

Chapter 4

The Media's Portrayal of Ageing

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Has the media's portrayal of ageing influenced society's views and responses to population ageing? And if so, why? What messages do the mass media send to society about the later years of life?

News, television, film and advertising commonly feature stereotypes that show older adults through a lens of decline and diminished value, emphasizing the "burdens" of growing old.¹ Use of such stereotypes – as well as negative language about ageing – shapes, reinforces and reflects society's attitudes and responses to growing older and, by extension, to population ageing.

This one-sided media messaging has created a distorted view of ageing. The result, in many cases, is low expectations of ageing^{2,3} that extend into all areas of life, including the workplace⁴ and healthcare.^{5,6} Moreover, even with years of advance warning, "societal and economic structures in many industrialized economies are ill-placed to cope" with an ageing population.⁷

The Origins of "Ageism"

What are the origins of such prevailing negativity about ageing? According to Robert N. Butler, founder of the International Longevity Center (ILC) in New York, answers are found both in the past and the human psyche.

In his introduction to *Ageism in America*, a 2006 ILC report, Butler writes that old age was generally valued in primitive societies. "Older persons often provided knowledge, experience, and institutional memory that was of adaptive – even survival – value to their societies. Although nomadic groups in various parts of the world abandoned the old and disabled when safety and security were at stake, overall older people were venerated", he explains.

Butler continues: "However, as the number and percentage of older persons, especially the frail and demented, increased, the perception grew that they were burdens to their families and society. It became widespread as societies shifted from agrarian economies, where older men had traditionally owned the land, to industrialized economies, when work was no longer centred in the home and older persons lost authority".⁸

These are the "the historic and economic circumstances" in which the status of today's older adults and attitudes toward them are grounded, Butler notes. Other key influencers include "deeply held human concerns and fears about the vulnerability inherent in the later years of life. Such feelings can translate into contempt and neglect", he adds.⁹

These ideas represent the building blocks of ageism, a term that Butler introduced to the world in 1968.¹⁰ Today, more than 40 years later, ageism still thrives, especially in Western cultures. The ILC report defines four categories of ageism.¹¹ These include:

Personal ageism – ideas, attitudes, beliefs and practices on the part of individuals that are biased against persons or groups based on their age.

Institutional ageism – missions, rules, and practices that discriminate against individuals and/or groups because of their older age.

Intentional ageism – ideas, attitudes, rules or practices that are carried out with the knowledge that they are biased against persons or groups based on their older age. This category includes practices that take advantage of the vulnerabilities of older persons.

Unintentional (or inadvertent) ageism – ideas, attitudes, rules or practices that are carried out without the perpetrator's awareness that they are biased against persons or groups based on their older age.

All four types of ageism can be found in the media and marketing today.

Ageism in the Media

Mass media is a critical platform for communicating the meanings and experiences of ageing between generations, and plays a role in shaping the agenda for discussing ageing issues.¹² Media portrayals of ageing not only reflect the widespread ageism in society, but also largely reinforce negative stereotypes. In addition, when ageing is depicted in a manner that appears positive, the aim is often to push anti-ageing messages and frame defying ageing as the only example of successful ageing.

For example, in May 2011, the cable news channel MSNBC reported on a US study showing the disconnect between fashion magazines and their ageing readers. “An analysis of editorial and advertising images reveals that despite proportions of older readers ranging as high as 23%, fashion magazines portray women over 40 sparingly, if at all,” writes LiveScience senior writer Stephanie Pappas. “Even in magazines geared toward ageing baby boomers, the images collectively present a thin, youthful, wrinkle-free ideal that’s impossible to maintain later in life.”¹³

This ideal has an impact on body image in older women, according to Denise Lewis, a University of Georgia gerontologist and author of research published in the *Journal of Ageing Studies*.¹⁴ “It leads to issues that have people denying ageing, so going to great lengths to continue to look like that ideal of a youthful person”, Lewis explains. This view of ageing promotes the idea that age-related changes in physical appearance are highly undesirable; therefore, all means should be taken to erase them.

Dove, a global personal care brand, challenged those beliefs through its award-winning Campaign for Real Beauty. One advertisement and billboard featured a 95-year-old model and posed the question: “Withered or Wonderful? Will society ever accept old can be beautiful?” Viewers were invited to log on to the campaign website and cast their votes. This ad proved a tremendous success, largely by tapping into society’s negative expectations of ageing and making people reconsider them. Further, the Campaign for Real Beauty translated into tremendous business success for Dove, which claimed a 700% rise in product sales in the United Kingdom (where the marketing effort originated) and 600% in the United States within the first two months of the campaign’s launch.¹⁵

Marketers make choices every day that have an impact on how society views ageing. Consider a campaign for Circle K convenience stores in Atlantic Canada that uses drawings of a person in three stages of ageing to illustrate the sizes of “Geezerade” slushy drinks and their cost. The eldest stage, which corresponds to the largest and most expensive drink, is an ageing caricature: a bald, toothless, wizened old man. Aimed at engaging youngsters, this campaign blatantly disrespects old age.

On the opposite end of the scale are the campaigns that suggest all older adults are “super seniors”. Portrayed in the media as healthy, wealthy and defying ageing, super seniors present an image of older adults that also distorts reality. Such stereotypes make it clear that “good” old age requires health, independence, and economic and social vitality, reflecting the dominance of independence, youthfulness, effectiveness and productivity as values in Western societies.¹⁶

“Bad” old age is characterized by illness, decline and a strain on social programmes and economies around the world. Yet, people do not have to look a certain way, participate in extreme sports or be free of functional challenges to be engaged in life, resilient and capable of setting an example of wellbeing.

Too often missing from media portrayals is a balanced view of ageing; one that reflects the challenges of getting older, while embracing the opportunities associated with ageing.

Media Responses to Population Ageing

Researcher Julia Rozanova, now an assistant professor at Canada’s University of British Columbia, published a study in 2009 in which she analysed newspaper, television and magazine content for depictions of ageing in Canada and Russia. Rozanova found that in both cultures older age groups were underrepresented, negative portrayals far outweighed positive portrayals, and older individuals with disabilities were virtually absent from advertising unless they were advertising assistive devices.¹⁷ This lack of representation in the mass media may contribute to marginalizing older adults, who already feel the effects of ageism and a sense of diminished worth and participation in society.

Older adults notice not only how little they are represented in media and marketing offerings, but also how poorly. For many, these depictions simply do not resonate. According to market research, three in four adults over 55 feel dissatisfied with marketing aimed at them,¹⁸ and 71% say that advertising images largely do not reflect their lives.¹⁹ Results from a survey conducted for TV Land, a US cable television channel, agree. Nearly two-thirds of baby boomers responding to this survey said they are growing increasingly dissatisfied with media that ignores them and they are tuning out.²⁰

In the United Kingdom, a survey found that 55% of adults over 50 feel that businesses have little interest in older people’s consumer needs; 46% often do not feel that advertising/marketing is aimed at them; and 50% find advertising/marketing that is obviously targeting older people to be patronizing and stereotypical.²¹ Further, a report by Help the Aged (now part of the charity Age UK) notes that 75% of respondents to a survey of people ages 60 and older thought that the media ignored the views of their age group.²²

Underlying all those findings is the “astonishingly neglectful” treatment of older adults, “who feel ignored, unwanted and dissatisfied with the negative stereotypes used to portray them in advertising, which they regard as inappropriate and irrelevant”.²³ Older people’s impressions are well founded: 90% of marketing dollars are directed towards the under-50 population today, reports London-based marketing and advertising magazine AdMap.²⁴ Help the Aged estimates as much as 95% of advertising revenue goes to the under-35 age group.²⁵ These figures show that the age 50-plus market remains largely invisible to, and devalued by, marketers and advertisers, who misunderstand and misrepresent this population.

Why is this happening? It is important to consider that advertising agencies are overwhelmingly staffed by employees under 50 years of age.²⁶ In fact, fully 95% of employees in UK agencies are under age 50, with similar age structures for the advertising workforce in the European Union.²⁷ With so few professionals over 50, is it surprising that this industry lacks insight into the needs, interests and aspirations of older people, as well as the realities of their daily lives?

On the promising side, some media responses show a movement towards more realistic views of ageing. For example, Van Selm and colleagues compared how Dutch television commercials portrayed older adults in 1993 versus 2007. They found that while older-adult roles had not become more prevalent, they were more diverse and less stereotypical in 2007 than in 1993.²⁸

Lien and colleagues examined prime time television dramas in Taiwan and found that older characters appeared less frequently and in less prominent roles than other adult characters, but were predominately portrayed as cognitively sound and physically healthy. However, older characters talked about age, linking it to death and despondence to influence younger characters. Dominant behaviour themes reinforced Chinese age stereotypes and traditional values.²⁹

In Germany, Kessler and colleagues examined how advertisements portrayed social participation of older adults. They found that only 4.5% of the characters in 656 ads were 60 years or older. However, when older adults did appear in ads, these individuals were depicted as socially engaged and open to new experiences.³⁰

Many of these more positive depictions of ageing, however, result from marketers trying to reach the lucrative baby boomer market segment with messages of eternal youth. These anti-ageing messages stigmatize both normal changes associated with the ageing process and ageing with any kind of disability or deficit.

The Impact of Media Portrayals

If positive portrayals of ageing promote the idea that defying ageing is the only way to age successfully, negative stereotypes of ageing then prime (prepare) a person for decline, diminished resilience and the subversion of health promotion efforts.

Age-based stereotypes are often internalized in childhood, long before the information is personally relevant, so they are accepted without critical examination. Termed “pre-mature cognitive commitment” (PCC), this mindless coding leads people to accept beliefs unconditionally. Later, when people perceive themselves to be ageing, the coding acts as a self-induced prime, causing them to act in ways consistent with this coding and creating a self-fulfilling prophecy.³¹ For example, Martin might believe that older adults cannot easily climb stairs, so he will sell his home with stairs in favour of a one-level style. No longer climbing stairs at home, he finds it more and more difficult to navigate stairs in the community. Eventually, he is no longer able to climb stairs, confirming his original belief.

Repeated exposure to negative images and messages about ageing confirms beliefs and entrenches negative stereotypes more deeply, both consciously and subconsciously. Once people believe they know something, most will actively look for information consistent with that belief.³² They do not have to look far.

Media portrayals of ageing are predominately negative. They contribute to a culture where people are both consciously and subconsciously primed to follow the negative ageing story. They also affect the way older adults see themselves and the way they are viewed and treated by society.

Dozens of studies have demonstrated how subconscious priming for either positive or negative stereotypes impacts the function of older adults. Collectively, these studies show that older individuals exposed to positive primes perform better on both physical and cognitive tasks than those exposed to negative primes.^{33, 34, 35} Negative primes had other surprising effects. They heightened cardiovascular responses to stress, i.e., heart rate and blood pressure, while positive primes muted these responses. Older adults exposed to negative primes were less likely to accept life-prolonging interventions in hypothetical medical situations than those exposed to positive primes.³⁶

Other studies demonstrate that adults with positive self-perceptions of ageing engage in more health-promotion strategies and take better care of themselves than those with negative perceptions of ageing.³⁷ In addition, negative stereotypes affect an individual’s self-esteem, self-efficacy and resilience – all factors related to whether older adults perceive that they have control over health outcomes.^{38, 39, 40}

The impact of negative views of ageing is simple, according to a study led by Becca Levy, PhD, Yale School of Public Health. Older people can literally “think” themselves into the grave 7.6 years early by feeling “bad” about getting old.⁴¹

Recommendations

To transform the experience of ageing and ageism in our societies, we must change the way the media and marketers portray ageing. Negative stereotypes need to give way to realistic portrayals, so that depictions encompass the many different experiences of ageing without attaching a value judgment.

Today, the concept of ageing is expanding and evolving as the older population demonstrates its many aspects and contributions. As new ideas and concepts come into being, new words and meanings emerge while other words and meanings recede and disappear. The stage is set for language and imagery that provide a fair, accurate and balanced view of ageing. How do we encourage the media to acknowledge its influence over society’s conversation about ageism and to exert a positive influence? One way is to show the financial benefit.

Dove’s Campaign for Real Beauty confounded stereotypes of beauty in its advertising and reaped the rewards. Similarly, a vast market of potential customers awaits media, marketers and businesses whose portrayals of ageing resonate with older consumers. This chapter shows that marketing messages are currently both missing and missing the mark.

To succeed with their outreach, the marketing and media professions need new ways of relating to older populations. Tools to educate and support this shift are key. Recommendations focused on these professions include:

Researchers, governments, industry associations and global organizations can create a clearinghouse of media and marketing research, best practices, communications guidelines and images of today’s older adults. The goals for this clearinghouse will be to educate media and marketing professionals about “real life” ageing, the diversity of older adults and the opportunities presented by this market; as well as to encourage these professionals both to provide effective and accurate portrayals of ageing and to stop using negative stereotypes and language.

Media and marketing companies, including film, news, television and publishing, can increase the prevalence and diversity of older adults represented in their offerings. This visibility will send a strong message, reinforcing the fact that older adults are part of the fabric of society and celebrating the value of experience.⁴²

Governments can provide post-secondary institutions with tax incentives to educate future media and marketing professionals about ageism and the older population. An understanding of ageism and its impact will encourage professionals to recognize the damaging myths, negative stereotypes and false perceptions of ageing fuelled by this prejudice and to avoid perpetuating them.

Governments can provide incentives or tax breaks for businesses, media and marketers to educate themselves and their customers about healthy, active ageing. This will help them understand the many possibilities for individuals to lead full lives at any age.

Researchers and academic agencies can take a well-rounded view of ageing when they report about this topic. A more complete, balanced approach will help temper “apocalyptic” reports of ageing, which in many cases fuel media coverage, business investment and government spending on the issue.

Researchers and organizations can showcase companies that have succeeded with the older-adult market and highlight how media and marketing can learn from them. Some potential avenues for sharing insights and information will include best practices, documentaries and awards programmes.

Through mass media, negative messages about ageing are becoming increasingly globalized. Efforts to address their impact will be most effective if governments and nongovernmental organizations share research and best practices that influence the way media and marketing professionals position ageing. Organizations such as the World Economic Forum have a role to play in bringing together businesses, governments, media and marketers. The goal of such interactions will be to create and synchronize global strategies that embrace the opportunities of population ageing and better address the challenges. It is important to recognize, however, that societies around the world view and respond to ageing in their own ways, and each needs to customize approaches to their specific culture.

Conclusion

Increased life expectancy is one of the most significant success stories of our times with global population ageing presenting both challenges and opportunities for society. Has the media's negative portrayal of ageing contributed to a slow and inadequate response to the challenges, as well as a lack of understanding of the opportunities? Based on all the evidence cited above, this article concludes that it has.

Ultimately, if we are to manage population ageing well, we need to acknowledge the impact of the media and marketers on shaping perceptions of ageing, and strive to reform the way they view and portray people living in this multifaceted stage of life.

Endnotes

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