



COVERT AGE DISCRIMINATION: THE PHENOMENON OF AGEISM AGAINST YOUNG WORKERS IN THE INDUSTRIAL SECTOR

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to conduct an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon of ageism experienced by young workers in the industrial sector. This issue is rarely discussed, as previous studies have tended to focus on age discrimination affecting older individuals. By employing a qualitative approach and a case study design, this research examines experiences of ageism among workers aged between 25 and 35 years. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and a review of written sources to strengthen the existing theoretical framework. The findings indicate that ageism against young workers manifests in various forms, including discrimination during the recruitment process, negative stereotypes regarding their abilities and character, and seniority practices that position age as an indicator of authority and competence. Structural factors, such as traditional workplace hierarchies and cultural norms concerning the appropriate age for marriage, further reinforce these age-based discriminatory practices. From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to expanding the understanding of ageism by emphasizing that age discrimination can occur not only against older workers but also against young workers, thereby necessitating a more inclusive analytical framework. Empirically, the findings underscore the importance of policy interventions and improvements in workplace culture to create a more inclusive industrial environment free from age discrimination.

Keywords: Ageism, Industry Sector, Young workers, Age Discrimination.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization, the industrial sector plays a crucial role in driving economic growth and generating employment opportunities (Akinyemi, 2025; Khan et al., 2023). This sector significantly contributes to Indonesia's economic development.

It was the largest contributor to the country's annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth in the first quarter of 2024, particularly through manufacturing, trade, construction, and mining (Dharmapriya et al., 2024). However, job availability remains a persistent issue, especially in relation to the demographic bonus (Mohammed Shuker & Hashim Sadik, 2024).

As of February 2024, the labor force reached 149.38 million people out of a total working-age population of 214.00 million. Nevertheless, 7.20 million individuals, or 4.82 percent of the total labor force, were unemployed (Amalia & Belgiawan, 2025). Statistics Indonesia also reported that unemployment within the category of Not in Employment, Education, or Training (NEET), amounting to approximately 9.89 million people, is predominantly filled by Generation Z (currently aged 15 to 27 years) (Sitompul, 2024). The high number of job seekers is not proportional to the availability of employment opportunities, resulting in a relatively high unemployment rate (Faberman et al., 2022; Siddique, 2023). One contributing factor to this condition is the presence of unreasonable job application requirements.

Within the industrial context, there are also social issues that render workers vulnerable, one of which is ageism (Brodmerkel & Barker, 2022; Cebola et al., 2023). Ageism refers to prejudice, stereotypes, and discrimination directed at individuals based on their age, particularly when they are perceived as either too old or too young to assume certain roles (Allen et al., 2022; Fragoso & Fonseca, 2022). Ageism is a form of stereotyping that can be experienced directly, whether positively or negatively (Aprilatutini et al., 2025). It is generally perceived that ageism negatively affects older workers, a conclusion supported by previous studies. Research conducted by Setyowati and Sumardjijati indicates that ageism has become embedded in everyday life within Indonesian society. In the 2017 film *Ziarah*, the main character, an elderly woman, resists various forms of ageism imposed upon her simply because she is no longer young (Setyowati & Sumardjijati, 2021).

Ageism, or discrimination based on age, is a persistent threat faced by workers, including young people (Cebola et al., 2023; Schmitz et al., 2025). Studies on ageism have tended to focus on discrimination against older individuals, based on the assumption that contemporary society favors youth over older adults. However, ageism directed at young people also occurs (Stanciu, 2022). This condition reinforces

the assumption that old age is undesirable due to the loss of social roles and income, which is often perceived as the worst phase at the end of one's life (Sallnow et al., 2022). In the industrial and labor context, ageism particularly when experienced during job applications can lead young individuals to feel alienated from the world of work and force them to endure such discomfort (Parawansa & Malik, 2024), even though human beings are inherently social creatures whose lives depend on interaction with others (Chapman & Carel, 2022).

The phenomenon of age discrimination against young workers in the industrial sector is important to examine because such practices often occur covertly and are rarely acknowledged as a form of structural injustice (Agyemang et al., 2024; Buchanan & Shen, 2025). Previous studies have primarily emphasized older age groups as the main victims of ageism, resulting in limited empirical and conceptual attention to the discriminatory experiences faced by young workers. In fact, stereotypes regarding immaturity, lack of experience, and assumptions that young workers are easily replaceable can significantly affect their work quality, career development, and psychosocial well-being during their productive years. There is also a lack of research explaining how ageism operates across various dimensions through recruitment processes, hierarchical workplace cultures, and prevailing social norms particularly within industries in Indonesia. Therefore, this study aims to uncover the various forms of ageism experienced by young workers and to identify the structural and cultural factors that sustain its existence. It is expected that this research will broaden readers' understanding, contribute to the field of industrial sociology, and provide additional insights for future studies.

2. RESEARCH METHODE

This research employs a qualitative design using a case study approach. A case study is a method used to examine a phenomenon in depth and detail (Assyakurrohim et al., 2022). The case study approach was applied to understand experiences of ageism among relatively young workers in the industrial sector. This approach is essential to explore how they interpret and make meaning of their experiences of ageism, as well as the forms of ageism they encounter.

The case study method was chosen because it enables researchers to delve deeply into the personal experiences of young workers and to understand the social and cultural contexts that shape ageist practices within the industrial sector. Data were collected through interviews with workers aged 25-35 years. In addition, data were gathered by reviewing and analyzing written sources such as scientific journals, articles, and other relevant literature. The purpose was to obtain information and theoretical frameworks relevant to the research topic.

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of social research. These principles primarily include maintaining confidentiality, obtaining informed consent, and ensuring the protection of participants. Prior to the interviews, each participant was provided with a clear explanation of the research objectives, the type of participation required, and the potential risks and benefits involved. Consent was obtained voluntarily, without any form of coercion. To preserve confidentiality and prevent possible negative consequences in the workplace, participants' identities were anonymized using initials. The collected data were securely stored and used solely for academic research purposes. The researchers also ensured that the interviews were conducted in a manner that respected the participants' comfort, including allowing them the option to decline answering any questions they found uncomfortable or to withdraw from the interview at any time. This ethical approach was particularly important because the issue of ageism involves sensitive experiences that may affect participants' employment positions and mental well-being.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Discrimination in the job recruitment process

The manifestation of ageism in the industrial sector can be observed in several areas, one of which is unfair recruitment practices (Stypinska, 2023). Very young workers or recent graduates aged 20-25 may still have relatively higher chances of receiving interview invitations (Wong et al., 2023). However, they are frequently overlooked or rejected during the recruitment process on the grounds that they lack experience or do not possess the required skills. This constitutes a serious issue, considering that if ageism continues to be practiced, it may potentially lead to

symptoms of social disorganization or even social disintegration among individuals seeking employment in the industrial sector (Badaruddin et al., 2025).

"I decided to shift careers at the age of 25 for a couple of reasons. Well, never mind looking for a job, even finding an internship program for my portfolio was incredibly difficult. What could we do? The average age requirement was 24 years old at most." (R, 26 years old)."

The same applies to workers over the age of 25 who do not meet the age requirements for applying for a job because they are considered "expired."

"I am now 27 years old, and I don't know whether my contract will be renewed or not. I have tried to look for job vacancies, but it is very difficult to find one because of the age limit. To be honest, I am not a lazy person. My data entry, computer operation, and time management skills are quite good, but the requirement for applying for a job is a maximum age limit. (A, 27 years old)."

Similar to A (27 years old), K (31 years old) also experienced anxiety and unpleasant ageism. He was discriminated against several times because of his age, regardless of his skills. According to him, the government also plays a role in perpetuating ageism and contributing to the high unemployment rate in Indonesia.

"Back when I had just graduated from college and was applying for jobs, many companies called me, but as time went by, it became more difficult as I got older. Especially working in banking, as you can see, even civil service jobs are limited to a maximum age of 35, so how can unemployment not increase? As time goes by, I am getting older, but it is more difficult to find work because of my age. We're still talking about age here, not my skills." (K, 31 years old)."

The young age requirement for job applicants has been set by companies in order to hire employees who can be paid less and have the same experience as employees who have been working for many years.

"When I was young, I was a victim of contract employment several times. After several years of contract work, I was forced to move from company to company due to unreasonable reasons. They wanted new employees who could be paid low wages and manipulated". (K, 31 years old)."

Discrimination in the recruitment process is an unfair practice because workers are treated differently based on their age. This practice is certainly detrimental to the individuals who are victims, and hinders diversity and inclusion in the workplace.

Stereotypes and Prejudices

Based on interviews with the informants, the stereotypes and prejudices they experienced or encountered from their coworkers can be summarized as follows:

- a) Age-based stereotypes and prejudices held by supervisors, coworkers, and clients. Young workers experience ageism when they are judged primarily on the basis of their age and are often perceived as less capable or less experienced because of their youth. This can result in lower expectations and limited opportunities for career advancement.
- b) Rudeness. Young workers are frequently portrayed as impolite or lacking good character. Their straightforward or outspoken attitudes particularly among those under the age of 35 are sometimes interpreted by supervisors as acts of defiance.
- c) Poor performance. Some individuals assume that young workers perform poorly, are less competent, or lack sufficient experience due to their relatively young age.
- d) Special treatment. Certain supervisors believe that young workers expect special treatment or additional benefits without exerting proportional effort. Young employees are sometimes labeled as spoiled because they are perceived to receive excessive attention and support, which is thought to reduce their resilience and adaptability.

Factors Contributing to Ageism

- a) Traditional workplace hierarchy. Seniority-based structures in the workplace can perpetuate ageism against younger workers. Older employees often occupy top positions, while younger workers are expected to advance gradually over time. This dynamic may create a persistent cycle in which younger employees feel overlooked or undervalued. In Indonesian society, age is still widely regarded as an indicator of seniority, giving rise to the assumption that older individuals must be respected while younger individuals should remain obedient. Interviews with informants revealed that some older supervisors believe they already “know everything,” leading

them to dismiss recommendations from younger workers out of a sense of superiority. Conversely, when supervisors are younger than their subordinates, they may feel uncomfortable directing them because of the age difference.

- b) Culture of early marriage. Early marriage remains culturally prevalent in Indonesia, and marrying after the age of 35 or choosing not to marry at a young age is often viewed as socially unacceptable. This cultural norm also influences employers' judgments. When companies encounter job applicants aged 25 or older, they may hesitate to hire them. Applicants above the age of 25 are frequently assumed to be planning marriage soon and therefore expected to request extended leave, which is perceived as potentially affecting company performance.

4. CONCLUSION

This study reveals that ageism against young workers in the industrial sector is a complex social phenomenon. It manifests in various forms, including discrimination during recruitment processes and negative perceptions regarding their abilities and character. Deeply rooted seniority practices, rigid workplace cultures, and societal expectations surrounding young adulthood further reinforce ageist prejudices toward workers aged 25 to 35.

The findings make a significant theoretical contribution by broadening the understanding of age discrimination, which has traditionally focused more on issues faced by older adults. This study highlights that age-based discrimination can also target younger generations, thereby requiring a more comprehensive conceptual framework to examine power relations, stereotypes, and age dynamics within contemporary workplace contexts.

From a practical perspective, the research demonstrates the tangible impact of age discrimination on career development, socio-emotional stability, and employment opportunities for the productive generation, ultimately influencing national industrial efficiency and workforce resilience. The study underscores the importance of strengthening labor policies that explicitly prohibit unreasonable age restrictions in

recruitment processes. Furthermore, it recommends that companies adopt competency-based selection practices rather than relying solely on age criteria. Institutional policies on anti-bias training for managers and supervisors should also be implemented to reduce age-related stereotypes in decision-making processes.

For future research, comparative studies across various industrial sectors and quantitative analyses of the economic impact of ageism on company productivity are needed. Longitudinal research is also essential to understand how experiences of age discrimination may shape the long-term career trajectories of young workers.

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