

Younger Adults' Perceptions of Aging: A Quasi-Experiment

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INTRODUCTION

- Many older adults report perceptions and experiences of social exclusion or differential treatment based on their age. They are targets of various forms of age discrimination/ageism.¹
- Exposure to negative or positive age stereotypes and ageist acts are shown to affect physical, functional, mental, behavioral, and social health outcomes among older adults.²
- Younger adults tend to hold the most negatively ageist attitudes, and are the most likely to perpetuate and engage in age-based discriminatory acts.³
- Extant knowledge on age stereotypes has been generated by asking participants to describe their thoughts about the 'typical elderly' or 'typical old' person.^{4,5}
- However, other popular terms describing an aging demographic are not yet examined in research (i.e., 'older person' or 'senior'). These terms are commonly used in major agencies and public policies (e.g., HelpAge; Government of Canada).

RESEARCH QUESTION

- Among younger adults, do age stereotypes elicited from the the four target words (i.e., elderly, old, older, senior) differ in terms of how relatively positive, negative, mixed, or neutral they are in describing an aging population?

METHODS

Recruitment & Participants

- Recruitment was open to anyone between 18-29 years old.
- Faculty-wide emails, as well as social media posts and snowballing were used to advertise.
- 60 participants per target word were needed and exceeded.
- Data were collected in September and October, 2016.
- Replicating methods of Levy (1996)⁴ and Hummert et al. (1994),⁵ the following question was asked—tailored to each target word: "When you think of the typical *elderly person, old person, older person, or senior*, what are the first five words that come to mind?"

METHODS

Data Collection & Analysis

- Online survey used to collect data with Opinio software.
- Participants provided anonymous online consent and were then randomly assigned to one of the four target words.
- Participants provided five elicited traits on their target word, then noted if each trait was positive, negative, mixed, or neutral.
- A summative count composite score across the five age stereotype traits was calculated for each participant in terms of how positive, negative, mixed, and neutral ratings were (0-5).
- Kruskal-Wallis nonparametric test determined statistical differences in composite score ratings among the target words.⁶

RESULTS

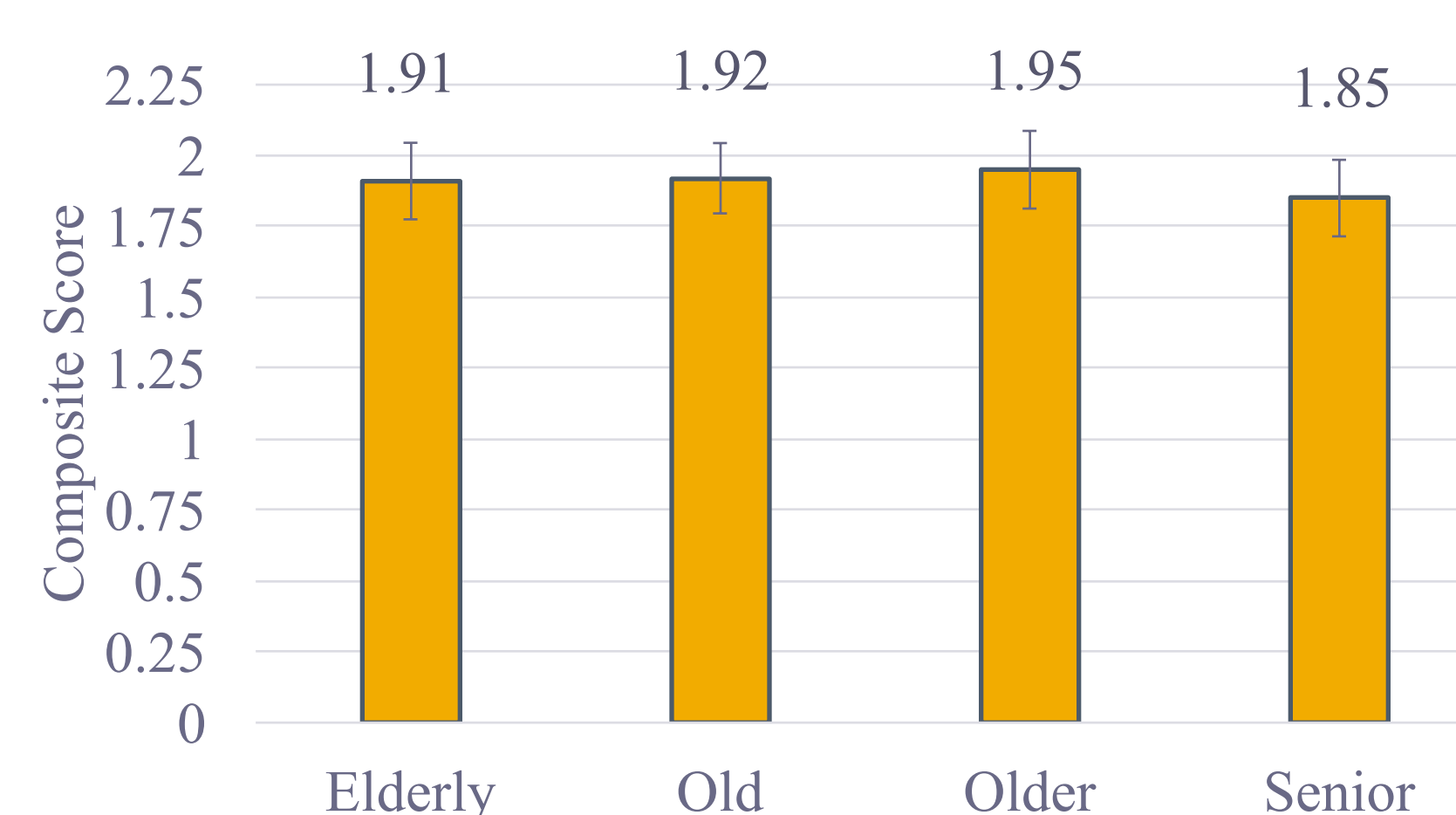
- 428 participants began survey, 360 completed: 15.9% drop out.

Table 1. Target word group sample sizes and drop out rate percentages (n = 360)

	Elderly	Old	Older	Senior
Number Consented	108	99	109	112
Number Completed	95	84	84	97
Number Withdrew	13	15	25	15
Percent Dropout (%)	12.0%	15.2%	22.9%	13.4%

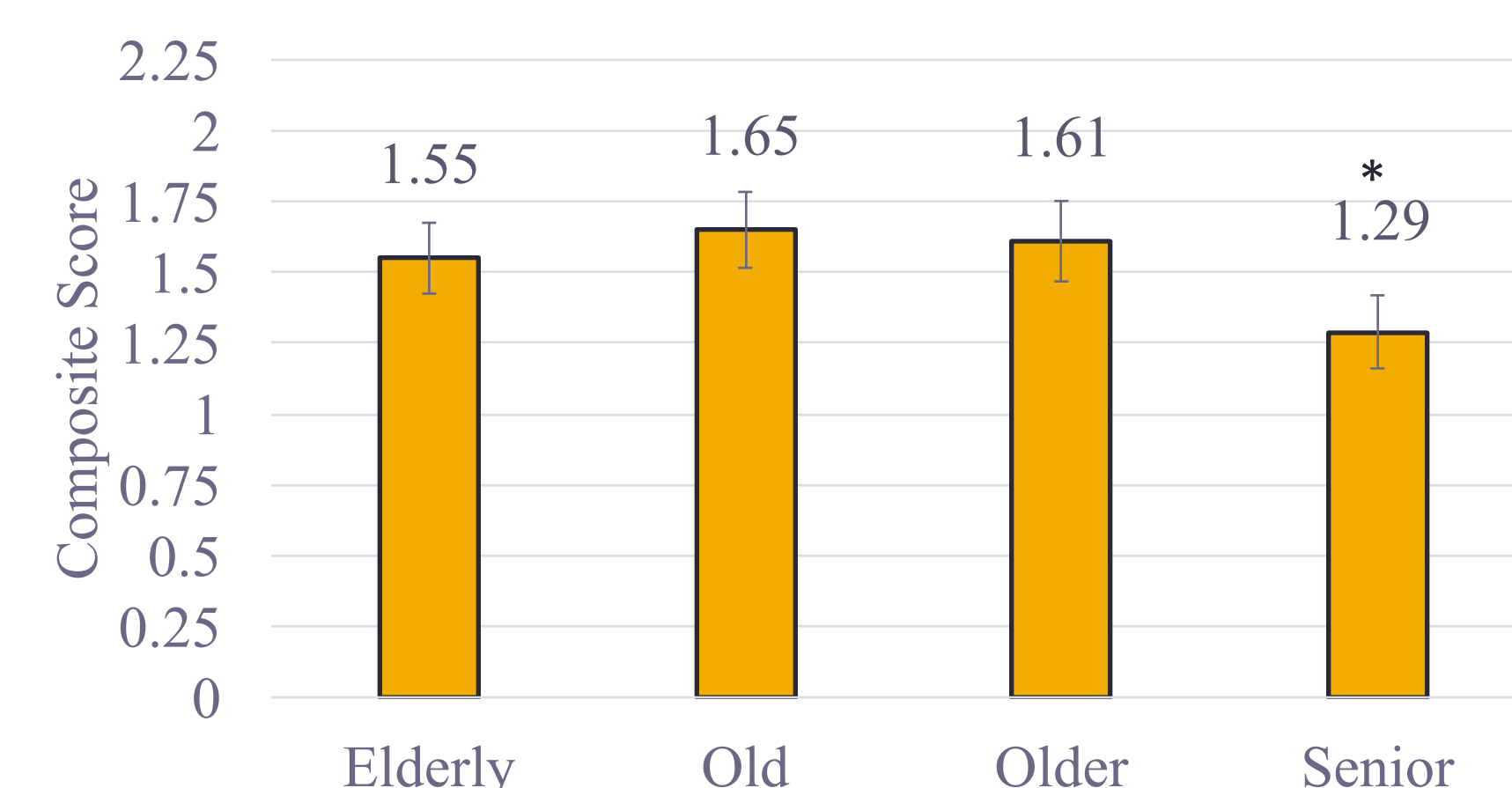
Note: Chi-square test for between-group differences was not statistically significant.

Figure 1. Age stereotype positivity rating by target word (n = 360)



- There were no significant differences in positivity rating.

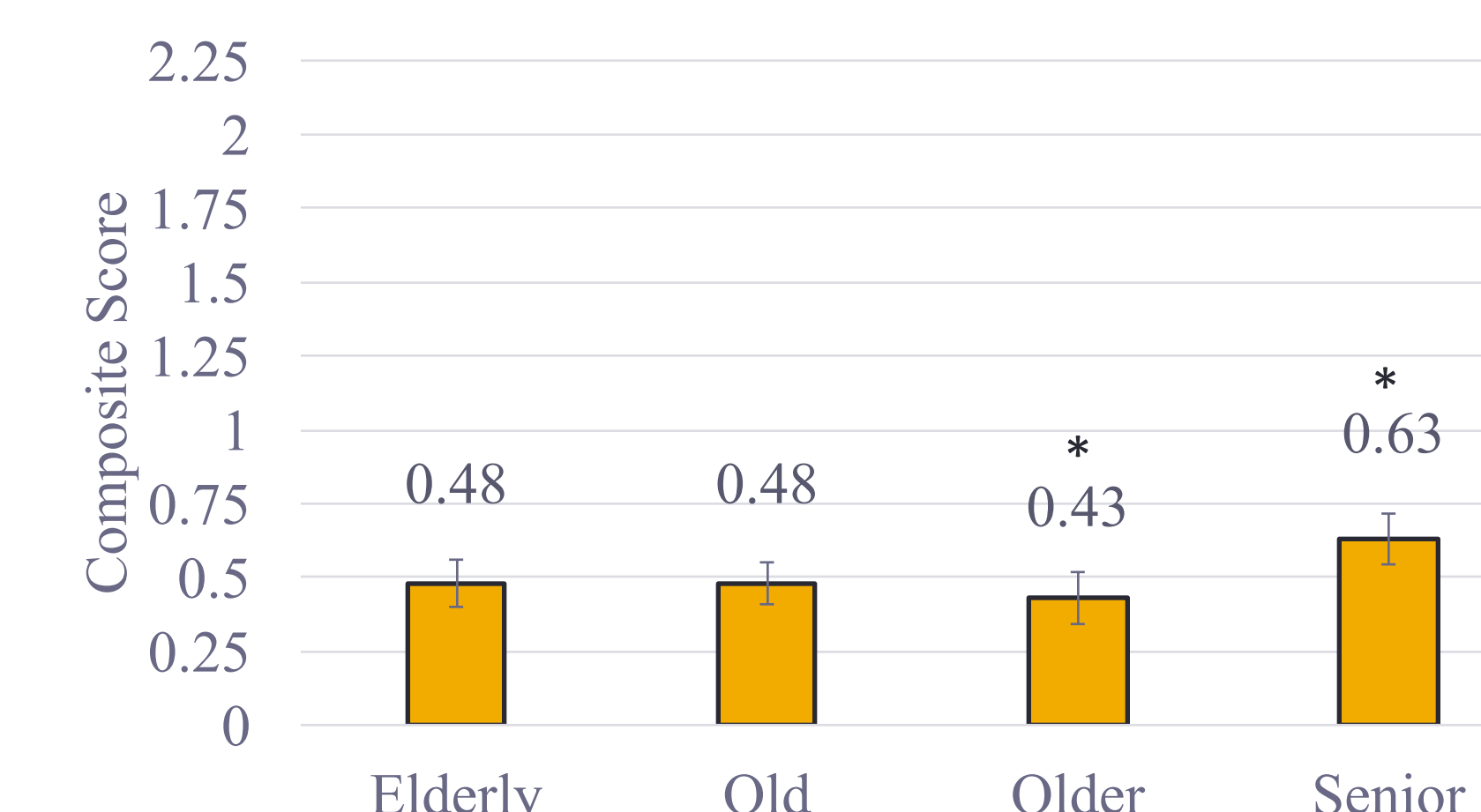
Figure 2. Age stereotype negativity rating by target word (n = 360)



- "Senior" was significantly less likely to elicit negative age stereotypes.

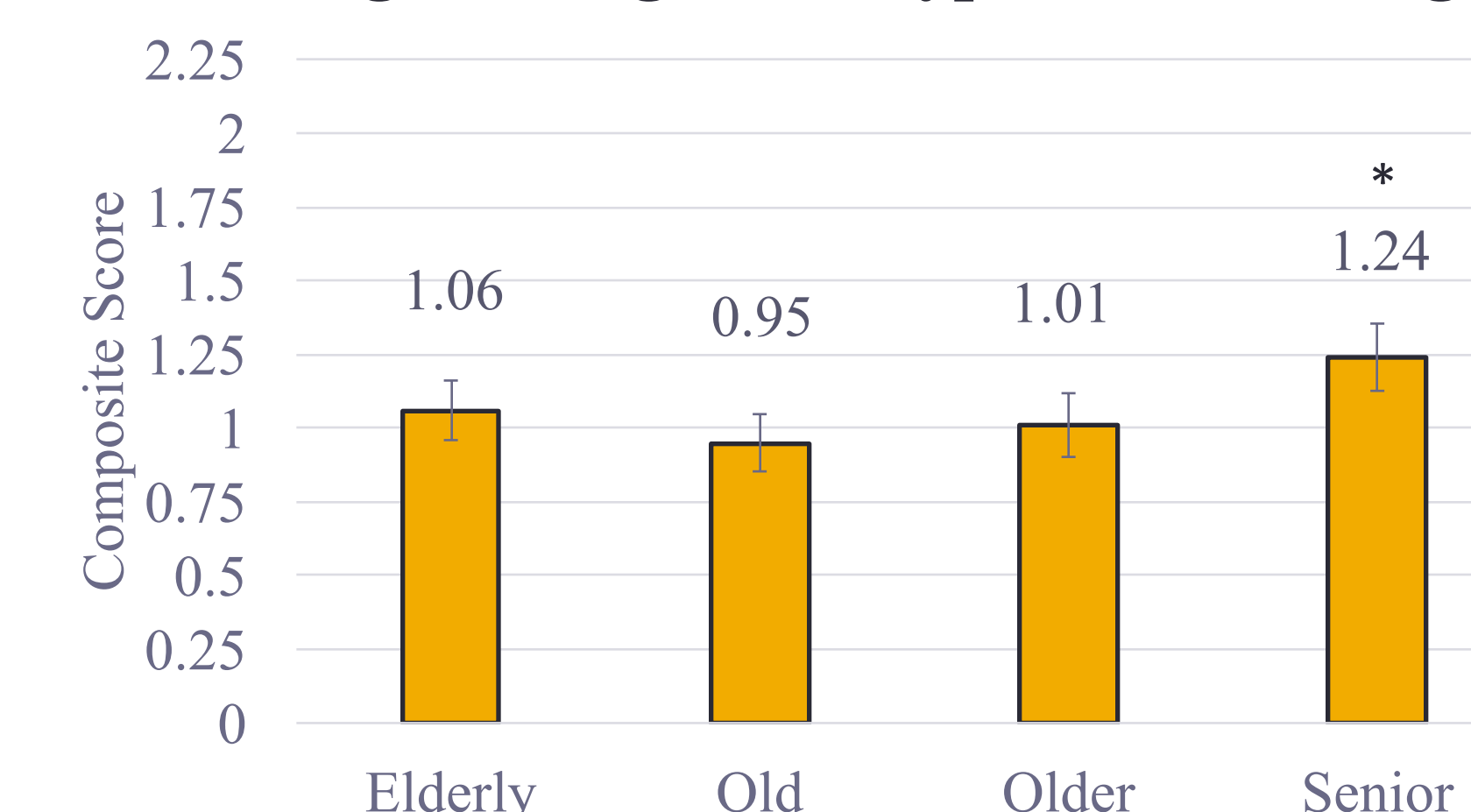
RESULTS

Figure 3. Age stereotype mixed rating by target word (n = 360)



- "Senior" was significantly more likely to elicit mixed age stereotypes than "older."

Figure 4. Age stereotype neutral rating by target word (n = 360)



- "Senior" was significantly more likely to elicit neutral age stereotypes.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

- Overall, participants were most likely to generate positive stereotypes of aging, regardless of target word assigned.
- Some trait words elicited clear polarized findings between positive and negative age stereotypes (i.e., "old" and "elderly" target words).
- To illustrate, among the four target words, "old person" generated the most negative age stereotypes and the second-most positive age stereotypes, as well.
- Polarity findings may be explained by outgroup social comparison theory and/or the lack of personal experience with aging.⁵
- Trait word "senior" was significantly less polar, more mixed, and complex. It generated the fewest negative age stereotypes and the most mixed and neutral age stereotypes.
- To promote realistic images of aging among younger adults "senior" may be the term to use. Regardless, each target word each elicited powerful, impactful messages.

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