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Published online: 07 Feb 2025.

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Middle School Students Portray Childism Via Memes

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ABSTRACT

Background: An educational intervention to reduce ageism was conducted with middle school students, who created memes about ageism toward older adults.
Method: 274 memes were analyzed thematically and visually to uncover key messages about ageism.
Findings: Although the focus was on ageism toward older adults, 99 memes (36%) addressed other forms of ageism, with 47 (17%) specifically highlighting childism. Two types of childism – other-directed and self-directed – emerged. Students used memes to express negative assumptions about their behaviors, cognition, and physical abilities due to their young age, while some memes actively challenged these stereotypes by promoting empowerment, age equality, and the rejection of childism.
Conclusion: Childism is a significant issue among middle school students, calling for increased research and policy focus. Guiding students to create anti-ageist memes offers a promising intervention strategy.

Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO) issued a global call to combat ageism given its negative impact on older persons (Officer & de la Fuente-Núñez, 2018). We sought to examine the effectiveness of an educational intervention aimed at eradicating ageism among middle school students, in line with the WHO's recommendations (2018). To accomplish this, we designed an experiential educational workshop on ageism and delivered it to 30 groups of 6th and 9th-graders in eight different schools in Israel. The workshop lasted approximately an hour and a half, and featured information related to age, ageism, old age, and aging. Its overarching goal was to raise awareness among tweens/teenagers about ageism, mobilize them to act against ageism on social media, and ultimately reduce ageist attitudes in Israeli society. Results concerning the intervention's outcomes are reported elsewhere (Suberry et al., 2024). In this article, we focus on the visual and thematic analysis of 274 online memes

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generated by school students during a workshop, all of which addressed the theme of ageism. Our primary aim is to explore the key messages that tweens choose to convey when crafting memes about ageism. It is important to note that even though the intervention was aimed at addressing ageism toward older adults, 99 memes (36%) addressed other forms of ageism, with 47 of these (17%) focusing on childism (ageism toward children). Our main focus here is on the memes that addressed childism.

Ageism

Ageism refers to stereotypes (how we think), prejudices (how we feel) and discrimination (how we act) toward people based on their age (WHO, 2021). It can operate at the institutional, interpersonal, or self-directed levels. Institutional ageism refers to the laws, rules, social norms, policies and practices of institutions that unfairly restrict opportunities and systematically disadvantage individuals because of their age. Interpersonal ageism arises in interactions between two or more individuals, whereas self-directed ageism occurs when ageism is internalized and turned against oneself (Okun & Ayalon, 2022; WHO, 2021).

Ageism starts in childhood and is reinforced over time. From an early age, children pick up cues from those around them about their culture's stereotypes and prejudices, which are soon internalized. People then use these stereotypes (other-directed ageism) to make inferences and to guide their feelings and behaviors toward people of different ages and toward themselves (self-directed ageism) (B. Levy, 2009). Ageism often intersects and interacts with other forms of stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination, including ableism, sexism, and racism. Multiple intersecting forms of bias compound disadvantage and make the effects of ageism on individuals' health and wellbeing even worse (Levy, 2021; Okun & Ayalon, 2022; WHO, 2021).

Ageism against younger age groups

To date, the existing literature on ageism has focused on ageism directed toward older adults, including several systematic reviews on the determinants, impact, and measurement of ageism and available strategies to reduce ageism (e.g. Ayalon et al., 2019; Burnes et al., 2019; Chang et al., 2020; Marques et al., 2020). These same issues, however, have not been adequately or systematically explored in relation to younger age groups, including children (de la Fuente-Núñez et al., 2021). Although ageism is a general term for age discrimination, not specific to any age group, usually it is used to refer to the experiences of older people. Articles that refer specifically to ageism toward young age groups, use a variety of different terms, such as childism, youthism, or juvenile ageism (de la Fuente-Núñez

et al., 2021; Spongberg-Ross, 2022). The plurality of terms possibly creates a lack of clarity and understanding concerning ageism toward younger people.

Ageism against children (childism)

Childism refers to negative stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination toward children due to their young age (Young-Bruehl, 2012). This phenomenon manifests through condescending attitudes, the exclusion from public spaces, and the implementation of policies undermining children's rights (Burman, 2007).

Childism stems from beliefs that children should be neither seen nor heard, are dangerous or incompetent, and exist to serve adults' needs (Tanu & Wall, 2023; Young-Bruehl, 2012). There is a tendency to dismiss children's opinions on issues directly impacting them like schooling or activities (Tanu & Wall, 2023). Within school systems, teachers relate negatively to students based on ageist assumptions – underestimating abilities or behaving condescendingly (Williams & Ferber, 2008). At a societal level, public policy often neglects children's needs and rights. For instance, children's voices are rarely considered in legal proceedings, and funding programs discriminate against children compared to other age groups (Hagestad & Uhlenberg, 2005).

Like the broader concept of ageism, childism manifests in both benevolent and hostile forms (Spongberg-Ross, 2022). Benevolent childism uses pro-children rhetoric to justify self-serving economic decisions by adults. Hostile childism assigns unfavorable stereotypes to children reflecting generational disconnects. Institutional childism involves social systems dismissing children's interests, while individual instances entail disrespecting a child's development (Westman, 1991).

The related concept of adultism refers to stereotypes assuming children are incompetent, inexperienced and reliant on all-knowing adults to impose decisions without consent (de la Fuente-Núñez et al., 2021). Adultism perpetuates power imbalances reinforced by institutions and customs. Manifestations include over-victimization, infantilization or romanticization of children (de la Fuente-Núñez et al., 2021).

Although childism is common, the research in this field is extremely limited (Lamb, 2022). In fact, the narrower view of ageism against older persons is more common (Ayalon & Tesch-Romer, 2018; Lamb, 2022). This means that the negative effect of childism on the health or wellbeing of children is unclear (de la Fuente-Núñez et al., 2021). In addition, we found no studies that deal with children's self-directed ageism. Given the lack of research on the topic and the fact that ageism toward older people has shown to be detrimental, it is essential to carry out further studies concerning childism.

The global campaign to combat ageism

With the goal of changing the way we think, feel and act toward people because of their age and aging, the WHO has launched a global campaign to combat ageism (Officer & de la Fuente-Núñez, 2018). In their campaign's report (WHO, 2021), the WHO proposed four strategies to combat ageism. The first strategy is policy and law enforcement for age equality and legislation of new laws in the field. The second strategy is educational interventions about age and aging. The third strategy is intergenerational contact interventions: the strengthening of inter-generational interactions. The fourth strategy, which has limited empirical support, is engaging in campaigns to combat ageism: use of media advertisement to change the negative narratives surrounding age and aging (WHO, 2018, 2021). It is also important to note that Okun and Aylon (2022) identified "inner work" as the fifth way to eliminate self-ageism. According to their research, while the first four strategies deal mainly with combatting other-directed ageism, the fifth strategy represents a fight against self-ageism (Okun & Ayalon, 2022).

The workshop "it is for our age!"

In response to the WHO's recommendations (2021), our study combined educational and media approaches to combat ageism. To do so, we developed the "It is for Our Age!" workshop, which is a social and educational program. We spent about seven months creating the workshop's content, which aims to promote a message of affirmation and agreement for all ages to combat ageism in Israeli society. The workshop's title, "It is for Our Age "has a double meaning in Hebrew. The first and more obvious meaning is an affirmation of all ages (In Hebrew: זה כן לגילנו), emphasizing an egalitarian and anti-ageist message. The second, more subtle meaning, "too old for our age" (In Hebrew: זקן לגילנו) highlights a very ageist message. The name of the workshop reflects the team's vision to raise awareness of ageism and promote a more equal society for all ages. However, the focus of the workshop was on ageism toward older people.

The workshop is an interactive 90-minute session, supported by a PowerPoint presentation that includes both theoretical and practical elements. The first 45-minute segment introduces the phenomenon of ageism toward older adults, exploring its negative effects through a combination of presentations, videos, images, discussions, and a flashcard game. The second 45-minute segment focuses on the role of media campaigns in driving social change. During this portion, we presented students with examples of successful social campaigns on various topics, such as environmental conservation and health, highlighting the significant influence of media in shaping social change in Israel. Although various tools can be employed for media

campaigns, this segment specifically concentrated on training students in creating online memes. Each student was given the freedom to select an image and text to craft a meme aimed at addressing and combating ageism.

Online memes

Although there are a variety of tools for carrying out media campaigns, in this workshop we taught school students to prepare online memes – a type of digital poster with image and/or text, which widely distributes social messages through the internet (Bingbing & Pinto, 2021; Kertcher & Turin, 2020). Memes can be used for various purposes, from humor and entertainment to social commentary and activism. They have become a significant part of the internet culture and are a way for people to express themselves, share ideas, and engage with social and current events in a critical, playful, or creative manner (Bingbing & Pinto, 2021; Kertcher & Turin, 2020).

The present study

The present study analyzes online memes produced by school students during the "It is for Our Age!" workshop – a structured educational program designed to promote age inclusivity and challenge ageist stereotypes in Israeli society. This study stands out because of its comprehensive integration of educational and media strategies, aligning with the WHO's (2021) recommendations for combating ageism. As part of the intervention, students learned to create memes addressing ageism, using this medium as a means of social commentary and awareness. While the memes were not disseminated during the workshop, we anticipated that students would independently use this tool to craft and share additional positive messages about age in their personal social networks. We hypothesized that disseminating the memes would contribute to reducing ageism across different age groups, fostering intergenerational understanding and solidarity.

Methodology

Data collection

Between October 2022 to March 2023–318 Israeli middle school students (aged 11 to 15, 73.4% females) from eight schools (five in central Israel, three in southern Israel) participated in "It is for Our Age!" workshop. Although some of the study participants were teenagers (aged 14–15), most were tweens (aged 11–13), that is, at an age between childhood and adolescence (Eccles, 1999). Tweens are on the younger spectrum preceding the teenage years, generally ending around age 12 or entering age 13.

While exact age ranges may vary slightly across contexts, ages 12–13 tend to demarcate the shift from tweens to teenagers developmentally. The tween stage captures pre-teen transitions leading into adolescent maturity (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2010). Participants' anonymity was kept, and they were identified using a unique registration number. The school students and their parents signed a digital informed consent. The research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee (approval no. 82203) and by the relevant educational authority (approval no. 13103).

During the second part of the workshop, we introduced the students to the concept of memes, explaining how they can be used to convey social messages. We also guided them on how to use "meme generator" websites (e.g., https://www.memeking.co.il/). The students were encouraged to craft a meme that would contribute to the fight against ageism, with complete freedom to choose the message and convey it through both image and text. they experimented with creating memes about ageism on their mobile devices and uploaded their creations to a shared online board via the Padlet website (https://he.padlet.com/). The workshop concluded with a presentation of the memes, which were projected on a screen in the classroom for everyone to view. The 290 memes created during the workshop form the research corpus for this study.

Data analysis

In this study, we conducted a visual and thematic analysis of 290 memes created by school students. The objective was to identify the content characteristics of these memes, which were generated by tweens following an hour and a half of educational and experiential activities focused on ageism and social campaign. Our analysis was guided by the thematic and visual analysis methods outlined in Kertcher and Turin (2020). We executed our analysis in three stages: classification, coding, and in-depth examination.

Step 1: classification

The first and second authors collected the memes produced during the workshops and organized them into folders based on preliminary categories, assigning a unique number to each meme. Of the 290 memes created by the students, 16 were identified as addressing topics unrelated to ageism, such as memes about the weather or TV shows. These irrelevant memes were excluded from the research corpus, resulting in a final dataset of 274 memes for further analysis. This dataset formed the basis for the subsequent coding and in-depth analysis procedures.

Step 2: coding

Each author conducted a detailed and interpretive examination of the 274 relevant memes, analyzing both the visual and verbal elements to uncover the nuanced connections between the images and the accompanying text. The three authors convened to discuss the memes, identify recurring content themes, and categorize them into main categories and subcategories. Defining these categories was an iterative process, involving a comprehensive review of all memes. Categories were adjusted as necessary; for example, a preliminary category on additional forms of discrimination (e.g., sexism, racism) was removed due to insufficient evidence, while a new category on the prevalence of the term "ageism" was introduced as it emerged as a significant theme.

Step 3: In-depth analysis

In the final stage, the first and second authors extensively reviewed the coding tables to identify the most prominent themes that consistently emerged across the data. They selected representative memes for each category/theme to illustrate these themes. This review process yielded insights into the students' perceptions and expressions regarding ageism. When distinctions between categories and subcategories were ambiguous, the three authors engaged in discussions to reach a consensus on the most dominant thematic associations. This collaborative approach ensured that the categorization and interpretation of the memes were reached through a consensus.

Results

The thematic and visual analysis of memes created by Israeli middle school students as part of the "It is for Our Age!" workshop, yielded numerous insights (Suberry et al., 2024). However, this paper specifically focuses on the subset of memes that addressed childism. This allows us to explore the unique ways in which students depicted and responded to childism, which emerged as a significant theme in their creative outputs. The analysis of these memes led to the identification of four key findings, which are discussed in detail below: (1) "childism? There is such a thing!" (2) Two types of childism – other-directed childism and self-directed childism (3) "They are just children, what do they understand?" –The most common ageist stereotypes reported by children (4) Three ways to combat childism – rejecting the phenomenon, glorifying younger persons, and empowering younger persons and echoing messages for age-equality.

The first finding: "childism? There is such a thing!"

Out of the 274 memes related to ageism, we found that 175 (63.87%) of the memes focused on *ageism towards older adults and aging*, whereas 99 (36.13%)

Table 1. Themes generated as part of the workshop (*N* = 274).

Who is the target of ageism?	Older persons	Children/Tweens/Teenagers	People of all ages
N	175	47	52
Prevalence (%)	63.87	17.15	18.98

memes referred to *childism* or *general ageism* (toward people of all ages). More specifically, despite the workshop's primary focus on the phenomena of ageism toward older adults and aging, 47(17.15%) workshop participants have chosen to use memes to combat *childism*, and 52 (18.98%) participants used them to combat *general ageism* (ageism directed toward people of all ages, including children). Table 1 illustrates the three main topics identified in the memes.

Whereas 17% might seem small at first glance, the importance of this finding lies in highlighting the prominence of *childism*. We were surprised to discover that although the workshop we produced was focused on learning about ageism toward older persons and aging, the students were interested in, talked about, and created memes on the subject of ageism toward younger persons. The significance of the finding is that there is a need to further study and delve deeper into this phenomenon and to initiate actions to combat it. Additionally, as part of improving the educational strategy for combating ageism toward older persons, the first finding stresses the importance of creating a deeper identification among school students with the problem by addressing childism – the type of ageism that they themselves experience.

The second finding: two types of childism – other-directed childism and self-directed childism

In the thematic and visual analysis of the memes that focused on ageism toward children (e.g., childism), two types of childism were identified: Ageism by the general public directed toward children (*other-directed childism*), and ageism of children toward themselves and their peers because of their age (*self-directed childism*).

Other-directed childism

Most memes in this category focused on *other-directed childism*, that is, presenting the negative perceptions that exist in society regarding children, issues of excluding children, making fun of children, and so on (see Figure 1). Meme 1.1, for example, reflects the childism experienced by children when they stand in line, and often just because of their age – people or older children push them aside or cut in front of them. This meme expresses ageism toward children by depicting an experience where the pelican (representing a child) initially thinks there is no line and it can pass easily, but then realizes it was

Meme 1.1   **Meme 1.2**

Meme 1.1 contains two pictures: on top, an excited pelican seeing no line, with the text "Yes! No line." Below, the disappointed pelican crashed into a glass window, realizing "They skipped me because I'm small."

Meme 1.2 depicts a woman with a scornful expression accompanied by the text: "Kids today" and two panicked/disappointed emoji faces. In the bottom part of the meme, it says - "I'm not angry."

Figure 1. Examples of memes that focus on children-directed ageism.

skipped because of its small size. This reflects the feeling that children are less important or neglected due to their age or size. The main message is that children feel they are disadvantaged simply because they are small, highlighting the discrimination they face. Another example of other-directed childism is meme 1.2, which echoes the common phrase and societal perception regarding the inferiority of the younger generation. The scornful expression and critical text convey the older generation's disappointment in the behavior of the younger generation. The irony in the meme highlights the discrepancy between the expressed sentiment and the visual cue, underscoring the ingrained bias and prejudice against children.

Self-directed childism
Alongside presenting experiences of *other-directed childism*, there were also memes that reflected *self-directed childism*. In these memes, we identified the internalization and adoption of negative perceptions of young age by the students who participated in the study. As a result of childism, there are children who internalized and adopted the social expectation concerning the ways they should behave, dress, and think. The prominent use of first person (I/we) in the memes was noticeable, in the sense that the meme creator "inserts her/himself" into the meme (see Figure 2).

In meme 2.1 we see a child, dressed in an oversize suit, staring at the camera with an innocent yet awkward expression. The suit jacket shoulders sag around his slender frame, the sleeves fully cover his hands. This creates a disconnect between the childlike features of his face and the formal adultness of his attire. One interpretation is that

חמישי נודר
שישי דוקר
שבת שומר

Meme 2.1   **Meme 2.2**

Meme 2.1 shows a child, dressed in an oversized suit, staring at the camera with an innocent yet awkward expression. The suit jacket shoulders sag around his slender frame, the sleeves fully cover his hands.

Meme 2.2 shows a child with a grumpy face and a clenched fist giving him an angry and tough appearance. The text accompanying the meme is: "On Thursday swearing, on Friday stabbing, on Saturday repenting."

Figure 2. Examples of memes that focus on children's self-directed ageism.

this boy chose to dress in the aesthetic style of a mature grown-up, despite the comical juxtaposition of his youthful appearance. Like how some older adults attempt to dress "younger than their age," donning styles from decades past, perhaps this boy is engaging in reverse-ageism through his manner of dressing. His oversize suit hints at a desire to be seen as more mature, responsible, and serious rather than be confined by stereotypical assumptions about childhood. However, his facial expression betrays the discomfort of sacrificing authentic self-expression for the sake of appearances. In this reading, this meme surfaces the tension felt by those who internalize ageist attitudes toward their own age group. Though speculative, this meme provokes consideration of how age-based stereotyping can start from an early age.

Another example of *self-directed childism* is meme 2.2, which shows a child with a grumpy face and a clenched fist having an angry and tough appearance. The text accompanying the meme is: "On Thursday swearing, on Friday stabbing, on Saturday repenting." These are a sequence of rhyming expressions in Hebrew. The meme reflects the stereotype of youth as unruly, criminals, and violent, as those who on the weekend go out to commit acts of violence ("on Thursday swearing" and "on Friday stabbing"), and then the next day repent ("on Saturday repenting"). This meme perhaps reflects a teenager who internalized and adopted the negative stereotype about violent youth and is echoing it.

Like the familiar distinction between *other-directed ageism* toward adults and *self-directed ageism* among older adults (Levy, 2009), the second finding shows that in the context of younger age as well there are two types of ageism - *other-directed childism* and *self-directed childism*, and the two lead to and amplify each other. It appears that the negative perceptions that exist in society

toward children seep in and are internalized, to the extent that some of participants even adopt them over the course of their childhood.

The third finding: "they are just children, what do they understand?" the most common ageist stereotypes reported by children

Mapping the memes created as part of the workshops points to the three ageist stereotypes that are most troubling for school students: *Stereotypes related to children's behaviors, stereotypes related to children's cognitive abilities and stereotypes related to children's physical abilities* (see Figure 3):

Stereotypes related to children's behaviors

Some of the memes produced by school students address the ageist perceptions that society holds regarding children's behavior, which often leads to their exclusion from certain places or events in public spaces, as well as various age-related restrictions. These perceptions are rooted in the stereotype that children are inherently disruptive or poorly behaved. For instance, Meme 3.1 illustrates the childism experienced by children when they are prevented from entering certain stores due to the negative stereotype that "all kids make noise and create a mess." This meme depicts an offended and angry-looking cat with the text underneath: "When they don't let me into a store because I'm too little." The meme poignantly reflects the frustration and exclusion that children feel when barred from entering a store solely because of their age, highlighting the ageist belief that children are inherently troublesome.

Meme 3.1   Meme 3.2   Meme 3.3

Meme 3.1 depicts an offended/angry looking cat, with the text underneath: "When they don't let me into a store because I'm too little."

Meme 3.2 depicts a surprised looking child. The top headline of the meme says: "When you grow up, you'll understand..." and the bottom line says: "I'm already big enough."

Meme 3.3 includes a picture of a child with a tough expression, displaying strength, and a clenched fist. The top text is: "Little but strong" and the bottom: "There's no difference between us."

Figure 3. Examples of memes that focus on ageist stereotypes reported by children.

Stereotypes related to children's cognitive abilities

There were several memes that specifically addressed the negative stereotypes in society about children's cognitive abilities. These stereotypes, which often portray children as scatterbrained, lacking knowledge, or incapable of understanding complex concepts, can lead to their exclusion from certain activities or programs solely based on their age. Meme 3.2 is a clear reflection of this issue. It depicts a surprised-looking child, with the top text stating: "When you grow up, you'll understand…" and the bottom text responding: "I'm already big enough." This meme highlights one of the common phrases used by adults, especially parents, to dismiss a child's curiosity or desire for understanding. By using this phrase, adults imply that children are not mature enough to grasp certain concepts, which can be frustrating and disempowering for the child. In this meme, the student is expressing the frustration of being subjected to this ageist stereotype, while asserting that he/she, as a child, is already capable, knowledgeable, and understanding.

Stereotypes related to children's physical abilities

Some memes addressed negative societal perceptions concerning children's physical abilities, specifically the stereotypes that portray children as weak, dependent, and in need of constant support. These stereotypes often lead to the exclusion of children from certain events and activities solely based on their age. For example, Meme 3.3 features an image of a child with a determined expression, displaying strength by clenching his fist. The meme's text reads: "Little but strong" at the top and "There's no difference between us" at the bottom. This meme challenges the prevailing stereotype of the "weak child" and aims to dismantle it by conveying the message that strength is not inherently tied to age.

The third finding shows that childism is linked to three central ageist stereotypes that are most troubling/disturbing school students. If the current research does indeed assist in expanding academic research into "childism" and encourages the social struggle to eradicate this phenomenon, then the third finding can help focus the contents of these efforts.

The fourth finding: three ways to combat childism

Analysis of the memes points to three different ways in which school students use memes to combat childism via memes – *rejecting the phenomenon, empowering young age* and *echoing messages for age-equality* (see Figure 4). The three approaches complement each other, aiming to undermine ageist stereotypes and promote a more equal and inclusive perception. While the first launches a frontal attack against the phenomenon, the second seeks to strengthen the status and abilities of children and teenagers, and the third strives to bridge intergenerational gaps by emphasizing common ground.
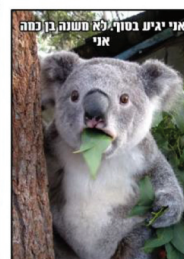
meme 4.1 depicts a cartoon of figures that appear mobilized for a demonstration or some kind of struggle. The meme's text (from top to bottom, right to left) states: "Who are we | People | And what do we want | To stop ageism | When | Nowwwww"

meme 4.2 depicts a girl holding in her palm a small figure of an older dancing happy woman. At the top appears the text: "Enough with ageism."

Meme 4.3 depicts a collage with a child at its center surrounded by various media channels such as cameras and the Netflix logo. The meme's headline states: "You don't have to be an older adult to be a celeb."

Meme 4.4 depicts a child in formal adult attire (including suit/tie/black glasses) with a look, hand gesture and expression of a "boss." The top headline is the child's quote: "Vote CCBFT (=Children Can Be Formal Too)."

Meme 4.5 shows two characters - an adult and a child. The adult wears large, black glasses (an accessory that adds to the "intelligent" stereotype), and next to him is a figure of a child/baby with a clenched fist and a serious expression. The meme's headline states: "You can be smart at any age".

Meme 4.6 shows sloth (Folivora) between trees while eating leaves. The text above the sloth states: "I'll get there eventually, no matter how old I am."

Figure 4. Examples of rejecting ageism via memes.

Rejecting ageism

Some memes included a brief, negative, and matter-of-fact presentation of the ageism phenomenon. These memes made extensive use of terms such as "no"/"enough"/"stop"/"resist," etc. In addition, these memes featured

prominent use of the term ageism in its various forms (e.g, ageist, ageistic) or terms related to defining the ageism phenomenon, such as: discrimination, age racism. Although these memes did not necessarily include explicit verbal or visual reference to childism, their overall message is combating ageism among people of all ages, including children. For instance, meme 4.1 depicts a cartoon of figures that appear mobilized for a demonstration or some kind of struggle. The meme's text (from top to bottom, right to left) states: Who are we | People | And w'hat do we want | To stop ageism | When | Nowwwww" (in the last word the last letter is repeated, in a manner fitting internet slang whose meaning is echoing the word and message). The message being "people want to go out now immediately without delay to combat ageism." Another example is meme 4.2 which depicts a girl holding in her palm a small figure of an older dancing happy woman. At the top appears the text: "Enough with ageism." In this meme, the school student chose to connect the young woman with the older woman, as the young woman holds the older woman, creating some sort of dialogue between them, perhaps a role reversal. The phrase "enough with ageism" breaks with and undermines the girl's suspicious expression upon seeing the older woman dancing.

Empowering and glorifying younger age

In contrast to the previous way of promoting the struggle against childism by negating the phenomenon, there were memes that included a positive presentation, appreciation, and empowerment of childhood. These positive messages shatter the common ageist stereotypes presented in the previous finding. For instance, meme 4.3 depicts a collage with a child at its center surrounded by various media channels such as cameras and the Netflix logo. The meme's headline states: "You don't have to be an older adult to be a celeb." The message conveyed by this meme is that there is no age limit to fame and success in the media, and a child can also succeed in various mediums and become a "celeb" (an important and well-known person). Another example can be seen in meme 4.4 which depicts a child in formal adult attire (including suit/tie/black glasses) with a look, hand gesture and expression of a "boss." The top headline is the child's quote: "Vote CCBFT (=Children Can Be Formal Too)." It appears this meme seeks to shatter the stigma regarding children's lack of involvement in and understanding of politics, to deny the stigma regarding the younger generation's flightiness, etc. To shatter this stigma, the current meme glorifies and empowers the child's abilities through an imagined situation where children establish a party and try to sway the public to vote for them. This party has a name like that of "older adults," and the message is that there is no age limit for political and social involvement, external appearance, and formality of people.

Echoing messages for age-equality

The third strategy used by the participants to fight against childism was echoing calls for age equality. This is reflected in memes that highlighted similarities between young and old. The central idea conveyed in these memes was that age does not define a person's skills, wisdom, talent, or character. By propagating this notion that "age is just a number," the participants attempted to break down prejudicial assumptions about young people's abilities and worth. They are fighting prejudice by spreading an inclusive vision of equality, reminding society that both children and elders can possess positive virtues.

Meme 4.5, for example, tries to fight childism by presenting an adult and a child, who are equally smart. In this meme two characters are shown – an adult and a child. The adult wears large, black glasses (an accessory that adds to the "intelligent" stereotype), and next to him is a figure of a child/baby with a clenched fist and a serious expression. The meme's headline states: "You can be smart at any age." Meme 4.6 also demonstrates the third strategy of promoting age equality to combat ageism. In this meme, a sloth (Folivora) is depicted between trees while eating leaves. Sloths are known for their extremely lethargic movement – they only move when necessary and even then, at a very gradual pace. The text above the sloth states: "I'll get there eventually, no matter how old I am." The message conveyed is that traits like strength, industriousness, speed of movement and pace are variable qualities, not dependent on age. Similarly, the meme asserts that one's choice of motion and progress is unrelated to age or life stage.

Discussion

This study explores the phenomenon of childism through social media memes produced as part of an educational workshop on ageism. By framing our research within the WHO's recommendations (2021), we explain how an educational intervention program can potentially address childism in Israeli society. While our research did not examine a reduction in ageism toward children, it did reveal the existence of ageism against children and suggests that memes can be used to reflect and communicate messages on age-related issues even in the context of childism.

The first finding, "childism? there's such a thing!" shows that while most literature on ageism focuses on ageism toward older adults (de la Fuente-Núñez et al., 2021), childism is an existing and disturbing ageist phenomenon that needs greater attention, given its presence in the lives of tweens. This conclusion is based on the fact that approximately 36% of the students, when tasked with creating messages against ageism toward older adults, chose instead to create messages addressing ageism across all ages or specifically targeted childism.

Although most of the participants in the research were tweens their messages primarily dealt with experiences of childism, rather than youthism or adultism, which characterize ageism toward somewhat younger persons at the ages between childhood and adolescence. This can be explained by the unique characteristics of the "tweens," an in-between age range bridging childhood and adolescence (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2010). Individuals in this age group are still laden with memories and experiences from their childhood, on the one hand, not entirely detached from their identity as children, and on the other hand, already in the process of forming their identity as tweens/teenagers. According to Eccles (1999), children at this age experience significant social and emotional changes, including increased self-awareness and struggles with personal identity and self-image. Additionally, during this period, they undergo internal conflicts between autonomy and dependence, where the desire for independence from the family background coexists with continued dependence in certain areas. Children at this age also experience tension between the world of childhood and the emerging value system of being adults. In any case, it is a challenging period that requires adaptation and flexibility for young children on their journey to adolescence (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2010).

The fact that 36% of the participants chose to create memes addressing ageism across all ages or specifically targeting childism, rather than focusing on ageism toward older adults, suggests that when educating children to combat ageism against older adults, it is advisable to first explain and illustrate the stereotypes and biases that children themselves experience. In other words, when seeking to increase children's awareness of the biases and prejudices toward older people, it is worthwhile to create a sense of personal identification with the issue in advance. This can be explained by the tendency of people to understand and take negative phenomena more seriously when they relate to them or to those close to them, and less so when it comes to strangers or distant individuals (Batson et al., 2005; Kogut & Ritov, 2007).

The second finding, "two types of childism – other-directed childism and self-directed childism," also contributes significantly to the existing literature in the field, because until today, a distinction between these two types of ageism has mostly been identified in the context of older adults. B. Levy (2009) argued that other-directed ageism pertains to ageism directed toward others, encompassing stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination exhibited toward people of other age groups, particularly older adults. According to the Stereotype Embodiment Theory (Levy, 2009), other-directed ageism leads to individuals experiencing self-directed ageism, internalizing and adopting negative attitudes and beliefs about their own aging. The fact that the workshop participants created messages encompassing both other-directed childism and self-directed childism, suggests that both types exist in the context of

childism and not only in the context of ageism. Moreover, it is possible that also in the case of childism, other-directed childism may lead to self-directed childism, meaning the adoption of negative stereotypes and their internalization.

In the broader context of existing research, the literature primarily centered around self-ageism in the older adult population (Levy, 2009), limited attention has been directed toward exploring the possibility of younger persons harboring negative attitudes toward their own age. Ansello (1978), for instance, posited that children grappling with severe chronic illnesses may be predisposed to yearning for adulthood, perceiving childhood as constrictive. Additionally, Pinquart (2021) contended that gifted children might develop negative perceptions about themselves due to social and cognitive disparities with their peers. Consequently, our secondary finding stands out for its novelty, as it introduces the term "self-directed childism" for the first time, suggesting that certain children may manifest negative attitudes or stereotypes regarding their own age.

According to the third finding, "They are just children, what do they understand?," middle school students in Israel experience three main negative stereotypes related to their age: stereotypes concerning misbehaviors, low cognitive abilities, and physical weakness associated with their younger age. This finding is consistent with previous studies on ageism directed at children, emphasizing the social tendency to perceive children as helpless victims, lacking strength and independent action (Buzzi, 1998). According to this finding, children experience stereotypes that view them as less valuable, less developed, less rational, or less qualified to make decisions compared to adults (Young-Bruehl, 2012). They also experience condescending attitudes, lack of respect of their privacy, and disregard for their unique needs and desires (Young-Bruehl, 2012).

This finding is important because previous studies have shown that negative stereotypes toward children pose numerous problems (Lamb, 2022). According to Sullivan and colleagues (2014), these stereotypes may undermine the education system and lead educators to perceive students as troublesome or undisciplined, resulting in less investment in developing their potential. Another issue is that children and adolescents may internalize these stereotypes, becoming ageist toward other children of their age, especially toward those from more vulnerable populations, such as immigrants, newcomers, or ethnic minorities (McGillivray, 2022). Existing Childism can adversely affect their development, potentially impacting their self-esteem and confidence (Mann et al., 2015), diminishing motivation and academic achievements (Hughes et al., 2001), and even contributing to behavioral problems and social adjustment issues (Erdem et al., 2006). Moreover, all the mentioned negative stereotypes can become self-fulfilling prophecies that shape children's experiences and may persist into adulthood (Jussim & Harber, 2005).

It also is important to note that some policies and practices, such as restrictions on children in certain places or activities, are grounded in psychosocial developmental milestones and scientific knowledge about risk and moral behaviors rather than in stereotypes (Kornadt, 2017). To reconcile this, it is crucial to differentiate between scientifically informed policies and harmful stereotypes. Scientific insights should guide policies and practices to ensure the safety and continued development of children, recognizing their developmental stage and capacity (Kornadt, 2017). Such policies, however, should not perpetuate or justify negative stereotypes that undermine children's value, agency, or potential.

The fourth finding, "three ways to combat childism," represents three approaches chosen by students to fight childism via protest, empowerment, and equality. Previous studies reinforce the use of these three approaches: protest tactics were identified as essential for raising awareness and motivating policy and public perception shifts (Levy, 2021), empowerment strategies were recognized for providing psychological uplift to oppressed groups (Cohen, 2020), and equality principles were shown to challenge the legitimacy of differentiated treatment by age (Harris & Orth, 2020). While each of the three approaches has merit, a coordinated initiative harnessing protest, empowerment, and equality is likely to generate optimal outcomes by challenging the legitimacy, projections, and internalization of ageist assumptions targeting children. Nevertheless, it is important to note that empowering children by positive stereotypes can have negative outcomes just like the use of negative stereotypes) (Czopp et al., 2015). Therefore, it is more useful to evaluate the individual (child or older adult) while keeping in mind a balanced view of neutral, positive, and negative stereotypes the group to which this person belongs possesses.

Among the various strategies to combat ageism (WHO, 2018), our experience with middle school students in Israel demonstrates that memes are an accessible and effective tool for conveying anti-ageist messages. Consistent with the Parasocial Contact Hypothesis (PCH), our analysis reveals that the distinct and creative language of memes facilitates the translation of abstract concepts into clear and comprehensible messages (Schiappa et al., 2005; Shifman, 2013).

Specifically, the PCH suggests that mediated contact, such as through digital media, can significantly influence social attitudes, particularly when direct, face-to-face contact between different social groups is limited or absent (Schiappa et al., 2005). In the context of our research, even though the memes were not widely disseminated, the process of creating and engaging with them provided students with a form of mediated contact with the concepts of age diversity and the fight against ageism and childism. This theoretical framework explains how exposure to positive representations through memes can foster empathy and encourage more favorable attitudes

toward different age groups. Further research should explore whether leveraging social networks to disseminate the memes could enable students to contribute to the fight against childism and promote age equality.

In summary, the research shows that childism is a persistent and troubling phenomenon, encompassing both other-directed childism and self-directed childism. Both manifest primarily in three types of negative stereotypes related to children's behaviors, cognitive abilities, and physical capabilities. The research also points to three main strategies that can help children in their fight against these stereotypes through protest, empowerment and equality. It is recommended to combine the approaches for a multi-pronged action against childism. Additionally, the research highlights the effective and creative use of memes for promoting awareness and challenging age-stereotypes.

This study, however, has several limitations warranting acknowledgment. The research exclusively focused on meme production without tracking their use in social networks. Follow-up research should examine memes' reach and effectiveness in shifting attitudes toward ageism and childism (Literat & van den Berg, 2019; Milner, 2016). Involving adolescents in creating and spreading memes may boost their self-efficacy (McCosker, 2018). Moreover, we recommend that future research incorporate in-depth dialogue with the students about their motivations and goals to interpret the embedded meanings more accurately. Future research will also benefit from obtaining the students' interpretation of the memes and from following their on-line activities to understand whether the memes penetrate their real-life social activities.

Disclosure statement

Funding

Ethics approval

The research was approved by Bar-Ilan University Research Ethic Committee (no. 82203) and by the Chief Scientist at the Israeli Ministry of Education (no. 13103).

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