VISUAL AGEISM ON TWITTER/X IN SPAIN:
Dehumanisation, Caricaturisation, and the Exclusion of Older Adults

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Ageism Visual ageism Social Media Twitter/X Ageist language Sexism	*Ageism is frequently manifested through negative stereotypes of older adults, particularly on social media and in the broader media, where dehumanising imagery is often employed. This study analysed 27 images from Twitter/X, selected from a larger sample of 348 posts on the basis of their high engagement. The findings indicate that visual ageism represents older adults as a homogeneous, depersonalised group and as objects of ridicule, with a particular focus on the sexuality of older women. The study concludes that such visual representations perpetuate both ageist and sexist discrimination, thereby contributing to the exclusion of older adults from fundamental rights.*

1. Introduction

The United Nations *World Population Prospects* report (2024) predicts that the global population aged 60 and over will rise from 962 million in 2017 to 2.1 billion by 2050, representing approximately 21% of the total population. Population ageing presents profound challenges across economic, political, and social spheres (Farinosi, 2023). Spain is among the countries with the highest life expectancy and, paradoxically, has experienced a 24% decline in its birth rate over the past ten years, one of the lowest worldwide (INE, 2024). The European Commission's 2024 *Ageing Report* forecasts that by 2040, the population of Spaniards over 65 will surpass that of those aged 20 to 64 (European Commission, 2024; Ministry of Economy, Trade and Enterprise, 2024). Undoubtedly, the progressive ageing of populations in developed countries is a key factor contributing to the rise of ageism in these societies (Thompson & Cox, 2024).

Ageism is defined as a set of stereotypes, prejudices, and discriminatory behaviours directed at individuals based on their age (Butler, 1969). It predominantly affects older adults in societies where youth, economic productivity, and physical independence are prioritised (Ayalon & Tesch-Römer, 2017; Iversen et al., 2009). According to data from the World Health Organization, one in two individuals worldwide exhibit normalised ageist attitudes across many domains of daily life, including language, public policy, and the media (World Health Organization, 2021). In Spain, Law 15/2022 of 12 July on comprehensive equal treatment and non-discrimination explicitly recognises age discrimination for the first time in national legislation, while also obliging public authorities to implement awareness-raising measures.

These attitudes not only harm older adults but also affect individuals who internalise them from an early age, fostering a fear of ageing that negatively impacts both physical and mental well-being (Ayalon, 2020; Costa, 2024; Levy, 2020). Among older adults, the internalisation of ageism is strongly associated with suicidal ideation (Gendron et al., 2024).

Conceptually, ageism manifests across three principal dimensions: cognitive, encompassing beliefs and stereotypes about age; emotional, comprising prejudices and negative attitudes towards older adults; and behavioural, which includes both explicit and implicit discriminatory acts (Rosell et al., 2020). Factors such as gender, race, social class, and sexual orientation interact with ageism, producing intersectional forms of discrimination, among which gendered ageism is particularly notable (Krekula et al., 2018).

Stereotypes associated with old age are recurrent in the media, culture, and literature. These include notions of physical decline, unattractiveness, uselessness, isolation, poverty, ignorance, devaluation, exclusion, and omission (Cooney et al., 2021; David et al., 2022; World Health Organization, 2021). Ageism is also linked to preconceived associations of old age with death and dependence, which can generate fear and anxiety regarding the ageing process (Costa, 2024; Thompson, 2021). In a recent study, Rothermund and De Paula (2024) found that stereotypical perceptions of older adults tend to be predominantly negative in relation to health and memory, but more positive regarding family roles and life experience, a conclusion that aligns with the findings of Sánchez-Román et al. (2022) for older adults in Spain.

Older adults are frequently mocked for their character or abilities (Oh, 2024), as well as for their sexuality (Chepngeno-Langat & Hosegood, 2012; Hinchliff & Gott, 2008; Mota et al., 2024). Older women, in particular, experience compounded discrimination based on both gender and age, placing them in a highly vulnerable position with regard to social representation (Caldas-Coulthard & Moon, 2020; Farinosi, 2023; McFarlane & Samsioe, 2020), especially in areas related to their sexuality (Barrett et al., 2023; Monge-Olivarría et al., 2023; Muñoz & Salido-Fernández, 2023).

The media and social networks play a central role in the construction and reproduction of ageist stereotypes. Specifically, Twitter/X has become a space in which images and visual narratives both perpetuate existing stereotypes and give rise to new forms of visual discrimination against older adults (Ivan & Fernández-Ardèvol, 2017). The impact of COVID-19 on age discrimination in social media and traditional media has been examined from multiple perspectives (Døssing & Crăciun, 2022; Meisner, 2021; Ng et al., 2022; Schramm et al., 2023; Skipper & Rose, 2021), including within Spain (Adá et al., 2022; Bravo-Segal & Villar, 2020). For instance, during the pandemic, ageist posts increased significantly, amplifying the use of humour and memes that ridiculed older adults and reinforced negative perceptions of ageing (Ayalon et al., 2021; Kahlbaugh et al., 2024). Jiménez-Sotomayor et al.

(2020) found that at least one quarter of tweets written at the onset of COVID-19 containing the keywords 'elderly' and/or 'boomer' included age-discriminatory or potentially offensive content targeting older adults, doubling the proportion observed in pre-pandemic studies (Gendron et al., 2018). Sipocz et al. (2021) provided a detailed account of generational conflict on Twitter surrounding the humorous gerontocidal hashtag #BoomerRemover in the wake of the pandemic.

Visual ageism under-represents or distorts the depiction of older adults in the media (Loos & Ivan, 2018; Ylänne, 2015), portraying them as dependent, fragile, isolated, or incapable, thereby perpetuating a negative view of old age that contrasts sharply with the diversity and richness of experiences within this age group (Ivan, 2023; Ivan et al., 2020). Visual age discrimination intersects with other forms of -isms, such as sexism, ethnocentrism, and racism, shaping the way older adults are visually represented on social media (Lee & Hoh, 2023; Ng et al., 2024). Despite increasing awareness of the harms of ageism, the visualisation of older adults as a homogeneous group continues to reproduce highly damaging stereotypes in digital communication, including in materials produced by public organisations (Loos et al., 2022; Xu, 2022; Xu & Larsson, 2021).

Visual representations of older adults on social media are characterised by the caricaturisation of physical features, underrepresentation, and the association of old age with frailty and dependence, reinforcing a narrow and stereotypical view (Sánchez-Román et al., 2022; Schramm et al., 2023). This phenomenon is particularly pronounced for older women, who experience compounded discrimination based on both age and gender, especially regarding their image and sexuality (Cruceanu et al., 2023; Gewirtz-Meydan & Ayalon, 2020). Such biases are often implicit even in advertising campaigns targeting older women (Bardey et al., 2024; Kenalemang, 2022). Recent studies have identified recurring patterns of discriminatory visual representation of older adults on digital platforms (Schramm et al., 2023; Swift et al., 2021).

Ageist humour on social media frequently relies on depersonalisation, presenting older adults as a homogeneous group rather than as individuals (Pochintesta & Baglione, 2023; Shayne & Walden, 2024). Twitter/X is the platform where such ageist humour is most prevalent, circulating through memes, images, and sarcastic comments that reinforce negative stereotypes (Graham, 2022; Ivan & Fernández-Ardèvol, 2017; Lee & Hoh, 2023). It is precisely this caricaturisation of negative group traits that contributes to the stigmatisation of ageing (Gullette, 2024).

Despite these discriminatory dynamics, digital platforms have also emerged as spaces in which older adults can challenge stereotypes, empowering themselves through alternative narratives and the use of humour as a tool for advocacy (Meisner et al., 2024; Nimrod & Berdychevsky, 2018; Willmott, 2024). Nevertheless, the predominance of ageist and sexist representations continues to constitute a significant barrier to the construction of a diverse and inclusive image of ageing.

Within this context, the present study focuses on analysing the visual representation of older adults on Twitter/X in Spain, an area that has received limited attention in the academic literature. The main objectives are: (1) to identify a representative corpus of images portraying older adults on this platform; (2) to assess the presence of characteristics associated with visual ageism; and (3) to examine whether older women are subject to double visual discrimination on the grounds of both age and gender.

2. Methodology

A mixed-methods approach based on public data mining was employed, involving the use of digital tracking data to compile, organise, and analyse generalisable samples representing individuals in virtual environments (Kimmons & Veletsianos, 2018; Moreno-Fernández & Gómez-Camacho, 2023). For this study, digital data were extracted from the social network Twitter/X.

The search term 'Inserso' was selected because it refers to the National Institute of Social Services in Spain between 1978 and 2004 and appears in the *Corpus del Español del Siglo XXI* (CORPES) of the Royal Spanish Academy (RAE) as a term used exclusively in Spain, with a normalised frequency of 0.13 per million. In colloquial contexts, 'Inserso' refers to the elderly population in Spain.

For sample selection, the social media analysis application Tweet Binder was utilised. This tool, widely applied in previous research, provides access to 100% of the content of all public posts matching specified search criteria (Álvarez-Mon et al., 2022; Castillo-Toledo et al., 2024; De Anta et al., 2022). A database was extracted comprising posts published on Twitter/X containing the keyword 'Inserso' between 1 January 2019 and 31 December 2023. A total of 27,971 posts were retrieved, of which 3,579

included visual content. Based on these figures, a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of 5% were established, yielding a sample of 348 posts.

From this dataset, posts with a high number of reposts and likes were selected for qualitative analysis. The analysis initially focused on visual content, but accompanying linguistic content was also examined. Conducted using Atlas.ti (v.23), the analysis involved interpreting the data beyond individual terms to better understand underlying meaning. The principle of saturation was applied to determine when additional information ceased to expand the established dimensions (Bradshaw, 2023; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This procedure enabled the identification of hermeneutic units representing the most significant examples, resulting in a final selection of 27 images along with their associated texts.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Visual Communication on Twitter/X in Spain Linked to the Elderly Population

Of the total sample extracted (N = 27,971), 12.8% of posts contained hyperlinks to photos, videos, or other visual content hosted on external websites. Although this represents a relatively small proportion, the finding aligns with previous studies indicating that Twitter/X is a digital platform predominantly oriented towards written text, in contrast to platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, or TikTok, which are characterised by the primacy of visual communication (Carpenter et al., 2020; Pittman & Reich, 2016). Nevertheless, there is a discernible trend towards increased use of images on social media (Oleaque-Moreno, 2023; Pinilla-Gómez, 2024). An annual analysis of visual communication within the sample indicates that 2021 was the year in which visual content associated with older adults was most widely used, with 951 posts, representing a 33.33% increase compared to other years included in the study (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Evolution of visual communication on Twitter/X in Spain about older people (2019-2023)
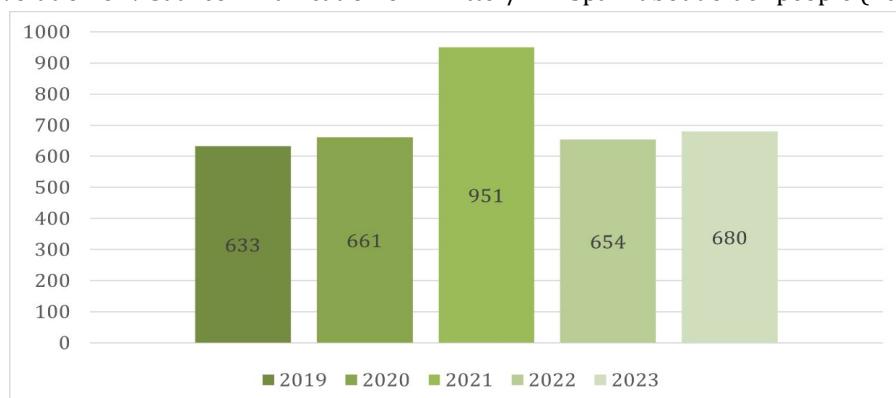
Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

In our view, this trend is related to the resumption of activities organised by IMSERSO for older adults, which had been suspended in Spain from April 2021 due to COVID-19 (Lascoiti, 2021; Loren, 2021).

A quarterly breakdown of the data across all periods analysed indicates that the highest number of videos and photos is generally published in the third quarter, corresponding to the summer months of July, August, and September. The sole exception is 2021, when this increase occurred in the fourth quarter, coinciding with the period in which older adults effectively resumed travel following lockdown (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Visual communication on Twitter/X in Spain by quarter about older people (2019-2023)

Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

3.2. The Negative Image of Old Age

Analysis of the visual content within the sample highlights a concerning social issue: the use of old age as a derogatory term and insult (Schramm, 2023; Swift et al., 2021). In this context, ageism is confirmed as a form of intergenerational conflict (Ayalon, 2020; Costa, 2024; David et al., 2022), in which younger individuals disparage adults by labelling them as 'old' once they reach the age of forty (Figure 4). This pejorative application of age reflects a stereotypical and prejudiced perception of ageing within society, in which old age is viewed as inherently negative and degrading (Cooney et al., 2021; Rothermund & De Paula, 2024; Sánchez-Román et al., 2022).

Figures 3, 4, 5, and 6 depict older adults as a homogeneous, undifferentiated group characterised by passivity and consistently negative connotations (Loos et al., 2022; Xu, 2022). No images were identified in which older adults are represented as active, healthy, attractive, or as individuals participating in society with their own unique characteristics.

Figure 3. Images related to intergenerational conflict

Los de más de cuarenta sois ancianos, podéis aprovechar y apuntaros al Inserso

Ya sabéis esta jovenzuela lo dice o sea….con 40 la gente se mete al geriátrico????? O viajan con el inserso…. Que estupideces de pueden leer 🤦🤦🤦🤦🤦

https://x.com/OLAQFAS/status/1393838961123024901   https://x.com/Gossipblonde1/status/1234207428843114496
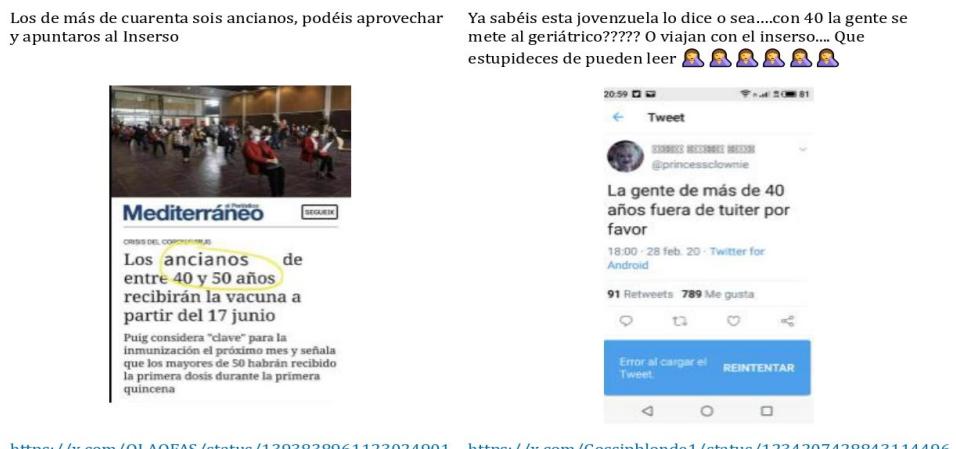
Source: Images extracted from public data on X/Twitter.

Figure 4 represents the most significant example of the negative and alienating portrayal of old age within the sample. It depicts the faces of older adults and communicators who are discredited solely on the basis of their appearance, without consideration of the content of their opinions or the individuality of their personalities. In the accompanying comments, the image is interpreted as representing a group of older adults who, a priori, are perceived as having nothing to contribute and are infantilised and belittled because of their age. One illustrative comment state that 'Poor old people who are tricked into being part of the circus,' implying that they constitute a group that is easily manipulated and incapable of making informed decisions (Oh, 2024).

Figure 4. Uniform representation of the elderly

Source: Images extracted from public data on X/Twitter.

This type of discourse not only perpetuates negative stereotypes but also excludes older adults from actively participating in decisions that directly affect them as individuals (Thompson & Cox, 2024). Such exclusion contributes to what is understood as ageism, a form of abuse that, according to Oscar and Puca (2021), commonly manifests as age-based discrimination.

Similarly, the use of the term 'third age' in associated comments to refer to the older population reinforces the ageist nature of the image, exemplifying one of the most common forms of discriminatory language: depersonalisation (Celdrán, 2023). By grouping all individuals into a generic category, the diversity and uniqueness of each person are overlooked (Shayne & Walden, 2024). This tendency to depersonalise reinforces the perception that older adults have passed the stage of adulthood and are no longer regarded as fully participating members of the citizenry.

3.3. Caricaturisation of Older People

The visual representation of older adults on Twitter/X is characterised by the systematic caricaturisation of this group; humour and mockery function as subtle mechanisms of ageist discrimination, recurrently displayed in images on the platform (Shayne & Walden, 2024). Figures 5 and 6 clearly demonstrate an intention to ridicule and distort the image through grotesque poses, compositions, and humorous texts with unmistakable ageist connotations.

In Figure 5, an older couple appears asleep in a slumped and slovenly pose, while a younger figure stands upright with a mocking and resigned expression. The female figure is the primary focus of the image, depicted in a particularly ridiculous position.

Figure 5. Visual ageism through caricature

Hay que viajar cuando sé es joven y no esperar a los viajes del INSERSO 😜 😂

https://x.com/Mercede20186995/status/1360162979661160453
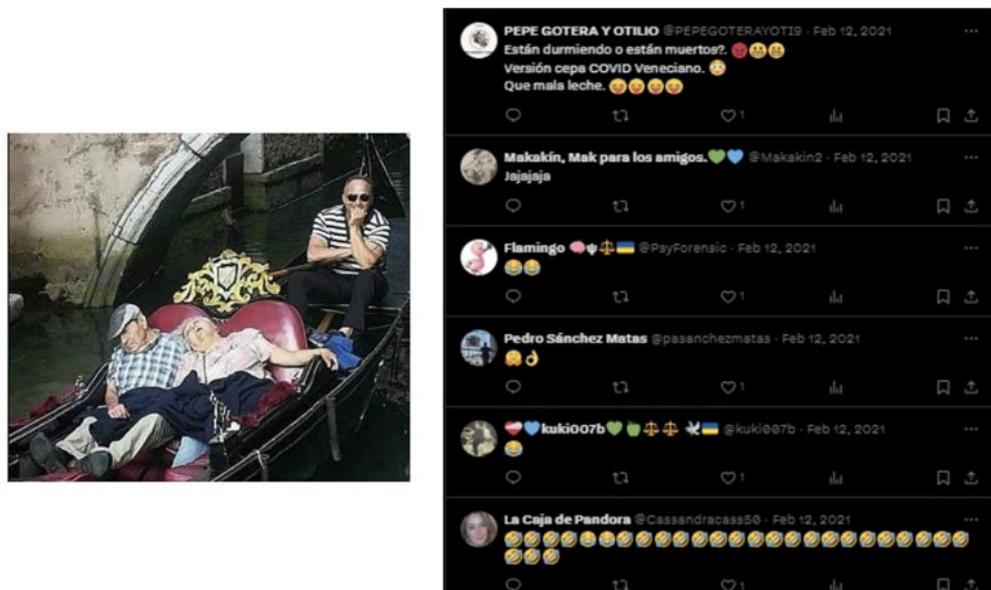
Source: Images extracted from public data on X/Twitter.

Figure 6 reiterates this pattern, ridiculing the older adult by superimposing a grotesque mask onto the image, in contrast to the young figure, whose condescending attitude infantilises her. Furthermore, the caricature of the grandfather flying a First World War aeroplane reinforces the infantilisation of the collective, exemplified by comments such as 'look how cute the grandfather is talking to the children', while emphasising the perceived tediousness and absurdity of individuals who merely ramble or recount war stories.

Figure 6. Visual ageism through caricature

https://x.com/StarWarsEs/status/1488894573497757707   https://x.com/Flakkedgalego/status/1608582926811410433

Source: Images extracted from public data on X/Twitter.

The use of humour is evident in almost all of the images within the sample (Graham, 2022; Ivan & Fernández-Ardèvol, 2017; Lee & Hoh, 2023). Older adults are satirised simply for existing (Figures 4 and 5), for the leisure activities in which they participate (Figures 5 and 6), for their sexuality (Figures 7 and 8), or for expressing their political opinions (Figure 9). In all instances, it is female figures who are subjected to the most pronounced caricaturisation and the harshest mockery, representing yet another

facet of gender ageism that characterises the visual content analysed (Kenalemang, 2022; Ng et al., 2024).

3.4. Sexuality and Gender Ageism

Analysis of the visual content of images associated with older adults on Twitter/X in Spain confirms one of the most damaging stereotypes affecting the dignity of this group: the denial of their sexuality and their identification as asexual individuals (Hinchliff & Gott, 2008), whereby any display of desire or sexual activity is deemed ridiculous and reprehensible (Chepngeno-Langat & Hosegood, 2012).

Figures 7 and 8 associate older adults' leisure activities with promiscuous and meaningless sexual behaviour. Although older women are not directly depicted in the images, references to them are recurrent both in the visual content analysed and in the accompanying comments. This group is portrayed as having no sexual appeal, reduced to mere objects, easily deceived, and available for the leisure activities depicted in IMSERSO trips to Benidorm. The sexist and ageist nature of these images is evident and is further reinforced by comments employing doubly discriminatory language (Barrett et al., 2023; Gullette, 2024). The humorous framing of tweets and Twitter/X posts renders highly discriminatory images and commentary socially acceptable, even though such behaviour would be rejected in other contexts (Caldas-Coulthard & Moon, 2020; Farinosi, 2023; McFarlane & Samsioe, 2020).

Figure 7 depicts extreme sexual practices (dildos, handcuffs, orgies), which acquire a humorous and ageist meaning when associated with older women on holiday with IMSERSO. The text of the post refers to older women with a clear pejorative undertone and a condescending attitude towards their sexual availability, including comments such as 'I'm going to get purple', 'there's going to be an orgy with Loli, Paqui and Mari Carmen', and 'because after sex, Paqui craves (a lollipop)'.

Figure 7. Double sexist and ageist discrimination

Source: Images extracted from public data on X/Twitter.

The ridicule of older adults for engaging in sexual activity reflects a prejudiced and restrictive view of ageing (Adá et al., 2022; Hinchliff & Gott, 2008). Influenced by stereotypes, society tends to regard sexuality as the preserve of youth, overlooking the fact that desire and intimacy are natural aspects of life at all stages (Krekula et al., 2018). In some instances, sexual activity in later life may be misinterpreted as promiscuity, merely because it does not conform to traditional expectations for this stage of life. Such attitudes not only dehumanise older adults but also reinforce harmful assumptions regarding their value and capabilities (Caldas-Coulthard & Moon, 2020).

3.5. Alienation and Denial of Citizenship

Figures 4 and 8 both illustrate the depreciation of older adults' opinions on political matters and the exercise of their rights as citizens. In the first instance, twelve older adults are shown participating in a programme on current political affairs; their age is the subject of ridicule, which a priori disqualifies any value judgement they might offer, irrespective of its content.

The second image represents a recurring motif in the sample, depicting a group of older citizens on a bus, in this case carrying Spanish flags and heading to a political rally. Once again, age serves as the primary rationale for mocking their ideology and denying them the right to demonstration and expression that would otherwise be recognised for the rest of the citizenry: 'they also do this when they go to vote, like sheep' and 'it is important to note the average age of those attending the PP party'. In the comments, alongside references to age as a negative attribute, one of the main mechanisms of depersonalisation emerges, as described by Thompson and Cox (2024): references to compulsory retirement are presented as an alienating situation that deprives older adults of societal participation and unifies them into a group perceived to have lost their civil rights: 'they prefer to ride the bus for free, paid for by the PP, rather than have their pensions increased by a left-wing government…'.

Figure 3 explicitly calls for the exclusion of older adults over the age of forty from the social network Twitter/X. Beyond the intergenerational tensions that label anyone who is not young as old, it is noteworthy that social media also associates older adults with citizens who are considered to lack the right to express themselves and participate in civic life, including within the digital environment (Ayalon, 2020; Ayalon et al., 2021; David et al., 2022; Meisner, 2021; Skipper, 2021).

Figure 8. Visual ageism through alienation

Source: Images extracted from public data on X/Twitter.

Analysis of the images in the study's sample confirms the depiction of older adults as an important voting bloc to which political parties pay particular attention. However, they are represented as a homogeneous and depersonalised group, easily deceived and manipulated, reflecting a clear process of ageist dehumanisation (Thompson & Cox, 2024). Comments accompanying the images reinforce discrimination through ageist language, with mechanisms of infantilisation particularly prominent (Celdrán, 2023; Molina et al., 2023). The original tweet in Figure 8 employs one of the ageist terms characteristic of discriminatory language in Spanish, 'abueletes/as' (grandparents), in this instance with a sexist twist that mocks non-sexist inclusive language and reaffirms the double

discrimination experienced by older women (Barrett et al., 2023; Celdrán, 2023; Gómez-Camacho & Moreno-Fernández, 2024).

4. Conclusions

This study conducted a visual content analysis of the most significant images extracted from a corpus related to ageist communication on social media in Spain, specifically on Twitter/X. The results indicate that older adults in Spain are frequently associated with images characterised by ageist connotations. This finding does not appear in the literature prior to this research, although studies by Pochintesta and Baglione (2023) and Kahlbaugh et al. (2024) reach similar conclusions regarding the use of memes in general.

Firstly, the images on Twitter/X present older adults as a homogeneous group subjected to a pronounced process of depersonalisation, a characteristic feature of age discrimination. Recurring visual representations of older adults in groups, on buses, during leisure trips, or at political events imply a process of depersonalisation in which each person's uniqueness is denied, stripping them of their individual characteristics and reducing them to an element of the collective.

Secondly, the images display a marked dehumanising character, evident in the caricaturisation and mockery of older adults' appearance. Comments accompanying these images reinforce the stereotype that this group is boring and grumpy, prone to recounting war stories or anecdotes of little interest. Humour and ridicule emerge as recurrent elements of ageist discrimination, as clearly illustrated in the analysis of the visual content associated with older adults on Twitter/X (Cruceanu et al., 2023). Dehumanisation is also evident in the exaggerated mockery of older women's sexuality, underpinned by the ageist stereotype that they constitute an asexual group in which desire is deemed ridiculous or inappropriate (Caldas-Coulthard & Moon, 2020; Gewirtz-Meydan & Ayalon, 2020).

Finally, analysis of the visual content reveals a strong tendency towards alienation. This occurs in two ways: older adults are segregated as a negative group, distinct from the rest of the population, and their political rights, including freedom of expression and demonstration, are denied. The images portray older adults as passive and easily manipulated, effectively positioning them as second-class citizens whose opinions and political expressions are interpreted as the product of manipulation by political parties and the media.

Ageism in these images is reinforced by the systematic use of highly offensive ageist language in the comments. Our conclusions in this regard confirm the findings of Thompson and Cox (2024) on the foundations of ageism, as well as those of Gómez-Camacho and Moreno-Fernández (2024) on ageist language in Spanish: the images analysed reproduce the same ageist stereotypes and prejudices that discriminate against older adults on social media. Infantilisation processes, however, are less evident in visual media and are more commonly expressed through verbal communication.

From a critical perspective, the use of old age as an insult reflects not only social prejudice but also a profound misunderstanding of ageing as a natural process and as a life stage rich in value and potential. The analysis demonstrates how social media contributes to reinforcing these negative stereotypes (Adá et al., 2022; Bravo-Segal & Villar, 2020; Gómez-Camacho & Moreno-Fernández, 2024; Ivan, 2023). By portraying older adults in a derogatory manner, harmful narratives are perpetuated that affect both older adults' self-perception and societal perceptions of ageing (Bardey et al., 2024; Costa, 2024).

This research highlights a central contradiction of ageism: although ageing is inevitable and affects everyone, discriminatory treatment of older adults remains widespread and socially accepted in many contexts.

5. Acknowledgements

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