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Perception of the sexual sphere of older people by young people, taking into account ageism attitudes and the level of their own sexual satisfaction

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Abstract

Despite the fact that the population is ageing and more people reach 100 years old, the needs of the elderly in Poland are still a little-discussed political issue. Discrimination against older people exists and affects all areas of their lives, including the sexual sphere. The aim of the paper is to determine what attitudes towards the sexuality of older people have people aged 18-26 years, taking into account their declared sexual satisfaction and manifested ageistic attitudes. The article is based on a study conducted in December 2022, on a group of 114 people. The studies used a quantitative approach and used questionnaires to examine the severity of these parameters. The study showed that the assessment of the sexuality of the elderly does not differ according to the sex of the subject and that the level of ageism and sexual satisfaction is important in the assessment of said sexuality. Interestingly, the study also showed that sexual satisfaction is more a predictor for men than for women, and ageistic attitudes are more a predictor for women than for men.

Keywords: ageism, sexual satisfaction, sexuality of the elderly, transactional analysis.

Introduction

Ageism is an attitude of age discrimination directed at individuals and/or groups, associated with stereotyping and prejudices about age. It can have var-

ious characters: internalised, interpersonal or institutional. Discriminatory attitudes may lead to exclusion from social and economic life, leading to a lower quality of life and higher rates of loneliness and social isolation among older people (Flesia, Monaro, Jannini, & Limoncin, 2023). The consequence of discrimination and stereotyping of seniors is a negative perception of their sexuality, which is after all an inseparable part of life (Fabiś, 2015). Taking into account the above phenomena, the first research question arises: Do people with a higher level of ageism attitudes perceive the sexuality of older people less favorably than people with a lower level of ageism attitudes (H1)?

Although ageism as a phenomenon affects older people regardless of gender, the literature on the subject indicates that women are more likely to experience it which provokes adaptive behaviours such as hair dyeing, treatments masking signs of aging of the face and body, etc. (Clarke, Griffin, 2008, quoting: Ayalon, Tesch-Romer, 2018). Such actions are much less often observed in the case of older men, the phenomenon is not described or noticed. Francine M. Deutsch et al. (1986) showed that older men are perceived as more attractive than older women, although there were no differences in perceived attractiveness between men and young and middle-aged women (quoting: Kite, Deaux, & Miele, 1991).

As ageism affects older women more often than men, a research question arises: Will the degree of favor among women in their perception of the sexuality of older people depend on the degree of severity of ageism attitudes (H4)?

Referring to the assumptions of transactional analysis, we can distinguish six basic forms of time structuring that are key to the organization of a person's life: withdrawal, rituals, activities, entertainment, psychological games, and intimacy (Stewart, Joines, 2016). Each of these forms plays a different role in building relationships with the environment and shaping interpersonal experiences.

Intimacy, being one of these forms, has unique importance in the context of interpersonal relationships. In the light of transactional analysis, intimacy should not be limited solely to the context of sexual activity, although this aspect can be an important part of it. Eric Berne (2021) indicates that intimacy is divided into unilateral and bilateral. Unilateral intimacy is based on openness and sincerity on the part of one person, while bilateral intimacy requires reciprocity, openness and sharing of experiences between partners. It is this mutual exchange that makes bilateral intimacy simultaneously the least risky and most authentic.

In this context, sexuality, which is a natural and inherent part of human life, can be an expression of true intimacy. Sexuality accompanies people from birth and seems to stem from attachment patterns, can take different forms and be conditioned by many factors (Izdebski & Ostrowska, 2003; Birnbaum et al., 2006; Butzer and Campbell, 2008; Davis et al., 2006, quoting: Khoury & Findlay, 2014; Impett and Peplau, 2002; Birnbaum et al., 2006; Khoury & Findlay, 2014, quoting:

Szymczyk & Trzęsowska-Greszta, 2014). This indicates a deep-rooted need for intimacy in human nature, the formation of which begins in the earliest stages of life. Attachment patterns that develop in relationships with caregivers form the foundation for later emotional and sexual experiences. From the perspective of transactional analysis, intimacy in sexual relationships can reach its fullness if it is based on reciprocity, sincerity, and willingness to share both emotions and needs. Sexuality, though conditioned by many factors, including biological, psychological, and cultural, can be a space for authentic understanding between partners. Thus, transactional analysis provides tools to better understand how different forms of structuring time, including intimacy, contribute to building lasting, satisfying relationships in which sexuality plays an integral role.

Sexuality and sexual satisfaction are not only an important aspect of our lives, but it is also correlated with the perception of sexuality in older adults (Allen, Petro, & Philips, 2009). In connection with the above, the next research question is: Do respondents with higher sexual satisfaction rate the sexuality of older people better than those with low sexual satisfaction (H3)?

The feeling of sexual satisfaction varies significantly between women and men. Women associate their sexuality with, for example, the menstrual cycle and pregnancy (Snell, Fisher & Walters, 1993). On the other hand, the determinant of sexual satisfaction for men is the size of their penis (Izdebski, 2012). Men combine sexual activity with respect, motivation and assertiveness, while in women it is associated with fear (Snell, Fisher, & Walters, 1993).

Because women's sexual satisfaction relates to many aspects of life, and in men refers (only) to the sexual sphere itself, whether the degree of perception of the sexuality of older people assessed by men will depend on the degree of their sexual satisfaction (H5)?

The age of women, with all its aspects, is assessed significantly worse than the age of men (Buczowski, 2015). Older men are defined as those who are still alive, capable of professional success and sexual activity (Barret and von Rohr, 2008, quoting: Kornadt, Voss, & Rothermund, 2013). Men are not afraid of old age, because it is not associated with drastic changes in their lives. The old age of women, on the other hand, is identified with curiosity, quarrelsomeness and devotion. (Cieślik, 2005, quoting: Rogala, 2007). Women are also perceived as significantly less attractive by men, which is associated with evolution and the association of fertility with young age (Rak-Suska, 2018). In the context of transactional analysis, a person, living in a certain society must fulfill certain roles, which are imposed from the moment of birth. A person acquires the ability to play the roles assigned to them on the basis of gender, nationality and belonging to a certain social class. For their fulfillment, the individual receives approval from the social environment, on the other hand, failure to fulfill roles according to social expectations is punished by society (Tomkiewicz, 1984). Also, in the con-

text of transactional analysis, ego states, which constitute a coherent set of thoughts and feelings, are expressed through appropriate sets of behaviours (Berne, 1998, quoting: Jagieła, 2017). Given that women are often judged through the prism of stereotypes, which affects their sense of identity and specific beliefs and actions, the research question is: Can we assume that they will be more likely to formulate a negative assessment of the sexuality of older people than men (H2)?

Based on the analysis of available scientific sources, it can be assumed that that no studies have been carried out to verify the relationship between ageism attitudes, sexual satisfaction and attitudes towards the sexual sphere of older people among young people. Therefore, given the current state of knowledge, it seemed justified to carry out studies that would allow a more complete understanding of this phenomenon.

Aim of the study

The aim of the study was to verify the relationship between the perception of sexuality of older people and the manifestation of ageism attitudes and the declared, felt sexual satisfaction in young people.

Material and methods

The Sexual Satisfaction Questionnaire (2014) by Agnieszka Nomejko and Grażyna Dolińska-Zygmunt (Nomejko & Dolińska-Zygmunt, 2019) was used to examine attitudes towards one's own sexuality. This method has undergone a number of revisions to identify the 10 questions used in the final version. Subjects are asked to respond to them on a 4-level Likert scale, and the total result obtained indicates the level of sexual satisfaction, which varies according to sex.

For women, we are talking about low sexual satisfaction, when the score is between 10 and 25 points, the average sexual satisfaction is between 26 and 31 points, and the high is between 32 and 40 points. In contrast, for men, the ranges look sequentially: from 10 to 27 points, from 28 to 33 and from 34 to 40.

This questionnaire was chosen because of its extensive design, testing the relevance of the questions with numerous competent judges, and measuring the reliability of the test using Cronbach's alpha.

Attitudes towards sexuality of older people were examined using Attitudes Towards Older Adult Sexuality in Long-term Care Scale (Spalding, Katz, Byers, Edelstein, 2021). The questionnaire originally consisted of 32 statements, but its final version contains 18 statements, and the respondents are asked to respond

to them on a 4-point Likert scale. Despite the name of this method, only one element refers to the situation of the elderly in the care home. This was one of the reasons for using this questionnaire, as most of the other methods oscillating around this issue focused mainly on situations in nursing homes and were dedicated to people working in these institutions.

Lindsey A. Cara, Alison L. Chasteen, and Jessica Remedios The Ambivalent Ageism Scale (2016) was used to examine ageism attitudes. The scale was developed and tested in four stages leading to the final, 13-element version. The authors of the questionnaire (Cary, Chasteen & Remedios, 2016) argue that it can be used regardless of the culture from which respondents come and is intended to investigate the assessment of hostile and benevolent ageism. The scale was chosen for the study because of its short but concise form. The aim of the study was to verify the relationship between the assessment of the sexuality of older people and the assessment of their own sexuality, ageism attitudes are only a clarification of the mentioned topic and serve to expand it. Taking these factors into account, the 13 statements to which the subjects must respond, on the 7-point Likert scale, seems sufficient.

A total of 61 women and 43 men participated in the study. The distribution of education level is as follows: secondary – 52,9% (55 persons); basic vocational – 1,9% (2 persons); higher – 45,2% (47 people). Place of residence: village – 21,1% (22 persons); city with up to 100 thousand inhabitants – 15,4% (16 persons); city with 100-500 thousand inhabitants – 27,9% (29 persons), and city with more than 500 thousand inhabitants – 35,6% (37 people). The average age of the subjects was 23 years; the youngest was 18 years old and the oldest was 26 years old.

The survey was conducted online, by providing a survey in the Google Docs form. The participants were asked to answer 10 questions from the Sexual Satisfaction Questionnaire (Nomejko & Dolińska-Zygmunt, 2014) and to respond to them on the 4-level Likert scale, respond to 18 statements from the Attitudes Towards Older Adult Sexuality in Long-term Care Scale (Spalding, Katz, Byers, Edelstein, 2021) also on the 4-degree Likert scale and on the 7-degree Likert scale to relate to 13 theorems of the Ambivalent Ageism Scale (Cary, Chasteen & Remedios, 2016). The hypotheses are as follows:

1. People with a higher level of ageism tend to perceive the sexuality of older people less favourably than people with a lower level of ageism.
2. Women rate the sexuality of older people less favourably than men.
3. Respondents with higher sexual satisfaction rate the sexuality of older people more favourably than those with low sexual satisfaction.
4. The degree of favor in the perception of sexuality of older people among women depends on the degree of presented ageism attitudes.
5. The degree to which older men perceive their sexuality favourably depends on their degree of sexual satisfaction.

Results

In order to present the obtained results, Table 1 presents descriptive statistics - means (M), standard deviations (SD) and medians (Me), sum (Σ), minimum and maximum, and reliability factors (α -Cronbach) of the individual test tools included in the study.

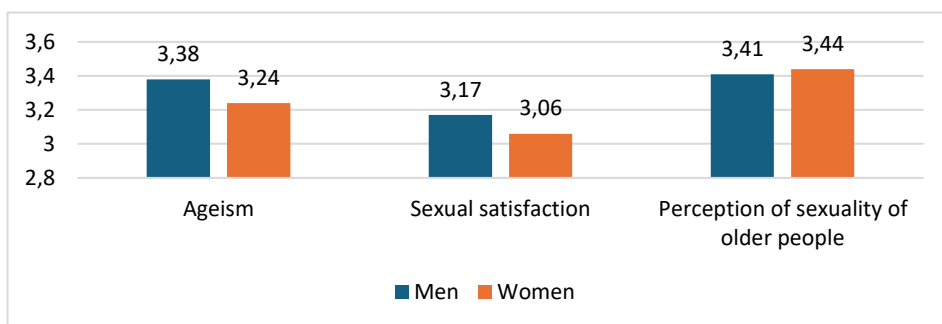
Table 1.

Descriptive statistics and reliability of individual research tools.

Variables	N	Means	Medians	Sum	Minimum	Maximum	Standard deviations	α -Cronbach
Ageism	104	3,3	3,56	42,95	2,04	4,87	0,87	0,85
Sexual satisfaction	104	3,10	3,10	31,05	2,86	3,49	0,22	0,86
Perception of sexuality of older people	104	3,43	3,59	58,4	2,6	3,83	0,36	0,87

Source: own research

In order to compare the mean scores of women and men on individual scales and to confirm hypothesis 2, a t-Student test was used to evaluate the results obtained by women and for independent rehearsals. The results of this analysis are presented in bar graph 1.



Bar graph 1.

The average results of the subjects obtained in the individual scales.

Source: own research

Analysis of the results presented in bar graph 1. showed a statistically significant difference between the mean sexual satisfaction scores of men ($M = 3,17$; $SD = 0,53$) and women ($M = 3,06$; $SD = 0,71$), at the level of $p = 0,04$, $t = -0,84$ and *Cohen's d* value = 0,18. On the other hand, there was no significant statisti-

cal difference between the mean results obtained by men ($M = 3,41$; $SD = 0,47$) and women ($M = 3,44$; $SD = 0,45$) in the sexual perception of older adults ($p = 0,77$; $t = 0,29$; *Cohen's d* = 0,07). This means that the hypothesis assuming a relationship between the perception of older people's sexuality and gender has been not confirmed. There were also no significant statistical differences between women ($M = 3,24$; $SD = 1,02$) and men ($M = 3,38$; $SD = 1,05$) in ageism attitudes ($p = 0,49$; $t = -0,7$; *Cohen's d* = 0,14).

In order to verify the first and third hypothesis, Pearson's correlation between the perception of sexuality of older people and sexual satisfaction and ageism attitudes was analyzed, with an assumed significance level of $p < 0,05$. The results of the obtained correlations are presented in Table 2.

Table 2.

Pearson correlation coefficients between the perception of sexuality of older people and sexual satisfaction and ageism among respondents (N = 104).

Variables	Sexual satisfaction	Ageism
Perception of sexuality of older people	0,24*	-0,42*

* $p < 0,05$

Source: own research

Analysis of the results included in Table 2. shows that there is a positive, weak correlation between perceptions of older people's sexuality and sexual satisfaction ($p = 0,12$) and a moderate, negative correlation between perceptions of older people's sexuality and the degree to which the subjects hold ageist attitudes ($p < 0,001$).

On the basis of the results, it can therefore be concluded that both hypotheses 1 and 3 are confirmed, as significant relationships between low ageism and positive perception of the sexuality of older people, and greater sexual satisfaction and a positive perception of the sexuality of older people, have been revealed.

Pearson's *r* correlation analysis was conducted to test the validity of hypotheses 4 and 5, by gender, between perceptions of elderly people's sexuality and sexual satisfaction and ageism attitudes, with an assumed significance level of $p < 0,05$. The results of the obtained correlations are presented in Table 3. and Table 4.

Table 3.

Pearson correlation coefficients between the perception of sexuality of older people and sexual satisfaction and ageism among women (N = 61).

Variables	Sexual satisfaction	Ageism
Perception of sexuality of older people	0,21*	-0,56*

* $p < 0,05$

Source: own research

Table 4.

Pearson correlation coefficients between the perception of sexuality of older people and sexual satisfaction and ageism among men (N = 43).

Variables	Sexual satisfaction	Ageism
Perception of sexuality of older people	0,31*	-0,24*

* $p < 0,05$

Source: own research

As the results in Table 3. indicate, there was a negative, strong correlation between ageism attitudes and perceptions of elderly sexuality ($p < 0,001$) and a positive and weak correlation between perceptions of elderly sexuality and sexual satisfaction in women ($p = 0,104$). In contrast, men (Table 4.) showed a positive, moderate correlation between perceptions of elderly sexuality and sexual satisfaction ($p = 0,043$), and a negative and weak correlation between ageism and perceptions of elderly sexuality ($p = 0,121$). The results testify of the confirmation of hypothesis 4 and hypothesis 5.

Multiple regression analysis was performed to determine the determinants of sexual perception of older adults.

Table 5.

Multiple regression analysis for subjects for variable: perception of sexuality of older adults.

N=104	b*	Std. Error b*	b	Std. Error b	t(99)	p
Age			3,58	0,64	5,59	0,00
Gender	0,02	0,09	0,01	0,08	0,19	0,84
Sexual satisfaction	0,21	0,09	0,15	0,06	2,32	0,02
Ageism	-0,41	0,09	-0,18	0,04	-4,47	0,00

Source: own research

The results of the regression analysis obtained for the variable perception of sexuality of older people showed that the intensity of ageism attitudes and attitudes towards one's own sexual satisfaction were important predictors of the level of this variable. However, the age of the subjects is not a predictor (Table 5.). A predictor of the perception of sexuality among older people among women turned out to be the level of presentation of ageism attitudes (Table 6.), and among men the declared level of sexual satisfaction (Table 7.). The magnitude of the multiple correlation coefficient (R) was 0,07. This indicates a very weak correlation between variables, which is also proved by the value of R^2 and the value of corrected R^2 , which are 0,00. The F value is 0,48, and $p = 0,49$, making the regression statistically insignificant.

Table 6.

Multiple regression analysis for surveyed women for variable: perception of sexuality of older adults.

	N=61	b*	Std. Error b*	b	Std. Error b	t(99)	p
Age				3,96	0,28	14,06	0,00
Sexual Satisfaction		0,12	0,11	0,08	0,07	1,18	0,24
Ageism		-0,54	0,11	-0,24	0,05	-5,01	0,00

Source: own research

Table 7.

Multiple regression analysis for surveyed men for variable: perception of sexuality of older adults.

	N=43	b*	Std. Error b*	b	Std. Error b	t(99)	p
Age				2,89	0,46	6,29	0,00
Sexual satisfaction		0,32	0,14	0,28	0,13	2,21	0,03
Ageism		-0,25	0,14	-0,11	0,06	-1,74	0,09

Source: own research

Discussion

During the research process, three key research questions were posed, and corresponding hypotheses were formulated to address them.

The first research question concerned the relationship between the level of ageism attitudes and the perception of sexuality in older people. In its context, the following hypothesis was put forward:

H1. People with a higher level of ageism tend to perceive the sexuality of older people less favourably than people with a lower level of ageism. This hypothesis was confirmed. The results show a negative but moderate correlation between the perception of sexuality of older people and the degree of ageism in the subjects. This means that the greater the approval of the sexuality of older people among the respondents, the weaker the degree of severity of ageism attitudes.

The study is part of the broader context of studies confirming the relationship between the perception of sexuality of older people and ageism attitudes. It can be concluded that discriminatory behaviour towards older people is also associated with a less favourable perception of their sexual sphere. The correlation between ageism and the perception of sexuality in older people can be explained by a number of theories. One of them is attribution, which, in terms of transactional analysis, represent the social expectations passed on to children by their parents. These expectations are about who and what we should be in

order to meet social expectations (Jagięła, 2017). Given that the sexuality of older adults remains a marginalized and often overlooked topic, compounded by stereotypes that exclude their sexual expression, it is unsurprising that stronger prejudices against older individuals correlate with less favorable perceptions of their sexuality. It can be argued that education about old age should be linked to greater attention to the problems of older people, while at the same time eliminating myths and stereotypes, including those related to sexuality. Such actions can improve the perception of older people in different spheres of their lives. The sphere of sexuality is one of the essential spheres of adult functioning.

The second problem concerned the verification of gender differences in the perception of sexuality among older people. The following hypothesis was put forward:

H2. Women rate the sexuality of older people less favourably than men. This hypothesis has not been confirmed. The analysis showed an insignificant difference between the sexes in the perception of the sexuality of older people.

This result may reflect the changes that have occurred in recent years in the perception of gender differences. This may be due to the fact that fewer and fewer institutions segregate citizens by gender, such as schools, workplaces (occupations), gender-related privileges (such as parental leave), which was the case even a few decades ago. Based on educational theories and transactional analysis, Berne suggested that people learn behaviours at an early stage of development (Jagięła, 2017). Therefore, teaching children at an early stage of education that women and men are not different “species” will contribute to the formation of appropriate attitudes in them. Today, gender is no longer a variable that differentiates society and the labour market to the same extent as before.

The third research problem concerned the verification of one’s sexual satisfaction with the perception of the sexuality of older people. In its context, the following hypothesis was put forward:

H3. Respondents with higher own sexual satisfaction rate the sexuality of older people more favourably than those with low sexual satisfaction. The results show a positive but weak relationship between the perception of sexuality in older people and sexual satisfaction.

Despite the limited number of studies focusing on the relationship between perceived sexual satisfaction and perceived sexuality of older adults, the literature suggests that there should be a positive correlation. The results of the study confirm this statement.

As an example, a study by Rebecca S. Allen, Kathryn N. Petro and Laura L. Phillips (2009) showed such relationship. Using the *Duke University Religion Index*, the *Aging Sexual Knowledge and Attitudes Scale*, and the *Human Sexuality Questionnaire*, the researchers found that young adults who described their sex life positively rated the sexuality of older women more liberally.

The fourth research problem concerned the predictors of women's perception of sexuality of older people. The hypothesis is:

H4. The degree of favor in the perception of the sexuality of older people among women depends on the degree of presented ageism attitudes. The study showed a negative, strong relationship between ageism attitudes and the perception of sexual satisfaction, and a positive and weak correlation between the perception of sexuality in the elderly and sexual satisfaction in women. This means that a predictor of the sexual perception of older people is the degree of ageism among women.

The concept of ageism, while generally referring to the elderly, seems to apply more to women than to men. Analysis of the results of numerous studies suggests that older women are more discriminated against than their male counterparts (Kornadt, Voss, & Rothermund, 2013; Saxena & Shukla, 2016; McGann, Ong, Bowman, Duncan, Kimberley, & Biggs, 2016). This leads to natural consequences, including stronger stereotypes, prejudices and concerns related to the aging process in women. Studies show that women are more aware of this problem, more afraid of aging, but also more inclined to counteract this phenomenon from an early stage of life (Clarke, Griffin, 2008, quoting: Ayalon, Tesch-Romer, 2018; Saxena & Shukla, 2016; Lössbroek and Radl 2018, quoting: Kornadt, Kessler, Wurm, et al., 2020).

The fifth and final research problem concerned the predictors of the sexual perception of older men. The hypothesis for this research question is:

H5. The degree to which older men view their sexuality favourably depends on their sexual satisfaction. In men, there was a positive, moderate correlation between the perception of sexuality in older adults and their own sexual satisfaction, and a negative and weak correlation between ageism and the perception of sexuality of older adults. This means that a predictor of men's perception of the sexuality of older people is their level of sexual satisfaction.

The issue of differences between women and men in the sphere of sexual satisfaction has been addressed by both Polish and foreign researchers. Szymon Kucharski and Teresa Rzepa (2017) in their research on the relationship between self-esteem and sexual satisfaction proved that men showed statistically significant, higher satisfaction of sex life than women. This can be explained by the number of components that are responsible for feeling sexual satisfaction depending on gender. We know that for both men and women, sexual satisfaction is positively correlated with quality of life and quality of relationship. However, it is also important for women to build open, close, sincere relationships, to achieve common goals in a relationship and to self-fulfill (Żak-Łykus, Nawrat, 2013). A study by Agnieszka Nomejko, Grażyna Dolińska-Zygmunt and Anna Mucha (2017) also showed lower sexual satisfaction among women. Women paid more attention to the quality of communication in close relationships and its seniority, compared to men.

It can be concluded that since women's higher sexual satisfaction consists of more components than men's, it is more difficult to maintain it at the same high level. One can speculate that the assessment of sexual satisfaction is influenced not only by conscious factors, but also by unconscious factors, educated under the influence of culture and upbringing.

Conclusions

According to the results of the presented research, attitudes towards the sexuality of older people correlate positively, though weakly, with sexual satisfaction and negatively, at a moderate level, with ageism attitudes, while a strong negative relationship was observed between ageism attitudes and the perception of sexual satisfaction, alongside a weak positive correlation between the perception of older people's sexuality and sexual satisfaction among women. In contrast, men showed a positive, moderate correlation between perceived sexuality of older adults and sexual satisfaction, and a negative and weak correlation between ageism and perceived sexuality of older adults. The results confirm the hypothesis, but also show gender differences in feeling sexual satisfaction and presenting ageism attitudes.

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Postrzeganie sfery seksualnej osób starszych przez osoby młode, uwzględniając postawy ageizmowe i poziom własnej satysfakcji seksualnej

Streszczenie

Mimo, iż społeczeństwo się starzeje i coraz więcej osób dożywa czwartego, a nawet piątego wieku, potrzeby osób starszych w Polsce są wciąż rzadko rozpatrywanym tematem społecznym i politycznym. Dyskryminacja osób starszych istnieje i dotyczy wielu dziedzin ich życia, również sfery seksualnej. Praca ma za zadanie określić jakie postawy wobec seksualności osób starszych prezentują osoby w wieku 18–26 lat, z uwzględnieniem ich deklarowanej satysfakcji seksualnej oraz przejawianych postaw ageizmowych. Artykuł przygotowano w oparciu o badania przeprowadzone w grudniu 2022 roku, na grupie 114 osób. W badaniach zastosowano podejście ilościowe, a narzędziem były kwestionariusze badające nasilenie wymienionych zmiennych. Przeprowadzone badanie wykazało, że ocena seksualności osób starszych nie różni się ze względu na płeć osoby badanej oraz, że poziom ageizmu i satysfakcji seksualnej ma znaczenie przy ocenie wspomnianej seksualności. Badanie również wykazało, że dla mężczyzn predyktorem oceny seksualności osób starszych jest w większym stopniu satysfakcja seksualna niż dla kobiet, a dla kobiet predyktorem oceny są posiadane postawy ageizmowe bardziej niż dla mężczyzn.

Słowa kluczowe: ageizm, satysfakcja seksualna, seksualność osób starszych, analiza transakcyjna.