

Article

“They Are Not Expendable”: Older Adults in British Columbia News Media During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Jenna Keeble, University of Toronto

Abstract

Ever since the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 pandemic, public health has featured prominently in news coverage. Older adults, who face disproportionate physical and psychological risks from the virus, have received considerable media attention. The current study thematically analyzed 62 text-based articles from British Columbia news outlets during a two-year period (January 2020 - January 2022). Social theories of ageism were used to examine results. Both indirect ageism and anti-ageist oppositions were observed. Older people were rarely interviewed, and very few racialized individuals were represented in reports. Intergenerational relationships and programs designed to increase social connections appeared regularly in the sample. Media organizations should continue to eliminate ageism from its content and educate the public on its impacts, as well as improve diversity in coverage.

Keywords: News Media; Ageism; Older Adults; COVID-19 Pandemic.

Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the news media played a major role in disseminating the latest public health information (Mach et al., 2021). Whether accessed through

print, radio, television, online websites, or social media, news organizations served as a primary source for emergency updates (Anwar et al., 2020). When national and provincial governments held press conferences, reporters attended these events. They summarized, interpreted, and published pertinent details back to citizens. Some frequent topics of circulation included infectious disease prevention, counts of confirmed cases and deaths, and new policies ordered by governing officials (De Coninck et al., 2020). Outlets covered indirect pandemic issues, like the uptick of mental health conditions (Anderssen, 2021), domestic violence (Thompson, 2021), and social isolation (Draaisma, 2021). Community news professionals worked to tell the public interest stories of people within their region during the unprecedented period.

There have been concerns about how the older population has been portrayed (Soto-Perez-de-Celis, 2020), as they face disproportionate risks of hospitalization and death from the virus (Statistics Canada, 2021). Three years after the COVID-19 pandemic was declared (World Health Organization, 2020), those 65 years or older continue to deal with health impacts of the crisis, while Canadian society has largely returned to a pre-pandemic lifestyle (Bowdish, 2023). Ageism has been speculated to play into media portrayals of older people during the pandemic, both in overt and subtle ways (Barth et al., 2021; Reynolds, 2020). Long-term care homes, which often house older people, were heavily reported on. Canada was identified as having the highest proportion of deaths in the sector compared to other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2020). These facilities, along with elected bodies, faced intense media scrutiny (Estabrooks et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2021). Intergenerational tension arose when social distancing mandates were placed and the allocation of healthcare resources was questioned (Esses et al., 2023). At the same time, a variety of intergenerational initiatives were launched to strengthen bonds, including phone outreach programs (Boucher, 2020) and art projects (CBC News, 2020). New housing strategies for older adults were envisioned because of the bleak patterns in long-term care across the country (Bielski, 2022). Older life and aging became trending topics, spurred by the events of past years and the knowledge that older people are increasing in global population distributions (World Health Organization, 2022).

British Columbia (B.C.) is a province on the west coast of Canada and home to over five million people (B.C. Government, 2023a). It had the third confirmed COVID-

19 case in the nation on January 28, 2020 (Fenton, 2022) and a death toll of 5430 as of April 15, 2023 (B.C. Government, 2023b). Provincial Health Officer Dr. Bonnie Henry led a public health campaign that has been described as compassionate and effective, earning global praise (Porter, 2020). Her signature calls for kindness, calmness, and safety (Zussman, 2020), as well as her public displays of emotion and vulnerability during press briefings (Migdal, 2020), were routinely mentioned. While B.C. fared better than Ontario and Quebec in controlling outbreaks in long term care (Harris & Burke, 2020), there were still deadly situations in facilities, notably in Vancouver's Lynn Valley Care Centre (Hagear & Woo, 2020) and Little Mountain Place (Young, 2021a). The B.C. public health office has been criticized for failing to quickly respond to outbreaks in institutions (Young, 2021b) and address the large proportion of deaths that occurred in long-term care (Migdal, 2021). A local columnist voiced concerns about transparency, particularly the office's decision to not participate in interviews conducted by the B.C. Seniors Advocate Office, an independent watchdog (Leyne, 2021). To curb virus transmission, public health measures were placed that impacted older people, especially those living in residential care. For example, restrictions on group gatherings and limits on visitors. Older adults have disclosed that they felt emotionally distressed, socially isolated, depressed, and lonely during the pandemic (Culbert, 2022; Wister & Kadowaki, 2021). Clearly, the balance between physical health and mental well-being is a central dilemma that played out in the media.

By analyzing news coverage of older people during the COVID-19 pandemic, this study explored whether B.C. media perpetuated or resisted ageism during the health crisis. A selection of articles from publications were thematically analyzed against social theories of ageism and its protective barriers. This study can serve as a reflection for media and communication professionals, government officials, and the public. In Canada, the older adult population is projected to grow more than 68% in the next 20 years (Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2017). Ageism should be weeded out of communication channels, so we can focus on solutions irrespective of age.

The following research questions shaped the study:

1. Is ageism present in B.C. media coverage of older adults during the COVID-19 pandemic?

2. Are anti-ageist messages present in B.C. media coverage of older adults during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Literature Review

Ageism, a term developed by Dr. Robert Butler in 1980, can be defined as prejudice and discrimination towards people older in age. It stereotypes the older population as frail, unchanging, and passive, and has a generally negative view of aging. The World Health Organization's (2021) latest global report on ageism explains how older people are seen as burdens to societies, especially in the context of healthcare, social services, and economic systems. Ageism can be layered with other forms of oppression, including racism, sexism, ableism, classism, homophobia, and transphobia. It exists institutionally, interpersonally, and internally and has negatively impacts on physical health, mental health, social wellness, and the economy (World Health Organization, 2021). Self-directed ageism can manifest as the belief that older life is a time of physical decline and social loss (Kornadt et al., 2021). In turn, this can impede medical recoveries and discourage engagement in communal activities.

Scholars have documented an increase of ageist discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic (Silva et al., 2021). Social media in particular contained content that conveyed older lives were not valuable, and that the pandemic was less serious because of its disproportionate impact on older adults (Jimenez-Sotomayor, 2020; Graham, 2022). Online, older people were associated with deterioration, vulnerability, morbidity, sickness, dependency, and incompetency (Xiang et al., 2021). Older adults in American newspaper coverage were labelled as "elderly" and "vulnerable," which are discouraged terms because of the potential to homogenize the group (Jen et al., 2021). Portrayals emphasized conflict, infection, death, and institutional care. Debates started about whether older lives were worth saving (Jeong et al., 2022). Researchers in New Zealand spotted how their media companies were using "the elderly" in conjunction with negative stereotypes (Amundsen, 2022). Morgan and colleagues (2021) specified the distinction between describing older people as inherently passive, at-risk. or vulnerable versus situationally. The latter being informed by social determinants of health, like ageism. Coverage of long-term care proliferated during the pandemic, but voices of older people living in these facilities were largely absent, instead replaced by family members speaking on their behalf (Allen & Ayalon, 2021).

This trend was observed in media representations of older Canadian Francophones, despite articles singling out the demographic as the reason to adhere to public health measures (Lagacé et al., 2021). The pandemic created an ideal environment for long-standing ageist biases to spread through communication networks.

To shield individuals from ageism, a few factors have been identified, including positive aging role models and supportive intergenerational relationships (Gasiorek & Fowler, 2020). Certain cultural beliefs and norms can also combat ageism. For instance, Rowe and colleagues' (2020) project with Indigenous Elders highlighted the importance of aging responsibilities and intergenerational connections to increase health and wellness for all community members. Aging perspectives of Somali Canadians tend to be positive in nature and focus on an increase of knowledge and participation in familial events (Lagacé et al., 2012). During the COVID-19 pandemic, older adults spoke about their ability to adapt and appreciate life (Brooks et al., 2022). Themes of connection, civic participation, and resilience were discussed as well (Hayden et al., 2022). While ageism is commonplace, prolonged conversations with older people reveal the nuances in the population and a variety of aging experiences and outlooks.

Methodology

The author purposively sampled text-based articles from *The Canadian Newsstream* database and *Google News* to ensure representation from corporate and independent organizations. Content publication dates ranged from January 1, 2020 to January 1, 2022. The keyword search was guided by previous research (Marier and Revelli, 2017; Rozanova et al., 2006) and included the descriptors "seniors," "older people," "the elderly," and "older adults." The words "COVID-19" and "pandemic" were used as well. The resulting articles were screened with the following inclusion criteria:

- Published by a B.C. or Canadian news outlet
- Discussed an older person or the older adult population in B.C.

In total, this study thematically analyzed 62 reports from 19 different publishers.

Analysis

This study utilized qualitative thematic analysis (Lochmiller, 2021; Braun & Clarke, 2012), social theories of ageism, and anti-ageist research to examine data. Each article was electronically filed in Dedoose, a qualitative data analysis software, and went through preliminary and iterative coding. Each article’s content (words, subjects, quotes, actions) were inspected, along with the context surrounding the various elements. Frequent codes pointed to patterns with key indicators, a coding sheet was constructed (see appendix A). Core themes were visualized with a map (Fig. 1).

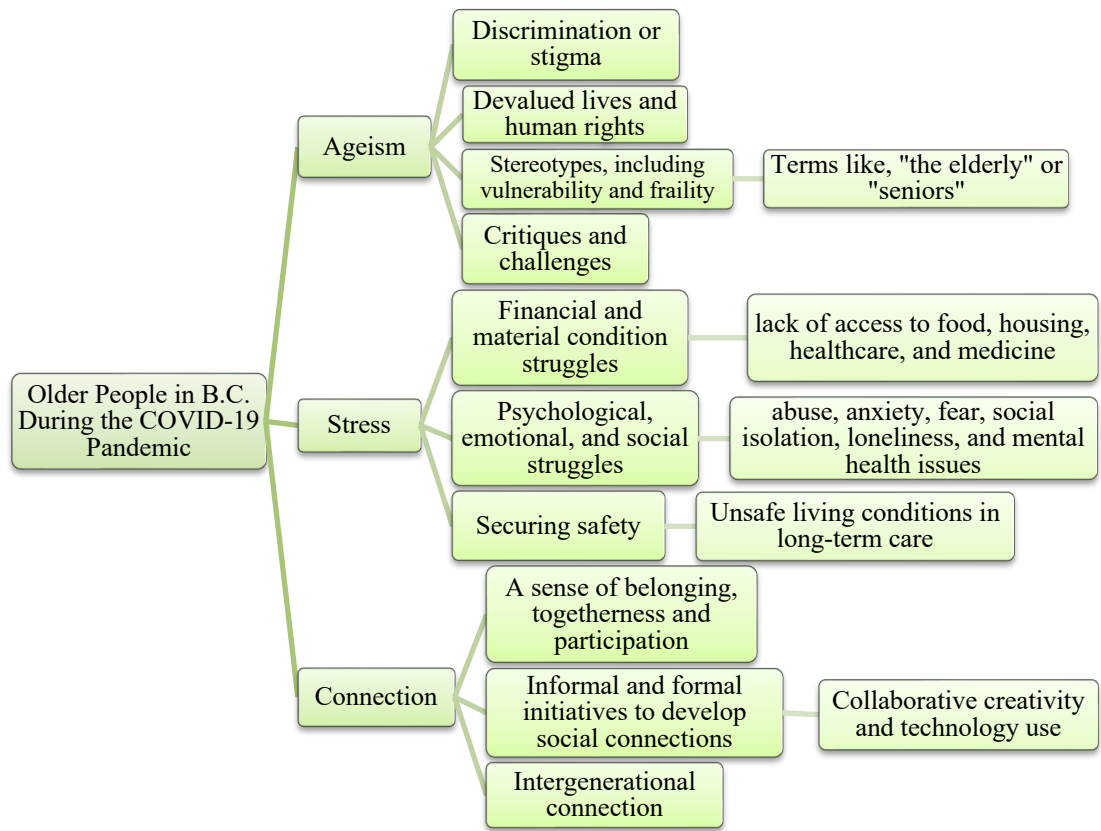


Fig. 1 Core themes in B.C. news coverage of older adults during the COVID-19 pandemic

Descriptive statistics were calculated (Fig. 2) to track the presence of themes. 92 per cent of the sample was coded as containing the ageism theme, and 90 per cent of the articles signalled the stress theme. Just over half of the sample (52 per cent) was marked with the connection theme.

THEME	NUMBER (n = 62)	PERCENTAGE
Ageism	57	92%
Stress	56	90%
Connection	35	56%

Fig. 2 Table of theme presence, where at least one code is found in article, for B.C. news coverage of older adults during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Indirect Ageism and its Social Harms

Ageism, a central theme of the data set, took on indirect forms. Writers used the descriptor “seniors,” presumably because of its appearance in government reports and advocacy groups (e.g. Seniors Advocate). Outbreaks in long-term care facilities were contextualized with the resident population’s age range and quantitative risk-levels. While these are epidemiological facts, without taking ageism and its health impacts into consideration, it may serve as justification for preventable deaths and the devaluation of older lives. The perceived salience of these articles can suggest homogeneity, characterized by frailty and vulnerability. Coupled with debates around how best to use medical resources, this has the potential to lead to discrimination. This type of narrative intersects with ableism.

Disabilities, or lack of them, can exacerbate ageist messages. This can be seen in a feature of a local barber and his “healthy aging” strategies. The man, who biked to work everyday, challenged stereotypes but may also stigmatize individuals who do not have the same abilities. Internalized shame was seen in rare interviews with older adults who participated in a physically distanced dance party in residential care:

“Barbara Bennett: ‘Oh to be young again! Anybody can play this game, young or old. It was invigorating. Seeing ourselves on the screen made us feel young again.’
 Jeanne Brownell: ‘It was awesome! To be in something like that makes you feel young again. It was just a lot of fun. I like rock and roll.’

Betty De Brun: 'If you're young at heart you can do anything.'" (Article #54)

This excerpt illustrated the stigma that one can feel about being older. Arguably, these thoughts go beyond reminiscing about earlier memories. It may hint at a desire to escape older life, which is seen as incompatible with independence and joy. Interpersonal ageism is seen in an article where multiple members of a family talk about an older relative who is "remarkably fit and active and independent despite his age." This stereotyping appeared to compromise the autonomy of the older person who was never quoted in the story.

Stress was a pervasive theme. It was indicated by the unaffordability and inaccessibility of food, housing, and healthcare. Living on a fixed income and limited support services were prominent struggles. For instance, a report outlined how several older people in an affluent West Vancouver community could not afford food when the pandemic was announced:

"When the centre had to close in mid-March, staff wanted to check in on each and every senior on its contact list. That meant 6,761 phone calls to ask 'Are you OK? Do you have what you need? Are you at risk? Do you need food?' 'It shattered some perceptions I had of our community,' Lawlor says. 'By asking those questions for the first time, we found out just how in need our community was. The pandemic made things worse, but people have been hungry for a long time.'" (Article #36)

Another text explained how staff of a long-term care facility needed to quickly procure personal protective equipment (PPE) during the pandemic, as they only had 34 pairs of goggles for 675 staff members. Quite a few stories featured charities that addressed inequities like a Christmas gift giving program that was created for low-income older people, many of whom lived with mental illness and social isolation. However, these initiatives were not guaranteed and dependent on funding.

Psychological and social issues continually showed up, including fear, isolation, and loneliness. In one published article, Dr. Henry was quoted as saying older people living in long-term care during the pandemic experienced “dark and anxious days” before dying. Public health restrictions prevented visits from outside guests, making residents feel distressed and uncomfortable. One woman spoke about not being able to see her husband living in a care facility: “I can’t go again unless I can get in to be with him,” said Rena. “It’s too painful.” (Article #55). Attention was directed to the B.C. Seniors Advocate survey of 15,000 residents, families, and members of the public that established low health and wellness for older people. Neglect was documented in some private care homes and resulted in the provincial government temporarily seizing operations at times.

While these stressors are not necessarily caused by ageism, they have been described as some of the economic and mental health impacts of it (World Health Organization, 2021). Failing to acknowledge the potential role of ageism in upholding these norms may lead us to accept a dismal quality of life. The progression seems inevitable and natural. Based on the coverage examined, the public may come to understand aging as a negative, passive, and shameful experience.

Lack of Voice and Diversity

Of particular concern was the minimal inclusion of older adult voices. Instead, family members, government officials, medical professionals, and social service workers regularly spoke on their behalf. There was a noticeable lack of representation of racialized older people, except by independent news outlets created to serve communities largely ignored by legacy media, like IndigiNews. These perspectives are crucial to addressing ageism, as they described how racism and colonialism compounded throughout a lifetime and caused stress. One of the only community paper briefings about a racialized older person dealt with a man who was physically assaulted by a stranger because of his turban. At the same time, these missing voices can showcase resiliency, adaptation, and positive aging worldviews. By not seeking out the very group of people an article purports to represent and only projecting the experiences of white, older adults, it is easy to amplify ageism.

Challenges to Ageism and Connections

Optimistically, anti-ageist messages and challenges were observed in the sample. The terminology “older adults” was used, and an entire story was dedicated to recognizing ageism during the pandemic:

“Finally, together, we need to combat ageism. It is not acceptable that so many of our older adults have died during COVID-19. They are not expendable. Older adults can have quality lives if we give them the safeguards and supports they need – to live through the pandemic and well beyond it.” (Article #11)

International Day of Older Persons was commemorated in a local paper, and the lack of representation of older women in portrait photography was the subject of another write-up. The Associate Director at the Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention conducted press outreach to encourage older adults to seek mental health support and to not feel that depression is a normal part of aging. Ageist stereotypes were challenged by publishing research results that suggested older people had more psychological resilience than younger people during the pandemic. Lengthy features on older people, which often came from independent news media or local journalism initiative reporters, consistently displayed anti-ageist messages. Readers were given a detailed and nuanced look into their life, supported by direct quotes.

A connections pattern emerged, marked by belonging, togetherness and meaningful interactions with peers, families, and communities. Calls for human solidarity and intergenerational relationships provided a coping mechanism during the pandemic. A coordinator extrapolated the effects of a program they run at a recreation centre: “It’s an opportunity to connect; it’s an opportunity for seniors to connect with me and to connect with each other.” (Article #17). Various activities were used to foster connections. Creative endeavours like dancing, writing, photography, and crafting were seen. There were fitness groups, social events, and educational courses as well. Technology proved to be a strategic asset for disease prevention while delivering social branches for wellness. A staff member at a congregate living building created a service for scheduling video calls. Staff and volunteers with Archway Better

at Home and Mobile Seniors Outreach conducted daily wellness check-ins and delivered essential goods, including refilling prescriptions. A worker talked to reporters about the program's benefits to older people in the community: "There's a sense of relief and connectedness you can hear through the phone." (Article #38). A wedding was held outside a long-term care home so that the bride's father could be a part of the ceremony. Youth-led initiatives included a virtual trivia night, a pen-pal program, online baking tutorials, and storytelling. In an in-depth interview with IndigiNews, Clarence 'Butch' Dick of Songhees Nation spoke about how intergenerational relationships with family made him feel honoured. Another older woman voiced her appreciation for younger people in an open letter to the local paper:

"As an old woman in my 80s, I am humbled and amazed at the kindness shown to we old people by the young people of this land. You have taken on this COVID adversary with great courage and sacrifice. Thank you very very much." (Article #40)

Discussion

This study found evidence of systemic and self-directed ageism within B.C. media materials. A conclusion that was predicted based on the breadth of ageism research (Butler, 1980; World Health Organization, 2021). The space these ideas occupy in our communication ecosystem can contribute to a problematic understanding of older life. Unexpectedly, there were writers who spread nuanced, anti-ageist perspectives. While more work should be done to ensure reporters and editors are educated on ageism and how to avoid it in their work, a fair amount of progress has been made. However, a lack of direct quotes from older people was a consistent observation, and accounts from racialized older people were virtually non-existent in mainstream outlets. Efforts need to be made to gather direct quotes from older people and to improve representation of the diverse older populations in the province. As research is published about older people's experience living through the COVID-19 pandemic (Brooks et al., 2022; Hayden et al., 2022), the focus on connecting is not surprising. This trend suggests that solution- and community-based journalism can resist negative

and simplistic depictions of older adults. It can pave the way for healthier aging experiences.

The current study inspected news coverage of the growing older demographic at a critical point in history. The qualitative nature of the study aided in the creation of rich and detailed pattern descriptions, but coding was more reflective and interpretative. Validity and trustworthiness were increased by an audit trail, measuring results with previous research, and including excerpts. This project used purposive sampling, and thus, is not generalizable and representative of all the news coverage of older people in B.C. during the COVID-19 pandemic. Future research may look at reporting in other regions in the country. In B.C., there is need to analyze non-English outlets in the province who cater to Chinese and South Asian audiences. Opportunities exist for the investigation of casual relationships between ageist attitudes and the type of media consumed. In the coming years, scholars should expand on the knowledge of ageism and unravel the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on older adults to increase health and wellness for all.

Acknowledgements

I want to thank my supervisor Aaron Goodman, Ph.D. for his support and guidance while producing this paper. I wish to express my gratitude to the peer reviewers for their insightful feedback and Philippe Ross, Ph.D. for his persistence and kindness throughout the publishing process.

Appendix A. Preliminary Coding Sheet

Theme	Theme Description	Excerpt
<i>Connections</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A sense of belonging, togetherness, and participation with peers, families, and communities. ● Human solidarity. ● Strategies can include (but are not limited to) musical activities, writing, crafting, baking, reading, dancing, and storytelling. 	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Creative activities appear to be a common technique of developing connections. ● Technology can be used to develop social connections when social distancing is necessary. ● Actors that develop social connections include older people themselves, families, care home staff, and youth. ● Intergenerational connection. 	
<i>Stressors</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Financial and material condition struggles, like not being able to afford and access food, housing, healthcare, community care, and medication. ● Abuse, anxiety, fear, social isolation, loneliness, and mental health issues. ● Caregiving and its impact on family members. ● Stress of living safely in congregate living environments, like long-term care, supportive housing, and assisted living. ● Lack of support from the government ● Intergenerational conflict 	
<i>Ageism</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Age-based discrimination, stigma, or stereotyping. ● Devaluing of lives and compromised human rights because of age. ● Downplaying the COVID-19 pandemic's impact because it is seen as a "seniors problem." ● Stereotypes of older people, including vulnerability and frailty, that homogenizes the population. ● Ageist terms for older people, including "the elderly" and "seniors." ● Critiques and challenges of ageism. 	

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