

Aging and the Media: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow

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Abstract

This paper describes the influence the media have on people and how it effects their view of the elderly. It describes aspects of the American media from the 1970s through today and discusses the changes that have occurred. Specific examples drawn from television, advertising, entertainment, and music are used to demonstrate how the media change audience perceptions and what must be done to improve perceptions of and attitudes toward elderly people today.

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Keywords: Aging, media, elderly, stereotypes

Our upbringing and socialization, outlook on life, and personal experiences all play a role in the way we view each other. Because we live in a commercial- and media-driven society, television shows, advertisements, movies, cartoons, and even music affect the way we perceive the world around us, including our views on aging. As gerontologist Laurie Hatch (2005) writes, "Immersed in a world surrounded by the media, people in our society absorb impressions, ideas, images, and sounds that reflect society's attitudes toward aging. Also, the media reflect dominant values in a society: Whether, and how, older people are portrayed represents one measure of how ageism and sexism are embedded in the social fabric" (p. 19).

In this paper I will present media portrayals of the elderly from the 1970s to the present, beginning with some theories that address this phenomenon, and followed by specific examples from each subsequent decade. Also I will discuss how aging has been reflected in popular music. Then, I will explore the disturbing trend of plastic surgery and other beauty treatments that have dramatically altered the way elderly people look and feel about themselves. And finally, I will touch on some of the effects of these media misconceptions and representations, ending with a brief discussion of advocacy groups. In sum, I argue that the mass media have

a significant impact on how people think, feel, and act toward others, and that for the most part the media have either ignored the elderly and/or conveyed and perpetuated a negative attitude toward them in our society.

Theories on the Media's Impact

Two theories about the effects of the media are social learning theory and cultivation theory. Social learning theory proposes that young people are greatly influenced by what they see and hear in the media "because in this process the youngster imitates the model that he sees or hears" (Vallocheril & Thorn, 1998, p. 6). Similarly, cultivation theory tells us that "the content of modern mass media has the powers to shape people's perceptions of the world" (p. 9). In our society, people are constantly bombarded with images that can change the way people think and feel on a variety of issues. The majority of people portrayed in the media today are young, middle- to upper-class Caucasians. There is no question that we live in a youth-oriented society. "Add to this, the fact that our society fears aging and death, and the chances of having older adults portrayed realistically become even less likely" (Delloff, 1987, p. 12).

Stereotypes are commonly used in the media for all ages, cultures, races, and religions. Vallocheril and Thorn (1998) define stereotype as a "presentation of individuals, sexes, cultures,

ethnic groups, religions, nations and the like which limits them to simplistic and unnuanced roles, beliefs, behaviors, and ways of thinking” (p. 23). Stereotypes are evident in television, movies, comics, and cartoons. For example, an online cartoon entitled “Honesty on the Internet” depicts an out-of-shape elderly man and woman sitting in their underclothes at their respective computers communicating with each other on an online service. Their faces and bodies are completely distorted. They are obviously lying to each about their interests because he is saying, “You’re a model. Cool, I’m a Chippendale’s dancer. I race speed boats. What’s your sign?” The cartoon suggests that elderly people are not attractive and need to lie in order to make themselves more appealing. It also suggests that elderly people do not take care of themselves as evidenced by the junk food, a cigarette, and cans of beer surrounding each of them.

The 1970s: The Invisible Elderly

Media portrayals of the elderly were rare during the 1970s. A survey of more than 9,000 television characters found only 3.7% of them to be elderly, and they were portrayed as “ineffective, unattractive and unhappy” (Delloff, 1987, p. 12). The widely watched and highly acclaimed television show, “All in the Family,” is one example from that decade. The two main characters are Archie and Edith Bunker, an aging couple. Archie is a tired, grumpy, hardworking hothead whose chauvinistic and conservative ways often prove to be too much for his family to handle. Edith is the meek, doting wife who spends most of her time cooking and cleaning or trying to make amends for the problems Archie constantly causes. In contrast, their daughter, Gloria, and her husband, Meathead, who live in the house with Archie and Edith, are young, intelligent, modern-day thinkers who antagonize poor old Archie. This juxtaposition of young versus old sends the message that the youth are much more attuned to contemporary issues and that elderly people are set in their ways, not willing to accept change.

Two other programs with older characters were “Sanford and Son” and “Maude.” Fred Sanford was always faking a heart attack when he wanted things to go his way; by this, the writers

were insinuating that older people are manipulators. Maude, on the other hand, was a smart, working woman with strong values and a good heart. Maude was a woman ahead of her time, and “Maude,” the television program, was the first show emitting a positive portrayal of an aging lead character.

The 1980s: Positive and Negative Images

The 1980s introduced more television sitcoms and stereotypical portrayals of older people. One of the most popular sitcoms of all time is “The Golden Girls” which aired from 1985 to 1992. “The Golden Girls” was a progressive comedy that dealt with social issues related to elderly women. Also, it presented one of the most positive portrayals of elderly women ever seen on television. Nevertheless, the character of the octogenarian mother, played by Estelle Getty, represented the stereotypical older woman with a sharp mind but a stubborn and persnickety personality. The show was nominated for 57 and won 10 Emmy awards and reruns are still aired today on syndicated television.

In 1985 the movie “Cocoon” was a tremendous box office hit. It was and still is one of the most popular movies to delve deeply into issues of aging. The story revolves around a group of older men who discover the fountain of youth in a swimming pool next door to the nursing home where they live. Although again stereotypical attributes are recognizable in some of the characters, the film also conveys important messages about growing older, such as the importance of friendship, the inevitability of hard decisions, the desire among some to live forever, and the need to say goodbye.

In the mid-1980s one commercial was so popular that presidential candidate Walter Mondale used it in his campaign. In this Wendy’s commercial, three older women dressed as “little old ladies” were looking at a small hamburger inside a very large bun. One of the old women repeatedly asked, “Where’s the beef?” This phrase continues to be used in popular culture to this day. The “where’s the beef?” commercial exploited older people by making them look small and stupid; however, Wendy’s gained prominence as a fast-food

business and that commercial made a lot of money for the company. The ad can still be seen today on the Internet ([online](#)).

Another 1980s' creation was "Maxine," a popular Hallmark cartoon character. She is found on greeting cards, as well as coffee mugs, men's ties, T-shirts, nightgowns, calendars, and more. Maxine depicts both the good and the bad aspects of growing older, but the focus tends to be on the negative. Typically, Maxine describes herself as crabby, moody, and opinionated, three stereotypical attributes of the aged. Even though the cartoon portrays such stereotypical images of aging, it also at times demonstrates the positive sides of aging, making people smile in the process.

Although the 1980s proved to be both positive and negative in terms of aging, the majority of the media continued to portray aging with a negative slant. And, as in the previous decade, elderly people continued to be not only misconstrued but also underrepresented.

The 1990s to the Present: A Culture of Youth

Elderly people continue to be underrepresented in the media, but their numbers increased from the 1980s into the '90s. According to a study by Gerbner (1993), even though in the 1990s Americans over 60 comprised nearly 17% of the population, they made up only 5.4% of all network primetime characters and only 4% of the casts in daytime serials. Old people remain almost invisible on television. This is true despite the fact that older people watch more television than the average younger viewer. Could it be because our society does not view elderly people as smart, attractive, or desirable? Why have the mass media decidedly ignored the elderly population? Are Americans really afraid of the elderly and growing older, or have such attitudes been engendered by the media portrayals of the elderly? In other countries, such as Japan, Ghana, and China, the elderly are revered; to be old is to be knowledgeable and wise. The United States does not appear to have the same enlightened view, at least not in the media.

An example of today's attitude toward the elderly can be seen in an ad for the Young Creatives Competition ([online](#)). This contest was sponsored by the world-renowned advertising agency, BBDO New York, looking for the best young talent (under 28) to shape the future of creativity for advertising. If this is the future of advertising, older people may need to start a revolution to take on such ageist campaigns. Even more appalling is the headline, which screams, "Check out the pathetic old geezers."

In a television commercial that promotes eating red meat as an energy-producing substance, a rock-and-roll band is on the stage performing a wildly rambunctious act. After the concert, the band members go to the dressing room and remove their clothes, wigs, and tattoos. Their true identity is now revealed: they are a group of very old rockers who have fooled the audience into thinking they are young (This [video](#) clip can be seen online. Even though this commercial is somewhat ageist because it implies the need to hide your age to get employment, nevertheless, it presents a more positive view of aging because it suggests that you can be old and still have fun and be active.

A dramatic and regressive shift that has taken place in the past few years involves the promotional pieces, commercials, and reality television programs that encourage plastic surgery, botox injections, veneers, and other medical interventions to keep people looking younger. In November 2006, The Today Show, the most popular morning show in America, hosted a weeklong series on beauty enhancement called "The New You". The special guest was Nely Galan, creator of The Swan, a new reality show that transforms "ugly" women into "beautiful" women. Galan believes that "the older people live, the harder they try to look younger." She also expressed her excitement about helping people look and feel younger. She compared people to cars, stating that maintaining your looks is like maintaining your car: "You don't let your car go without the proper maintenance, so why should you let your body go without the proper care?" Plastic surgery, facial injections, and other "beauty treatments" cost hundreds, if not thousands, of

dollars. Poor people in our country can hardly afford to get food on the table and money for the rent. How are they to feel if they cannot afford these “fountain of youth” products and treatments? Are they then the broken-down old cars to which Galan referred?

These types of messages can have a significant psychological impact on older adults. It is important to note that this increased awareness of appearance has been fueled by media coverage and an overabundance of “makeover” reality television shows in recent years, such as “Queer Eye for the Straight Guy,” “Extreme Makeover,” “The Biggest Loser,” and “The Swan.” According to Henry and Heckaman (1999), society’s pressures to look young have steadily increased the popularity of cosmetic surgery. Plastic surgery is no longer something done in secret or a topic of embarrassment, as it had been for many years. Youth-promoting slogans are prevalent in newspaper, magazine, television and Internet ads. By saying that looking youthful is attractive, the media are indeed perpetuating the idea that looking older is unattractive.

Fortunately, there are some companies promoting positive aspects of aging. For example, Kellogg’s released a positive ad that was part of its campaign to promote a healthy diet and healthy weight for seniors ([online](#)). The ad celebrates the changes that occur as we age. What a refreshing look at the aging process. Kellogg’s should be commended for promoting better health and positive aging.

Popular Music Jumps on the Anti Aging Bandwagon

Several songs about aging have met with great success. In general, songs about aging are about loss. In the 1970s, Harry Chapin’s “Cat’s in the Cradle” is about life passing us by. It tells of an aging father and his son who never seem to have the time to get to know each other. In the 1990s, Bonnie Raitt won a Grammy for her song, “Nick of Time.” This song refers to the physical changes that take place as we age and is about the fear of dying. And finally, “Landslide” by Stevie Nicks, was a number-one hit in 1975, was recorded by the Dixie Chicks and became a huge

success in 2002. “Landslide” deals with the changes that take place in relationships as we age and how they can affect us. One might wonder why songs such as these were so popular. Perhaps our society really does want to understand aging but is so afraid of the subject that we only want to hear about it in songs rather than see it on primetime television or in the movies.

Effects on the Elderly of These Media Misconceptions

With all of the pressure from the media to look young and beautiful, how are the elderly viewing themselves these days? According to one media commentator, “Elderly people are among the greatest users of all media forms. It is ironic that elderly people watch more television than any other age group and that they go virtually unnoticed. With all of the media interest they demonstrate, it seems cruel to see the distorted views that they see of themselves. People often act the ways they are expected to act. Their own self-images tend to conform to the images they see portrayed” (Delloff, 1987, p. 12).

Due to an increase in media forms and the attention placed on looking younger, it is possible that a lack of confidence has been fostered by a lifetime of media reinforcement of the idea that the best years of life are reserved for our youth. This argument is supported by the results of a study of more than 50 people between the ages of 60 and 92 that indicated that regardless of the actual television shows viewed, the more television the elderly saw, the more negative were their views about growing old (Sabo, 2005).

Self-image is important in all cultures. Unfortunately, in the United States, we see that self-image can be easily altered or damaged by the information that is aired or printed in the media. Low self-esteem and poor self-image can prevent seniors from enjoying their later years.

The Struggle for Change

Nonetheless, there is good news. The media are gradually changing the ways in which the elderly are portrayed, particularly on talk shows

and in documentaries and news programming. Due to the rapid increase in the number people over the age of 65, the trend seems to be changing to cater more toward older adults. More products and services are becoming available to seniors. In comparing magazine ads in the year 2000 to those in 1980, Morgan and Kunkel (2001) found “a definite increase in both the number of ads that feature older people and in the average age of many models. While most people in ads are still young, the increased visibility of older people begins to change our images of aging” (p. 8).

Additionally, many advocacy groups work to improve the way our society perceives the elderly. For example, the American Association of Retired Persons works for positive social change and enhancing quality of life as we age. The Gray Panthers works on multiple age-related issues, including antidiscrimination. The Pioneer Network advocates for and facilitates deep system change in our elders’ attitudes toward themselves and society’s attitudes toward aging.

Conclusion

Over the past 40 years, the mass media have had an overall negative effect on society’s attitudes toward aging. Most people portrayed in the media are young and virile. These one-sided presentations create problems and misconceptions for both young and old alike. The older person may feel positive about their days as an adolescent, but regard life in the

golden years to be less than desirable. Young people can potentially be affected in a way that tends to make them less respectful of the elderly. This may influence them to be less willing to provide love and support to elderly persons who may need their help. Since the 1970s we have witnessed a gradual change to the point where older people are now more visible in commercials, ads, television, and movies. Also during the past decades some extremely popular songs have addressed the aging process in a more realistic way. It appears that people are more comfortable hearing songs about aging than looking at older people in movies, magazines, or on television.

Although it remains to be seen, there is a possibility that older people in our society will be more respected and better understood because of this increased visibility in the media. One current problem, though, is the intensified discussion in the media of plastic surgery, botox injections, and various other treatments intended to make people look and feel younger. Obviously more work needs to be done to encourage the mainstream media to send out more realistic images and messages about aging. Advocacy groups are working hard to bring positive social change in our attitudes about aging. Perhaps one day we will turn on the television and see a commercial for an aging cream that brings out the best in your wrinkles rather than trying to hide them, while sending a message that older people are alive, active, and living well.

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Acknowledgments

I would like to take this time to thank my partner of many years, Dr. Janja Lalich, who has mentored me through this writing process. Also, my Health and Aging professor, Jeanne Freeman, who allowed me to go on and on about old people because she is as passionate about them as I. And to my dogs, Jojo and Sadie, who keep me calm and in good health because of their therapeutic value in my life.

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