al. (2015) explored in human-computer interaction (HCI) and Lundh (2016) criticized in information behavior research with children. The central argument of the authors is that for both age groups, too much research focuses on what they cannot do yet or what they can no longer do. This results in an attributed helplessness for young and old, which is to be solved by technology development. For older adults, technology is seen as a solution or a reduction of risks associated with aging (Neven, 2011; Vines et al., 2015). Technology is expected to balance the limitations of biological aging, for instance, by using ICT to break down age-related isolation (e.g., Khosravi et al., 2016).

Aging is not always viewed positively in society. Social and cultural research is investigating how aging and death are perceived in society and the consequences that arise from this (e.g., Nelson, 2005; North & Fiske, 2012; Chonody et al., 2014). When age is perceived primarily as a negative variable, this can be fertile ground for ageism. Ayalon and Tesch-Römer (2018) defined ageism as the complex, often negative construction of (old) age. Older individuals are viewed as a homogeneous group. Ageism is a special form of discrimination because it (a) applies to all people and (b) is widespread and accepted in society. No other group than older adults is openly stereotyped, with people believing that they are not expressing negative stereotypes or prejudice but merely true statements about older adults (Nelson, 2011). These outward biases can become internalized and inflict self-directed ageism. The rejection and fears of one's own aging process and the lack of social

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