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What Really Matters in Old Age? A Study of Older Adults' Perspectives on Challenging Old Age Representations

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Abstract: Aim: Older age is not a homogenous or stereotypical experience. Age-stereotypical representations can often be disconnected from older people's own experiences. Challenging the status quo is relevant for aging well. The aim of this study is to analyze older adults' perspectives on stereotypical versus their own age representations. Method: This qualitative study included a sample of 433 older adults who were 65 to 74, 75 to 84, and 85+ years of age. Content analysis was carried out. Results: Findings from this study indicated that the great majority of the participants (88%) did not identify with stereotypical age representations. This was so among participants in the 65–74 age group in relation to Showing a sense of agency (81.1%); Feeling spiritual (73.4%); Having meaningful goals (72.2%); Holding a significant social network (70.9%); Staying tuned to the world (67.1%); and feeling physically attractive (59.8%). Participants who were 75–84 years of age clarified what physical health (81.0%) and surviving chronic illnesses (78.9%), autonomy (75.5%), being socially active (74.9%), and staying mentally active (70.1%) represent at that age. The +85 years age group drew attention to No pain or physical limitations (95.6%), Physical health (93.1%), Cognitive autonomy (87.1%), Staying tuned to society and the world (76.3%); and Mobility (72.2%). Conclusions: Participants' favoring their own over stereotypical thinking about people their age represents inner resourcefulness and a penchant for aging well. Collaborative partnerships for sharing such wisdom around could enrich policy programs and interventions that favor inclusivity and fight ageism, fostering a more accurate perspective of what it means to be a certain 'age' versus simply being 'old'.

Keywords: aging; older adults; representation of age; subjective age; subjective aging

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1. Introduction

A demographic age-related revolution is underway across the globe. Helping the ever-expanding populations of older persons live better, happier lives while simultaneously enjoying longer and healthier lives presents a challenge for mental health specialists owing to increased longevity and improved quality of life in old age (von Humboldt and Leal 2017). In fact, it is expected that by 2050, the proportion of the world's population aged 60 years and older will reach 22%, almost double compared to 2015 (World Health Organization 2022). It is essential to comprehend what defines aging well, how positive psychology may support and enhance mental and physical health, and how to age successfully and embrace well-being in the future years.

Aging well is relevant to later life (von Humboldt et al. 2013a, 2022), as measured by both subjective and objective health, happiness, and satisfaction criteria (von Humboldt et al. 2013b).

As Levy (2001) has long theorized, age stereotypes can influence how people anticipate experiencing their own aging process. The process of age stereotypes becoming self-relevant for individuals is facilitated by their encounters with a plethora of societal cues, usually pejorative, that indicate they are old. Old-age cues that prompt the transition of age

stereotypes to self-relevance may be encountered on an interpersonal level, as in patronizing forms of speech directed at the old by the young (von Humboldt et al. 2013b, 2021), partly through internalizing age stereotypes that, over the years, can shape self-representations of aging.

Felt age or subjective age is the perception of one's own age, whether it be young or old. Interestingly, a considerable number of older people believe they are younger than their actual age. Views of subjective age are crucial for personal growth, health, and well-being across the lifetime (Ikeuchi et al. 2022).

Subjective aging refers to individuals' experiences with their aging process and the state of being old, encompassing both self-perceptions of aging and subjective age. Moreover, subjective age is defined as the age one feels in relation to one's chronological age, as opposed to self-perceptions of aging, which may include views about one's own aging process (Kotter-Grühn et al. 2016).

The literature distinguishes between chronological age and subjective age, including felt age (psychological age), look age (perceived physical age), and behave age (psychological interests and actions) (Choi and DiNitto 2014). Chronological age, outlined as the amount of time that has passed since a person was born, is crucial for determining an individual's rights and obligations in modern society (Bleka et al. 2019). Look age, also known as perceived physical age, is a self-evaluation of biological aging and describes how old someone believes they appear (Kotter-Grühn et al. 2016). Lastly, behavior age is defined as the age of the individual whose interests and actions they most closely resemble (Montepare 2019). Young and older individuals' age identities were shown to vary along a variety of aspects. Young people often see themselves as acting older than their age, while older individuals tend to perceive themselves as behaving younger than their actual age (Montepare 2019).

A younger age representation appears to enhance subjective well-being and cognitive performance and reduce depressive symptoms (Debreczeni and Bailey 2021). Moreover, research suggests that the use of technology may trigger aging stereotypes, leading to changes in age self-perception, even if it does not affect performance, which could have significant implications for the well-being of older adults in an increasingly technological world (Lee and Maher 2021). In relation to this, older adults who use smart technology daily tend to feel younger than those who do not (Ikeuchi et al. 2022). This speaks to Lamont et al. (2021) findings that, later in life, adults are more likely than younger adults to feel judged when and to avoid using technology.

The widening gap between age representations and chronological age across adulthood was found on all continents (Debreczeni and Bailey 2021). Although older adults reported a relatively younger age perception globally, these differences were most pronounced in North America, Western Europe, and Australia/Oceania and weakest in Africa. Old age representation is associated with stereotypes of dependence, social isolation, and vulnerability. Moreover, older persons' ideas of aging well differ from one another and do not necessarily align with the clinical definition of aging (Cohn-Schwartz et al. 2022). Even though negative representations about old age can undermine positive perceptions of aging, people were less likely to activate negative stereotypes about older adults if they had a positive perception of their own aging (Cohn-Schwartz et al. 2022). Additionally, a higher quality of life is linked to more optimistic representations of aging among older individuals (von Humboldt et al. 2013a, 2022).

A key indicator of later-life health is one's representation of aging. How individuals view themselves as they age have been identified to predict a wide range of outcomes, including well-being, health, and even mortality (Westerhof and Wurm 2018). Age stereotypes cannot be used to analyze one's self-perception of aging; rather, one's self-perception is more heavily influenced by personal experiences, individual biographies, and personality (Cohn-Schwartz et al. 2022). Across 20 countries, own-aging perceptions have been intimately associated with older people's perception of their position in life (Low et al. 2013).

Reporting a younger subjective age in later life is linked to greater physical performance, less obesity, and fewer chronic diseases (Stephan et al. 2020), as well as higher well-being (Westerhof and Wurm 2018). Notwithstanding its protective effects on cognition (Kwak et al. 2018) and everyday functioning (Wettstein et al. 2021)

On the other hand, people who have positive representations of aging tend to be happier, healthier, and live longer. People with a more optimistic perspective on aging also tend to be in better physical and cognitive health, report less depression and negative affect (Heimrich et al. 2022), and show more life satisfaction (Stephan et al. 2020).

Most older adults do not identify with stereotypical age representations, and these are frequently challenged. It is critical to explore how people think about getting older and how those ideas are formed, especially among older adults themselves. By doing so, we can identify possible areas for change in the way that 'old' is portrayed and stereotyped in society. Hence, the aim of this study is to analyze and compare older adults' stereotypical versus own age representations. Diverse representations were sought across three age groups: 65–74, 75–84, and 85+ years old (North and Fiske 2012). This analysis is based on three different age groups, which allows for a nuanced understanding of the varied experiences and perceptions of aging across different stages of later life. Research on lifespan development emphasizes that individuals may experience significant physical, cognitive, and social changes at different points in older adulthood (Baltes 1987; Montepare 2019). By comparing responses from these age groups, we aim to explore how perceptions of aging might shift from early older adulthood (65–74) to advanced age (85+), highlighting potential differences across the various age groups.

2. Method

2.1. Recruitment and Sampling

To be eligible to take part in this study, people needed to meet the following criteria: (a) be at least 65 years old, (b) comprehend the purpose of the study, and (c) not have a history of cognitive impairment resulting from mental or neurological conditions, alcohol or drug abuse, or any other situation. Among the 450 eligible invitees, 17 were largely unavailable or provided insufficient data for further analysis. Our 433 participants were between 65 and 78 years of age (M = 70.9; SD = 4.87 years. Very nearly two-thirds were female, and only 18.2% had completed high school. The vast majority (89.1%) shared a home with someone else (see Table 1).

Table 1. Sample of sociodemographic and health characteristics.

Characteristics	**Age Group 65–74 Years-Old**	**Age Group 75–84 Years-Old**	**Age Group +85 Years-Old**	**Total 433 (100.0)**
Age, Average ± SD				M = 70.9 ± 4.87
Biological Sex, n (%)				
Female	121 (64.5)	98 (65.3)	67 (61.5)	286 (66.1)
Male	53 (30.5)	52 (34.7)	42 (38.5)	147 (33.9)
Education, n (%)				
Primary school	75 (43.1)	66(44.0)	53 (48.6)	194 (44.8)
Middle school	68 (39.1)	62 (41.3)	31 (28.4)	161 (37.2)
≥High school	31 (17.8)	22 (14.7)	25 (22.9)	78 (18.0)
Household				
Live with someone	162 (93.1)	135 (90.0)	89 (81.7)	386 (89.1)
Live alone	12 (6.9)	15 (10.0)	20 (18.3)	47 (10.9)
Family Annual Income, n (%)				
≤25,000 €	81 (46.6)	76 (50.7)	27 (42.6)	184 (42.5)
>25,000 €	93 (53.4)	74 (49.3)	82 (75.2)	249 (57.5)
Perceived Health, n (%)				
Good	109 (62.6)	81 (54.0)	55 (50.5)	225 (56.6)
Poor	65 (37.4)	69 (46.0)	54 (49.5)	178 (43.4)

Recruitment was conducted through senior universities, message boards, personal emails, and community center service lists. Prior to the study, participants received comprehensive information about the study's aims, how study data would be used, and assurances of their confidentiality and anonymity. Consenting participants completed semi-structured interviews using Zoom, WhatsApp, and Skype and at their convenience. Phone and online help were available to address participants' concerns. The two main questions in the interview guide were: (1) "Do you identify yourself with what your age represents for you?" and (2) "In your understanding, how do you deal with what old age represents?" (see Table 2). The questions used were established to ensure directness and insight in responses. Participants were provided with online or telephone support to address any questions.

Table 2. Interview guide.

Part 1: Sociodemographic, Health and Lifestyle Questions	
1.	What is your age? (in years)
2.	What is your birth sex?
3.	What gender do you identify with?
4.	In which country do you live?
5.	What is your nationality?
6.	How would you describe the area where you live?
7.	What is your marital status?
8.	What is your household composition?
9.	How many children do you have?
10.	How many grandchildren do you have?
11.	What is the highest level of education you have completed?
12.	Are you retired? If yes, what was your profession before retirement?
13.	Do you currently have a job? If yes, what is your profession?
14.	In which of the following ranges does your household's approximate gross annual income fall?
15.	Do you consider yourself a spiritual person?
16.	What is your religion?
17.	Have you had any illness recently? If yes, which one(s)?
18.	How would you describe your general health?
19.	How many medications do you take daily?
20.	Have you had any psychological problems recently? If yes, which one(s)?
21.	Are you currently undergoing or have you undergone, in the last three months, any pharmacological or psychological/psychiatric therapy?
22.	Do you engage in any leisure or free-time activities? If yes, which one(s)?
23.	What is the weekly frequency?
24.	What is the average weekly duration of your leisure and free-time activity(ies) (in hours)?
25.	Do you regularly engage in any sport or physical activity? If yes, which one(s)?
26.	What is the weekly frequency?
27.	What is the average weekly duration of your regular sport or physical activity (in hours)?
28.	Are you currently in a relationship?
Part 2: Interview Questions	
1.	Do you identify yourself with what your age represents for you?
2.	In your understanding, how do you deal with what old age represents?

Interviews lasted approximately 25 min each, and after confirming the eligibility and availability of all participants and interviewers, interviews were conducted over a two-month period (September to October 2022). Research staff who administered the interviews underwent comprehensive training to ensure consistency and reliability in data collection. This training included detailed instructions on administering the standardized questions and on handling follow-up questions to better understand and delve deeper into participants' responses. Interviewers were also trained through mock interviews to better facilitate participants' sharing of their old age representations. Whenever the interviewers needed more clarity, one follow-up question was made: "Can you explain what you mean by that?" Additionally, a post-interview thank-you note was sent to all the participants.

To manage the large sample size of participants, interviews were scheduled and conducted systematically by a team of two trained interviewers, with each interviewer responsible for a subset of half the participants. The entire transcription and translation procedure was completed following the interviews to ensure accuracy. After applying the interview protocol, a brief reading was carried out to verify the coherence of the narratives and so that the researchers became familiar with the contents of each interview. Strict adherence to ethical standards throughout the process was crucial for the research. Ethical procedures were approved by the William James Center for Research and ISPA-Instituto Universitário ethics committee. Ethical principles for research with human subjects were followed from the Declaration of Helsinki and the Portuguese Psychologists' Code of Ethics.

2.2. Data Analysis

Qualitative interviews were conducted with older adults, and a thorough examination was carried out employing content analysis following the gathering and proper transcription of all data, as proposed by Erlingsson and Brysiewicz (2017). The number of responses refers to the frequency of occurrences for each topic, tallying how often each theme is mentioned throughout the dataset. Although a substantial volume of data emerged from the interviews, data were analyzed manually in order to achieve a deep understanding of participants' experiences.

The process of coding the interviews began, with the data being analyzed for an *a posteriori* analysis. A code list was created by assigning codes to find pertinent topics to aid content analysis (Erlingsson and Brysiewicz 2017). Each category was assigned a numeric code to create a code list. This code list was created based on the different narratives that participants made about their age representations.

Major topics and sub-topics were determined and organized into separate, mutually exclusive groups with descriptive headings. The three researchers agreed that this categorization strategy was successful.

Assessments have arisen regarding internal consistency; variations in the coding structure have been carried out from this manual coding. Throughout the analysis process, debriefing meetings were held regularly. Any differences in coding prompted discussions to establish consensus. To ensure data and codes were mutually exclusive, a constant comparison by two researchers was performed. Peer consensus was used to address any differences that arose during the analysis and codification process, ensuring a transparent and comprehensive process of reflection.

Adherence to common rules for classifying and categorizing qualitative data was crucial in the creation of a trustworthy analysis system. These rules included integrity, objectivity, uniformity, and relevance. Homogeneity in structuring the data was considered by finding recurring topics. The relevance of the categories was rigorously evaluated to ensure their importance in the analysis. Objectivity and fidelity were maintained to create reliable and precise categories. Verbatim transcripts were analyzed until theoretical saturation was achieved. Codes were generated and allocated. The resultant codes were then examined, cross-referenced, and hierarchically structured to achieve consistency in their interpretation. A matrix was created to enable both theoretical and empirical discussions of the data. The qualitative analysis went deeper into the evolved categories, providing a nuanced comprehension of the data, while the descriptive analysis offered a thorough summary. Two researchers independently coded each interview, and their levels of agreement were high (inter-researcher agreement: $0.83 < k < 92$, p-value < 0.01 in all analyses).

3. Results

A large proportion of participants (88%) did not identify with stereotypical age representations of same-age people across a number of key themes.

3.1. Themes at 65 to 74 Years of Age

Among participants between 65 and 74 years of age, content analysis revealed 6 themes challenging stereotypical age representations: (1) Showing sense of agency (81.1%); (2) Feeling spiritual (73.4%); (3) Having meaningful goals (72.2%); (4) Holding a significant social network (70.9%); (5) Staying tuned to the world (67.1%); and (6) Feeling physically attractive (59.8%).

3.1.1. Theme 1: Showing Sense of Agency

The most prevalent (81.1%) theme was showing a sense of agency. This theme reflected how participants valued a sense of control, subjective awareness, and autonomy in shaping their experiences and age identity. Yuri reported that "when I feel like I have control over my life and can make decisions that align with my values and beliefs, I feel more empowered and confident in my decisions and experiences. Sadly, that is not always possible since people expect me to be passive in my decisions" (Yuri, male, 67 years old). His statement underscored the significance of personal autonomy and the frustration experienced when societal expectations challenge one's sense of control. Similarly, Jonna expressed her resistance to age-related stereotypes and her assertion of personal agency in defining her own experience of aging: "I understand that others may hold silly stereotypes about old people, assuming that we are frail, technologically inept, or no longer capable of learning and adapting. However, I don't identify with these stereotypes, and I decide what it is to be old because I am an old woman. I believe that being old means deciding what I want for myself" (Jonna, female, 65 years old). Jonna's perspective highlighted her rejection of stereotypes and emphasized the importance of self-determination in shaping her own experience of aging.

3.1.2. Theme 2: Feeling Spiritual

The second theme verbalized by 73.4% of participants of this age group was feeling spiritual. This theme captured how spirituality influenced participants' perceptions of themselves and their aging process. Tanya explained, "Others think that I should behave like an older person. However, I do not identify as old. Spirituality made me get out of this context. I started doing meditation, and it helps me feel more centered, grounded, and connected to a deeper sense of purpose and meaning in life. This sense led me to feel closer to myself and more vibrant, regardless of what people expect from my age" (Tanya, female, 71 years old). Tanya's statement illustrated how her spiritual practices, such as meditation, provide her with a sense of vitality and purpose, helping her transcend societal expectations associated with aging. Lilia also highlighted how her strong spiritual beliefs contribute to her sense of youthfulness and helped her overcome the constraints typically associated with aging: "Being deeply rooted in my religious faith can make me believe I am younger than I actually am. This deep spiritual connection allows me to transcend the limitations of age and embrace the fullness of my being, with a youthful spirit" (Lilia, female, 69 years old).

3.1.3. Theme 3: Having Meaningful Goals

Nearly three-quarters (72.2%) of participants suggested that setting and pursuing meaningful goals positively impacts what being 65 to 74 years of age represents to them. This theme underscored the role of personal objectives in enhancing engagement and fulfillment during this stage of life. Julian said: "My family expects me to be well; however, my projects make them nervous. They say I should relax more and leave these for the younger ones. Having my own goals and direction in life can help me feel more engaged, motivated, and fulfilled. I started volunteering in the community, where my values and interests are aligned and gave me a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction that can help me feel more youthful and energized" (Julian, male, 74 years old). His statement emphasized how pursuing personal goals, such as volunteering, not only provided him with a sense of purpose but also countered stereotypes about aging and contributed to

his overall sense of vitality and satisfaction. Eric's frustration with age-related stereotypes is evident in his comment. He believed that engaging in meaningful goals is crucial for continued personal growth and learning, reinforcing his sense of purpose and activity: "It's frustrating when people assume that I should just sit and watch TV. I strongly believe that we should break free from that stereotype and instead focus on setting meaningful goals, allowing us to continue growing and learning, regardless of our age" (Eric, male, 72 years old).

3.1.4. Theme 4: Holding a Significant Social Network

Holding a significant social network was mentioned by 70.9% of the participants in the 65–74 years of age group. This theme highlighted the importance of social connections in providing a sense of belonging and support during this stage of life. Thomas's statement underscored how maintaining a strong social network contributes to his sense of identity and provides essential support to navigate the challenges associated with aging: "Connecting with friends, family members, and community members who share my interests can give me a sense of belonging, purpose, and fulfillment that can help me feel as a real person. Having this social support can help me surpass the challenges of aging" (Thomas, male, 66 years old). Anne also verbalized, "Having friends at this stage of life brings me happiness. It's through these connections that I feel understood, valued, and inspired as we share ideas, projects, and experiences that enrich our lives. It makes me feel alive and younger" (Anne, female, 74 years old). Anne's comment also highlighted the joy and rejuvenation she derived from her friendships, emphasizing how these relationships enhanced her sense of well-being and vitality.

3.1.5. Theme 5: Staying Tuned to the World

Very nearly two-thirds (67.1%) of participants in this age group spoke of stereotypes about their staying tuned to the world. This theme reflected how staying up-to-date can influence their self-perception and sense of relevance. Olivia verbalized, "Expectations are that I am always outdated and do not know what is going on. I love staying attuned with the world, and this provided me opportunities for knowing myself better and for feeling good about my age" (Olivia, female, 71 years old). This perspective underscored how actively engaging with current events and trends helped this participant challenge outdated perceptions and foster a positive self-image. Felix also said, "Embracing the ever-evolving world allows me to stay relevant, connected, and open, and my age will not interfere with my ability to adapt and thrive in today's dynamic society" (Felix, male, 70 years old). This view reflected the belief that staying involved with a changing world enhances one's sense of relevance and adaptability, countering stereotypes about aging and uselessness.

3.1.6. Theme 6: Feeling Physically Attractive

The last appreciably prevalent (59.8%) age stereotypical representation that participants challenged was how they looked. This theme illustrated how maintaining physical attractiveness and confidence may impact their sense of vitality and well-being. Susan highlighted how confidence in one's appearance, supported by exercise and self-care, can enhance feelings of vitality and respond to age-related stereotypes: "Can I be sexy? I asked myself many times. Feeling confident in my appearance can give me a sense of vitality, energy, and youthfulness that can positively influence my age and well-being. Some exercise and self-care can help me feel more engaged in my daily life, which helps me not feel too old" (Susan, 65 years old). Samantha verbalized, "Feeling physically attractive contributes to my sense of youthfulness. By taking care of my physical well-being through exercise, grooming, and dressing in a way that makes me feel confident, I can embrace my age with grace and radiate a positive self-image" (Samantha, female, 68 years old). Attention to physical appearance and self-care may foster a sense of youthfulness and allow one to maintain a positive self-image despite societal stereotypes about aging.

3.2. Themes at 75 to 84 Years of Age

Five 'stereotypical age representation' themes for most participants between 75 and 84 years of age were: (1) Physical health; (2) Surviving chronic illnesses; (3) Autonomy; (4) Being socially active; and (5) Staying mentally active.

3.2.1. Theme 1: Physical Health

The most prevalent theme among participants who were 75 to 84 years of age was physical health (81.0%). This theme emphasized how maintaining a healthy lifestyle influenced their self-perception and challenged age-related stereotypes. Anne said, "Everyone expects me to be sick or frail. I found out that a healthy lifestyle can make me feel younger. I remember when I was younger, I used to do proper nutrition, go to the gym twice a week, and take care of my mental health. So, when I do these things now, with my age, it brings back my old memories of being young" (Anne, female, 78 years old). This perspective highlighted how adhering to a healthy lifestyle not only helped maintain physical well-being but also evoked a sense of youthfulness and continuity with the past. Jimmy also illustrated how a positive body image and self-care contributed to challenging societal expectations and affirming one's sense of worth beyond age-related labels: "Feeling good about my body as an older adult allows me to defy societal labels and not identify myself solely as an old man. This positive body image transcends age stereotypes, reminding me that my worth and identity are not defined by a number" (Jimmy, male, 79 years old).

3.2.2. Theme 2: Surviving Chronic Illnesses

The second theme was surviving chronic illnesses (78.9%). This theme underscored how overcoming significant health challenges can influence self-perception and resilience. Ryan verbalized, "Let me tell you something: If I fought cancer and I won, then I can do anything. I am as tough and strong as a 30-year-old guy. I think that these kinds of experiences help us grow but can also show us that we are too young to die" (Ryan, male, 82 years old). This statement highlighted how conquering a severe illness may foster a sense of strength and invincibility, challenging age-related limitations and reinforcing a belief in one's enduring vitality. Dana said, "Surviving an illness has made me feel disconnected from my age in a good way, as I now perceive myself as a powerful and courageous individual. Overcoming this adversity reminded me that I can face any challenge" (Danna, female, 79 years old). This perspective emphasized how triumphing over health challenges enhances one's sense of empowerment and resilience, shifting focus from age-related constraints to personal strength and capability.

3.2.3. Theme 3: Autonomy

Stereotypical representations of autonomy lacked self-relevance and were challenged by 75.5% of participants in this age group. This theme reflected how maintaining control over various aspects of life influences their self-perception and challenges age-related stereotypes. Eric's perspective underscored how retaining control over daily life and personal decisions helped offset stereotypes about aging and reinforced a sense of personal autonomy: "While I can't do everything, I do not understand why I should behave like an old man. Autonomy can take many forms, such as having the ability to make decisions about my daily routine, finances, and social connections. So, if, with 77 years, I still can do all this, I think I'm not that old" (Eric, male, 77 years old). Hugo verbalized, "Having autonomy as an older person makes me feel like an adult, not an older adult, without being defined by my age, as I can still do everything I set my mind to. It helps me maintain a sense of purpose and allows me to have meaning in my life" (Hugo, male, 80 years old). His view highlighted how maintaining autonomy supported a sense of purpose and challenged the notion that aging limits one's capability and self-determination.

3.2.4. Theme 4: Being Socially Active

Stereotypical representations of the social wherewithal of people in their mid-70s to early 80s were questioned by 74.9% of participants in this age group. This theme highlighted how maintaining an active social life defied stereotypes of loneliness and isolation in older age. Kim said, "I do not identify with the stereotype of being old and lonely, although I feel wiser in my relationships. I like to maintain meaningful relationships engaging with family, friends, and the community. These regular interactions and connections help combat feelings of loneliness and isolation and inspire me to keep going. These people make me feel young, and I want to live for another 20 years" (Kim, female, 82 years old). Lucas verbalized, "Contrary to the stereotype of the old man alone, I have friends... We share laughter stories and create cherished memories together, reminding me that friendship knows no age limits" (Lucas, male, 79 years old). Both views reflected how strong social connections and friendships fight loneliness and enhance one's sense of vitality and purpose, defying stereotypes of aging and contributing to a vibrant and fulfilling life.

3.2.5. Theme 5: Staying Mentally Active

The last theme, staying mentally active, was verbalized by 70.1% of the participants. This theme emphasized how intellectual engagement and learning challenge stereotypes about cognitive decline in older age. Liam mentioned how continued education pursuits challenge age-related assumptions and contribute to a sense of ongoing growth and vitality: "Attending a senior university has allowed me to break the notion that old people are too old to learn. I am continuously expanding my knowledge, exploring new subjects, and challenging myself intellectually" (Liam, male, 80 years old). Similarly, Laurie also explained how engaging in intellectual activities helped to maintain mental sharpness and defied stereotypes about cognitive decline with age, reinforcing a sense of youthful mental vigor: "My body may be aging, but my mind is still young. I love to challenge myself intellectually, for example by studying, it keeps my mind sharp and vibrant" (Laurie, female, 82 years old).

3.3. Themes at 85+ Years of Age

The oldest participants identified five themes concerning stereotypical age representations of people: (1) No pain or physical limitations (95.6%); (2) Physical health (93.1%); (3) Cognitive autonomy (87.1%); (4) Staying tuned to the society and the world (76.3%); and (5) Mobility (72.2%).

3.3.1. Theme 1: No Pain or Physical Limitation

A significant 95.6% of participants revealed that having no pain or limitations can have a positive impact on the representation of their age. This theme emphasized how maintaining physical well-being challenged stereotypical associations of aging with discomfort and disability. Anne verbalized how prioritizing health and activity can counteract age-related assumptions about physical decline, fostering a sense of vitality and fulfillment: "Society expects old people to be limited or in pain. I've been focusing on my health for years, being active, and fostering important connections, and I've noticed a revived sense of youthfulness and energy. I have no pain. Age is simply a number when it comes to living a happy and fulfilled life if you have the appropriate mindset" (Anne, female, 86 years old). Lily explained, "Age does not have to equate to discomfort. Having no pain makes me feel like I'm not that old. Even in old age, we can enjoy life and have a vibrant existence" (Lily, female, 88 years old). This view reinforced the idea that physical well-being can significantly influence one's perception of age, allowing for a more vibrant and positive experience of later life.

3.3.2. Theme 2: Physical Health

Physical health resonated with 93.1% of participants aged 85 and older. This theme challenged stereotypes about aging and emphasized the role of an active lifestyle in main-

taining vitality. Physical activity and a healthy lifestyle can defy age-related stereotypes and foster a sense of youthfulness and well-being. Philip said, "Old people are not sedentary people. I firmly think that leading a healthy lifestyle, being active, and exercising frequently is essential for everyone's health. It's tremendously powerful to shatter preconceived notions about aging and demonstrate that, with the right care, one can live a full life and feel much younger than their actual age. I definitely feel younger when I exercise" (Philip, male, 88 years old). Also, Stefan reinforced the idea that maintaining physical health and activity can reshape perceptions of aging, emphasizing that vitality and fulfillment are attainable, regardless of age: "I go to the gym, and I like it. I do not correspond to the stereotype of the sick old man. . . it allows me to embrace a different narrative of aging, empowers me to lead an active and fulfilling life, reminding me that I am more than just my age" (Stefan, male, 87 years old).

3.3.3. Theme 3: Cognitive Autonomy

Cognitive autonomy was a significant theme for 87.1% of participants aged 85 and older, reflecting their views on maintaining mental independence and sharpness despite societal stereotypes about cognitive decline in old age. Tom mentioned, "I do not feel slow in reasoning. That is my ability to think, reason, and make independent decisions. I keep my mind active and independent by reading and learning new things. And by doing that, I don't feel that old. I would feel old when I can no longer do those things" (Tom, male, 90 years old). This statement highlighted how cognitive engagement and the ability to make independent decisions contributed to a sense of mental vitality and challenged age-related assumptions about cognitive decline. Daniel reinforced the notion that maintaining cognitive autonomy and mental sharpness can significantly influence one's experience of aging, countering stereotypes that equate aging with diminished cognitive abilities: "Everyone automatically relates aging to cognitive decline. But I feel good, my mind feels good. And the sharpness of my mind empowers me to navigate the world with confidence, even at this age" (Daniel, male, 89 years old).

3.3.4. Theme 4: Staying Tuned to the Society and the World

Stereotypical representations about staying tuned to society and the world were challenged by many participants (76.3%) who were in their 80s or older, reflecting their active involvement in contemporary issues and their challenge to stereotypes of isolation in old age. Brian expressed that staying informed and actively participating in societal discussions can offset stereotypes of isolation and demonstrate that older individuals can remain relevant and engaged: "I am not isolating myself or passively waiting for life to end. I make sure I stay involved in the world by paying attention to the news, engaging in debates, and keeping up with technological developments. Growing older doesn't have to be a barrier to being connected and contributing to greater conversation. And I can proudly say that I can have conversations with younger generations, which makes me feel that I am their age" (Brian, male, 86 years old). Isabel mentioned, "My desire to learn and know more stems from the fact that I am far from death. Rather than being constrained by thoughts of mortality, I choose to live, and I believe that every day presents an opportunity for growth" (Isabel, female, 90 years old). Her perspective emphasized the idea that maintaining curiosity and a proactive approach to learning can enhance one's sense of vitality and connection to the world, regardless of age.

3.3.5. Theme 5: Mobility

For 72.2% of participants, being mobile represented and was therefore part-and-parcel of being 85 and older, illustrating its crucial role in their sense of vitality and in challenging to age-related stereotypes. Annabelle explained, "Feeling I can go anywhere challenges any prejudice about being very old. I have always valued mobility, even at the age of 88. I can perform my regular responsibilities while also exploring new locations, participating in social activities, and keeping in touch with people. It contributes to my overall well-

being and plays a significant role in challenging the stereotypes associated with aging" (Annabelle, female, 88 years old). This quote highlights how maintaining mobility enhances independence and engagement with life, thereby contesting stereotypes that depict older adults as inactive and limited. Anthon noted the profound impact of mobility on personal well-being and self-perception, emphasizing how regaining mobility can rejuvenate one's sense of youthfulness and freedom: "When I lost my mobility in my youth, it was a difficult time, and I felt old beyond my years. However, now that I have regained my mobility, I no longer feel old. The ability to move freely and independently allows me to embrace life" (Anthon, male, 81 years old).

4. Discussion

Participants from the 65–74-year-old age group predominantly challenged age-related stereotypes through themes that emphasize personal empowerment and engagement with life. Key themes included the following: Showing a sense of agency, feeling spiritual, having meaningful goals, holding a significant social network, staying tuned to the world, and feeling physically attractive. This cohort highlighted a proactive approach to aging, characterized by an emphasis on maintaining personal control, spiritual fulfillment, and active social involvement. Compared to older groups, these themes reflected a concern with self-perception and engagement rather than physical health, indicating that young older adults are more focused on asserting their individuality and relevance in society.

Most emphasized that displaying agency was the key theme that challenged conventions or stereotypes about what being in this age group represents. This involved asserting control over their lives, making independent choices, and actively pursuing goals. Recent research indicates that current older adults feel more empowered than previous generations (Gerstorf et al. 2019). Subjective age can also greatly shape lifestyle choices, which subsequently impact overall health (Hughes and Touron 2021).

For these younger older adults, feeling spiritual emerged as a significant theme, reflecting the profound impact of spirituality on their sense of self and overall well-being. Research indicates a possible connection between age and religiosity. Longitudinal data analysis by Bengtson et al. (2015) revealed a trend of rising subjective religiosity as individuals advance through adulthood stages. Except for very old individuals whose religious service attendance may decline due to physical limitations, religious engagement remains relatively steady over time (Bengtson et al. 2015). Religious and spiritual practices remain steadfastly advantageous to older people's physical and mental health and wellness (Balboni et al. 2022; Coelho-Júnior et al. 2022).

Having meaningful goals also stood out as a prominent theme in this age group, showing their drive to pursue purposeful endeavors and continue growing internally. In another study, a link between better health resources and more goal setting in areas including social connections, health upkeep, leisure-time activities, and physical exercise was discovered (Nelis et al. 2018; Wong et al. 2022). Older people in better health appear to exhibit a greater capacity to anticipate opportunities for psychological growth and perhaps their physical wherewithal to pursue them (Kornadt et al. 2021). However, studies also suggest that different personal and environmental factors can have an impact on goal setting in older age (Baker et al. 2021; Saajanaho et al. 2016).

The importance of holding a significant social network was evident among the 65–74 age group, highlighting the value of meaningful connections and the positive impact of social interactions on their overall happiness and quality of life. Social networks vary from close friends, family, and work colleagues to distant acquaintances (von Humboldt et al. 2022). Older people have smaller networks due to fewer distant acquaintances, yet they often feel content, i.e., more satisfied with their lives (Kang 2023) and less lonely (Thompson et al. 2022). Notably, the number of close friends remains consistent with age and significantly impacts lifelong well-being, regardless of family, neighbors, or passing acquaintances (Bruine de Bruin et al. 2020).

Staying tuned to the world was also a significant theme for the younger older adults, highlighting their active involvement in current events and societal developments. This counters the stereotype of older adults being detached. The increasing integration of technology in daily life extends to seniors, enhancing aging and activity in relation to social, work, and health matters (World Economic Forum 2023). Many are skilled in digital tools, influenced by appeal, social bonds, familiarity, mental engagement, peer support, grandchild interactions, feature use, awareness, and immediate benefits, motivating their early tech adoption (Lee and Maher 2021).

Last, feeling physically attractive seemed to challenge conventional age representations for this age group, illustrating the importance of maintaining a positive self-image, taking care of one's physical well-being, and defying societal expectations regarding physical appearance and aging. People in their 80s have exhibited no lesser inclination than people in their 50s to preen themselves to thus be stylish and fit (Montepare 2019). With age, people generally find faces less attractive, but this decline is milder in older individuals' assessments compared to younger and middle-aged ones. Attractiveness isn't fixed or uniform; instead, it varies based on factors such as age, gender, and the specific dimensions of attractiveness under consideration (He et al. 2021).

The most important themes for the 75–84-year-old age group were managing physical health and maintaining independence. Prominent themes included the following: Physical health, surviving chronic illnesses, autonomy, being socially active, and staying mentally active. This shift in focus from the younger cohort's emphasis on personal agency and spiritual aspects to concrete concerns about physical well-being and autonomy indicated an increased prioritization of managing health and sustaining independence.

The attention to autonomy and being socially active underscored a desire to preserve control over one's life and to maintain social connections, which may reflect the growing importance of these factors as individuals go into older adulthood.

Most of the participants in this group indicated that physical health was the most significant theme to represent their age, with a significant majority highlighting its importance in maintaining overall well-being and vitality. Younger subjective age is associated with improved physical functioning, indicating a substantial association between physical health and subjective age (Stephan et al. 2020). Higher levels of physical activity were linked to feeling younger after an 8- to 20-year period, according to a notable longitudinal study (Stephan et al. 2020). It appears that there is a two-way relationship between feeling young and being physically active (Heimrich et al. 2022).

Surviving chronic illnesses stood out as a key theme among this group, emphasizing their resilience and determination to overcome health challenges while defying the stereotype of older adults being defined by their ailments. Cardiovascular disorders have been reported to be connected with a lower risk of subjective age (Stephan et al. 2020). Even after taking into consideration sociodemographic variables, current illnesses, and feelings of loneliness, this association is still substantial (Wettstein et al. 2023).

Autonomy was a significant theme among the 75–85 age group, underscoring their strong desire for self-sufficiency, decision-making autonomy, and maintaining control over their lives. The historical advancements in psychosocial factors, like control beliefs and perceived restrictions (Gerstorf et al. 2019), might contribute to the trend of this age group feeling younger (Wettstein et al. 2023). Older people handle solitude better than younger adults due to their greater independence in daily life, leading to improved subjective well-being, social integration, self-esteem, and positive emotions during solitary moments (Nikitin et al. 2022).

This cohort of older adults also indicated that being socially active was an important theme. They highlighted staying connected, taking part in social activities, and nurturing relationships for happiness. Having a partner, family, or friends provides vital social support. Studies link better well-being in old age to quality social networks (Becker et al. 2019). The impact of the social environment on how people feel their age is being studied,

with local factors like social interactions shaping perceptions of age and well-being (Hughes and Touron 2021).

Last, staying mentally active was a relevant theme among the 75–85 older adults, reflecting the importance of intellectual pursuits, learning, and embracing new experiences to maintain mental sharpness, challenging the idea that cognitive decline is inevitable with age. Research indicates a connection between psychological well-being (Weiss et al. 2013) and feeling younger. Those who feel younger tend to experience fewer depressive symptoms and greater life satisfaction, regardless of their level of depression (Heimrich et al. 2022). A younger age might also preserve one's day-to-day physical functioning (Wettstein et al. 2021). This underscores how both mental and physical health contribute to shaping one's subjective age.

Participants 85+ years of age focused on the themes that reflected health, cognitive, and physical dimensions of aging, including the following: No pain or physical limitations, physical health, cognitive autonomy, staying tuned to society and the world, and mobility. Participants in this group prioritized overcoming physical challenges and maintaining cognitive and social engagement, illustrating a heightened focus on managing health and staying active despite advanced age. This cohort emphasized on themes like cognitive autonomy and mobility, which underscored a significant concern with maintaining mental sharpness and physical independence and contrasted with the earlier groups' focus on personal agency and social connections. While group one (65–74) was the only group of three that did not report physical health as a factor, the older two groups ranked these as the most significant priority (group 2, ages 75–85) and second most important theme in the oldest group (ages 85+). Indeed, the themes for the older group highlighted a shift towards adapting to and overcoming the inherent challenges of very old age.

Many of the oldest individuals feel age is shaped by pain-free, unrestricted living, emphasizing the need for physical well-being. Feeling younger subjectively seems to enhance health and well-being (Debreczeni and Bailey 2021) and lower mortality risks as well as less frailty (Li et al. 2021). Less chronic illness is associated with a youthful feeling (Wettstein et al. 2023). Frailty, encompassing weakness and low activity, may make older adults perceive themselves as older (Stephan et al. 2020).

Physical health remained a prominent theme among the +85-age group, with respect to its importance for maintaining independence and a fulfilling life. Recent research shows that several factors contribute to older individuals feeling younger. These factors encompass older age, regular sports engagement, better quality of life, improved physical and mental health, higher life satisfaction, positive views on aging, and fewer depressive symptoms (Heimrich et al. 2022). In another study, people well into their 80s who saw themselves as physically younger tended to gravitate towards learning new skills, working, and traveling (Montepare 2019). This variety of interrelated factors emphasizes the complexity of how people perceive and experience aging.

For the oldest older adults, cognitive autonomy was a key theme, showing their desire to retain mental clarity, decision-making abilities, and independence in their daily lives. Research indicates a connection between feeling younger and enhanced cognitive abilities. In studies by Stephan et al. (2016), those with a younger subjective age displayed better long-term memory and executive function over a decade. Intriguingly, these cognitive benefits remained when considering age, demographics, and health factors. The preservation of autonomy also appears to quell own-age negativity in this age group (Kisvetrová et al. 2022). This suggests that subjective age plays a pivotal role in cognitive outcomes and underscores the potential cognitive health benefits of maintaining a youthful attitude toward aging.

Staying tuned to society and the world emerged as an important theme among the +85 age group. This reflects their ongoing interest in current events, societal shifts, and the desire to stay informed and connected. Study participants showed a strong desire for active engagement, valuing their independence, self-esteem, and social connections. Their focus involves staying informed and involved, prioritizing current well-being rather than undue worries about future age-related changes. While preserving physical abilities

and social bonds is crucial (Barbaccia et al. 2022), this approach underscores a proactive, optimistic perspective on aging. It highlights living in the present and cultivating a content and meaningful life. Later life is best represented as a contributory stage in the life course, marked by paid, volunteer, political, and cultural forms of work (United Nations 2020).

Last, mobility was a significant theme among this aged group, emphasizing the importance of maintaining the ability to move independently, as it contributes to their sense of freedom and a fulfilling quality of life. Mobility, as per Ferrucci et al. (2016), significantly impacts quality of life, predicting disability and survival. A quicker decline in walking speed links to worse outcomes (Artaud et al. 2015). Older adults value their mobility, viewing its loss as a key drawback of aging (Stephan et al. 2016). Feeling subjectively younger connects to faster walking (Stephan et al. 2020), implying that a youthful perception benefits physical functioning, particularly mobility, which is crucial for general well-being and health in older people.

Analyzing the data based on age groups provided both valuable insights and a number of limitations. Segmenting the data by age allowed for the identification of distinct themes and priorities that vary in old age, revealing how perceptions and concerns shift over time. This approach illuminated the ways in which different age cohorts navigate through aging, from the emphasis on personal agency in younger older adults to the focus on managing physical health and maintaining cognitive function in the oldest age group. However, this method may oversimplify within age groups, potentially overlooking individual variability in experiences and perspectives on aging. While age-related trends can be informative, it is important to recognize that each individual's experience of aging is unique and influenced by a range of personal, social, and contextual factors.

Additionally, while the study provides valuable insights into how older adults challenge age-related stereotypes, it does not address the possibility that subjective age might sometimes reflect an internalization of negative stereotypes about aging. As an example, if individuals view aging as generally negative and something to be avoided, they might perceive themselves as "younger" to distance themselves from what they consider undesirable aspects of old age. These dynamics could lead to a detachment from the positive aspects of aging highlighted by these participants, as well as the internalized negative perceptions of aging. Future research should explore this potential internalization of ageism to provide a more comprehensive understanding of subjective aging and its implications.

Moreover, the lack of diversity within the sample, particularly concerning ethnicity, gender, and living conditions, raises concerns about the generalizability of the study's conclusions to more diverse demographic and cultural contexts. The study's findings may not fully capture the experiences of individuals from varied backgrounds or living situations, potentially limiting the applicability of the results across different populations. Moreover, future research should examine gender differences to provide a more nuanced understanding of how gender may influence experiences and perceptions related to age-related stereotypes. The reliance on self-reported data introduces subjectivity as a potential constraint. Self-reporting could be susceptible to personal biases and social desirability effects, potentially causing participants to portray a more favorable or socially accepted perspective on aging. Additionally, the accuracy of participant responses might have been influenced by recall bias. The study's cross-sectional design further restricts its ability to establish causal relationships or track changes over time. Longitudinal studies would offer valuable insights into the dynamic nature of aging perceptions and experiences across different stages of life.

Despite these limitations, the study has valuable implications for understanding older adults' perceptions of age representation. Most of the participants do not identify with what being a certain age stereotypically represents, which stresses the importance of exploring how individuals interpret their own aging process and subjectively experience it. Indeed, these older adults pointed out in a very clear way what challenges their age representations. By doing so, these findings highlight the negative impact of ageism and age-related stereotypes on older adults' self-perceptions. To counteract the harmful effects

of ageism, future policy programs must address these biases and promote positive views of aging (United Nations 2020).

Moreover, different cohorts show different experiences in terms of the challenges their age represents. Younger older adults challenge stereotypical age representations mainly by showing a sense of agency, feeling spiritual, having meaningful goals, holding a significant social network, staying tuned to the world, and feeling physically attractive. The following group (75–84 years old) was centered on different themes, such as physical health, surviving chronic illnesses, autonomy, being socially active, and staying mentally active. Interestingly, the oldest older adults focused on no pain or physical limitations, physical health, cognitive autonomy, staying tuned to society and the world, and mobility. Customized interventions addressing these needs are vital to empower and support older adults, challenging age-related stereotypes, and promoting inclusive and aging well. However, Levy (2001) suggested that after a lifetime of exposure to a culture's age stereotypes, older adults direct these age stereotypes inward. Across all age groups, participants spoke with conviction about what age stereotypically represents and did not respond accordingly but rather defiantly, for their own good reasons. Later life ought to be conceived of as a contributory as disconnected or opposed to an insular stage of life (United Nations 2020). Active living, such as learning and working, and not letting one's mental skills lie idle are key ingredients for mentally healthy living at all ages (World Health Organization 2022).

Furthermore, the study emphasizes the need for deeper research into the complex interplay between personal and social factors in shaping self-perception as people age. Understanding this interaction has significant implications for various aspects of older adults' lives. By identifying factors that contribute to positive self-perception, custom-made interventions can enhance resilience and foster a positive mindset in facing age-related challenges. Creating age-friendly environments involves challenging ageist stereotypes and advancing a nuanced understanding of aging (United Nations 2020). This includes establishing inclusive communities, promoting intergenerational interactions, and providing supportive frameworks for active aging.

Future studies could investigate the impact of stereotyping on older adults' cognitive and physical health. Additionally, interventions aimed at reducing premanufactured age stereotypes and their detrimental effects on self-perception and well-being in older individuals should be explored. These efforts can contribute to a more age-inclusive society that respects and values the diverse experiences and perspectives of older adults. Moreover, future research should also consider examining experiences where individuals feel that age-related stereotypes resonate with their own perceptions. Understanding both perspectives—how people actively defy stereotypes and how they might internalize ageism—can provide a more comprehensive view of aging. This dual approach would not only highlight areas for potential growth but also inform the development of more effective interventions aimed at contesting ageism and supporting positive aging experiences.

In conclusion, this study has revealed that older adults' self-perceptions of what age represents for them do not align with prevailing stereotypical representations. Most participants challenge these through sharing a diversity of experiences and potential.

Moreover, from these findings, it is evident that older adults do not fit into a homogenized concept of older age, and their ideas of aging well are varied and often pleasurable. The themes identified in each age group are explicit and provide valuable insights into what older adults prioritize and value in their lives. For the 65–74 age group, themes such as agency, spirituality, goals, social network, connection, and attractiveness strongly defy common representations of old age and indicate a strong desire for purpose, spirituality, and independence. In the 75–84 age group, physical health, chronic illnesses, autonomy, social networking, and mental activity were largely framed in terms of maintaining physical well-being, resilience in the face of health challenges, and a strong desire to retain independence. For the oldest older adults, pain, physical limitations, health, cognitive autonomy, connection, and mobility underscored for them the significance of experiencing overall physical well-being and preserving their cognitive abilities.

These findings emphasize the need for society to move beyond negative age-related stereotypes and acknowledge the diverse experiences of older adults. We can create age-inclusive environments by recognizing and putting to good use their agency, spirituality, meaningful goals, physical and cognitive abilities, social connections, and desire to be in tune and engaged with the world around them. Older adults can reshape aging's narrative by embracing their unique perspectives, which promotes inclusivity, benefits well-being, and endorses an age-friendly society. Programs and policies that endorse sharing and declaring own-age representations for public consumption. Can foster a more accurate understanding of 'age' and rightfully in contrast with 'old'.

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