

Representation of the Elderly in Media

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## Abstract

In this essay we will briefly discuss how the elderly are presented in the mass media. The focus will be on our discussion on the negative and stereotypical representation of them, the effect it has on society and our perception of them. To do this, we will analyze examples from two movies: *Calendar Girls* and *Another Year* and will examine the contrasting presentation of the elderly in each. Our discussion will also consider how advertisements present older generations, the impact they have on the younger generations, and the pressure of “fighting the aging process”.

### Representation of the Elderly in Media

The elderly are generally viewed in a stereotypical way: slow, ill and fragile. This is not the image of a person companies would usually prefer to have representing their product. Their depiction in the media is largely limited to advertisements or programs that are attempting to appeal to all generations of a family. They are the friendly elders who do not wear brand name clothes, prefer Lipton to Jack Daniels, and are more inclined to talk about their past than the “awesome new rollercoaster” at a local theme park. The elderly are distinctly “uncool” in the media’s eyes and the lack of positive representations is a testament to this. The focus for media studies, in demographic terms, is usually gender, race and class, but not age. According to Rayner, Wall and Kruger (2004), this makes it a “fruitful area of study” and a potential goldmine for a thesis topic.

Representation of the elderly in movies tends to vary depending on the film. In *Boynton Beach Club*, an elderly character named Harry says, “People think when you get to a certain age, there’s no more sex. That ain’t true” (Seidelman, 2005). Often, people over fifty cheer at this point, because they are tired of seeing negative representations of older people in the media (Kendall, 2008, p. 398).

Typically, older actors are required to portray characters that are either seriously ill or dying, but in recent years that image has been upgraded in certain movies, for instance, *Calendar Girls* (Cole, 2003). It is a true story about the Women’s Institute calendar featuring a selection of twelve middle-aged ladies, posing with various paraphernalia typical for the middle-aged (flowers, cakes, knitting, etc.). The film is a positive representation of mature women, whilst having a tongue-in-cheek look at the stereotypical ideas of what middle-aged life is. Movies such as this have been encouraging the elderly to shake off the pre-

determined ideas about how they should act and, as an effect, there has been sharp increase in the amount of elderly fitness routines in recent years (Dacosta & Miragaya, 2002, p. 279).

Other movies, such as *Another Year*, a new film starring Jim Broadbent, present middle-aged couples as being content with their life, while the lives of their loved ones begin to fracture (Leigh, 2010). We all have memories of our grandparents informing us of who has died, who had broken their hips and who was moving to a senior center. Films like *Another Year* emulate and perpetuate the myth that being elderly means the end of life.

Social influence of the mass media is one which can help to alter people's perception of their own existence and question whether they are doing it right; this is further disseminated by our peers who, are also influenced by the mass media: "As with the mass media, peers largely provided information that reinforced pre-existing beliefs and opinions" (Comstock & Scharrer, 2005, p. 28). As human beings, we are created to want to please others around us through our appearance, views, attitudes and interests, and as such, we are inclined to compromise our own feelings in order to "fit in", and the "messages of the mass media [are] filtered through the interpretations of others, thus typically [increasing] the role of social influence in maintaining the status quo" (Comstock & Scharrer, 2005, p. 29). When we look at the various representations of the elderly in the media – mostly grandparents and hospital patients – it immediately becomes apparent that the media presents us with a selection of elderly stereotypes, which we are conditioned into accepting, that we will, one day, become.

Media often appears to utilize these stereotypes to present "the old vs. the young" battle, through which it is suggested that if the old benefit from government spending, the younger generations miss out (Kendall, 2008, p. 398). As an under-represented demographic,

the elderly are often perceived as not deserving resources and finances unlike younger generations, simply because for a lot of us the primary impression of the elderly is the one we obtain through television, films and news. Richard Harris (2009) states that despite an increase by 8% in terms of the percentage of people alive being over 65 since 1900, there are still only as few as 3% of characters online being over 65 (p. 96). This means that for those of us who are under 65, the perception of an elderly person is based on a very limited representation. Positive depictions are usually an exception to the rule, such as the previously mentioned *Calendar Girls* and the long-running series, *Golden Girls*.

Kevin Durkin (1995) confirms that “it is because they *are* an exception – the representation of older women as witty, intelligent and sociable is not wide-spread in the media” (p. 640). It is as if the media preferred to forget that the elderly were once young and would also spend time with friends, fall in love, go shopping, and generally be young people who were ready to become valuable members of society. The media also seems to forget that the current elderly generation participated in two World Wars and deserve a lot more respect than they currently receive. However, one day we will also be old and by that time it is quite possible that negativity presented in the media will have indoctrinated us to expect that we will become fragile, weak and useless.

The media representation of the elderly is an extremely negative one. We are conditioned to expect very little from our elderly generation because on those rare occasions when they are shown in the media, we are presented with an image of someone who takes without giving back, someone who is weak and needy and a drain on our resources. It is an unfair stereotype, but the one that the media seeks to perpetuate. Seniors are being portrayed as the epitome of “anti-cool”, which, therefore, causes people to strive to stay young.

Growing old has so many stigmas attached to it that by the time we turn thirty, we are repeatedly complimented on how old we *don't* look (Kendall, 2008, p. 398). Advertisers and make up brands are constantly forcing the idea of maintaining our youth with anti-aging and anti-wrinkle creams, while in reality growing old is a factual unavoidable part of life. As a result of poorly represented demographic in the mass media, our expectations of the elderly are low and our perceptions are negative. We are faced with standing up, walking around visions of our future selves, which the media tells us to fight against. The media's presentation of the old is negative and as a direct response, so is our opinion of them.

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