

Gender Representations of Older People in the Media: What Do We Know and Where Do We Go from Here?*

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Abstract

Despite the increase in the percentage of older people around the world, older people and particularly older women are quite underrepresented in the media. This article gives an overview of the representation of older women and men, starting with a short literature review showing that older women and men are nearly invisible in the worldwide media, and when represented, they are often depicted in negative ways. We show that such under- and misrepresentation should be taken seriously because media representations influence how older people regard themselves and how they are regarded by younger people. Based on this literature review, we identify several areas for future research on gender representations of older people to close the still existing gaps in the literature: Research that goes beyond (1) women and the gender binary, (2) lumping age groups together, (3) numerical representation, (4) content analysis, (5) traditional media, (6) single-country studies, and (7) academia.

Key words

media representation, literature review, movies, television, advertising

Introduction

The percentage of older people¹ is increasing worldwide, especially in more developed regions, where 17.6% of the population was already aged 65 years or over

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¹ The term “older people” has been used in the literature to describe anyone from over 45 to 65+ (Prieler & Kohlbacher, 2016). This age range is rather wide, which makes it difficult to adequately summarize research findings. Thus, this article mentions the definitions of “older people” for each specific study.

in 2015. This proportion is projected to reach 26.6% by 2050. This trend is not restricted to the developed world. In less developed regions, only 6.3% of the population is currently aged 65 years or over, but this proportion will more than triple by 2050 and will reach 21.6% by 2100 (based on United Nations, 2017).

Despite the increasing number of older people and their increasing economic importance in many parts of the world (Prieler & Kohlbacher, 2016), previous research around the world has shown that older people, particularly older women, are nearly invisible in the media compared with younger women (Lauzen & Dozier, 2005b; Matthes, Prieler, & Adam, 2016; Smith, Choueiti, & Pieper, 2014). (Unless otherwise indicated, all studies cited were conducted in the United States.) The same trend is also present within the academic literature. While there are numerous studies on gender representations and several studies on the representations of older people (for an overview, see Loos & Ivan, 2018; Prieler, Kohlbacher, Hagiwara, & Arima, 2011; Ylänne, 2015), there are comparatively few studies specifically on gender representations of older people. However, such intersectional research could reveal the results from the double marginalization of older women based on age and gender (Lemish & Muhlbauer, 2012). Thus, this article focuses on representations of the intersection of age and gender. First, we will provide a brief literature review on gender representations of older people in the media, particularly in the most studied areas, which are advertising, fictional television content, and movies. This review will be followed by a discussion of the literature showing what possible effects such representations might have. Finally, we will suggest how future research can fill the existing research gaps in the area of gender representations of older people.

Gender Representations of Older People in the Media

At the beginning of the 1970s, Susan Sontag decried what she called the “double standard of aging” in that society is much more permissive regarding the aging of men than of women (Sontag, 1972). She argued that physical attractiveness is much more important for a woman than a man and is closely connected with youthfulness for women. In contrast, men are closely connected with competence, money, and power—qualities that increase with age. Thus, aging undermines women’s traditional source of power. In contrast, when men show early signs of aging, such as gray hair, they are read as signs of maturity and authority (Twigg, 2004). This strong connection between beauty, youth, and women still exists nowadays (Clarke & Korotchenko, 2012). Therefore, it is not surprising that

Halliwell and Dittmar (2003) found in the UK that older women regard aging most negatively in the context of its impact on their appearance. Older men, on the other hand, report a neutral or even positive impact of aging on their appearance. Society has clearly changed since Sontag's writing nearly 50 years ago, and many societies are increasingly aging around the world. Nevertheless, the double standard of aging and the resulting symbolic annihilation (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Tuchman, 1978) of older women in the media has continued over the last few decades in a variety of media, particularly in advertising, fictional television content, and movies. In the following section, we will provide a brief literature review of gender representations of older people in these media.

Movies

Bazzini, McIntosh, Smith, Cook and Harris (1997) examined the 100 top-grossing movies from the 1940s to the 1980s and showed that older female characters were underrepresented and more negatively portrayed than their male counterparts. Similarly, Lauzen and Dozier (2005a) analyzed the 100 top-grossing domestic movies of 2002 and found a double standard of aging. Male characters clearly outnumbered female characters (73% vs. 27%), and the majority of male characters were in their 30s and 40s, while the majority of female characters were in their 20s and 30s. Older people of both genders were underrepresented compared to the demographic reality. For male characters, leadership and occupational power increased with age, while older female characters were less likely to have such power or goals. A more recent study (Smith et al., 2014) reported that in 11 different countries, there was a lack of women over 40 in movies compared to their share in society.

A study by Markson and Taylor (1993) analyzed the ages of 1,169 actresses and actors who were nominated in four award categories (best actress/actor and best supporting actress/actor) for the Academy Awards from 1927 until 1990. This research showed that people over 29 accounted for only 27% of winners for best actress and 67% for best actor. A similar study by Lincoln and Allen (2004) confirmed a significant negative effect of being female and of being older on the number of film roles received by actors—this effect is referred to as “double jeopardy” for older women. Markson and Taylor (2000) summarized their findings on movies in the following way: “Despite changing gender roles in later life since the 1930s and despite social and economic changes for older Americans (earlier retirement age and better health are but two examples), their film roles have remained

remarkably static in age and gender stereotyping” (p. 137).

This is not to deny that there are cases of older women in movies. For example, in the Bond movie “Spectre” (2015) Monica Bellucci was 51 years old and was the oldest “Bond Girl” in any of the Bond movies. However, what some call a “revolutionary treatment of women” in that movie has to also be seen in perspective. On the one hand, 51 is actually not that old. Indeed, several articles mention that nobody ever wrote that Daniel Craig was an “older man” playing James Bond despite being a similar age. Besides that, her appearance in the movie is extremely short, so one might wonder if this was not primarily a publicity stunt without much meaning. In addition, Monica Bellucci represents the same stereotypical woman that has been used throughout the history of movies; she is a sex symbol and certainly not someone with whom the average older woman can identify. Last but not least, there have always been representations of older women throughout the history of television and movies (Lemish & Muhlbauer, 2012; Walsh, 1989). However, only the future will tell if these representations are exceptions or will become more the norm.

Fictional Television Content

Similar results are found in fictional television content during primetime television. Women have generally been younger, and men have outnumbered women in the older age segment throughout the decades (Gerbner, 1993; Signorielli & Bacue, 1999). This pattern was true in the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s (Aronoff, 1974; Gerbner, 1993; Glascock, 2001; Lauzen & Dozier, 2005b; J. D. Robinson & Skill, 1995; Signorielli & Bacue, 1999; Vernon, Williams, Phillips, & Wilson, 1990). For example, there are 3.35 male characters for each female character among middle-aged characters and 2.04 male for each female among older characters (65+) (Vernon et al., 1990). The underrepresentation of older people and particularly older women during primetime is also seen in other parts of the world, such as Germany and Taiwan (Kessler, Rakoczy, & Staudinger, 2004; Lien, Zhang, & Hummert, 2009). Gerbner (1993) explained that the “character population is structured to provide a relative abundance of younger women for older men, but no such abundance of younger men for older women” (p. 211). This difference was also recognized by focus group members in New Zealand, who argued that older men can have many young women in the media, but the reverse is not acceptable (Vares, 2009). The reason for the presence of young women and the absence of older women might be the continued power and

privilege of men within media institutional structures, as suggested in a report in the UK (Dolan & Tincknell, 2013).

In addition to numerical gender differences on primetime television, previous research has also found that older men are shown to have more desirable characteristics (e.g., active, healthy, and socially involved), whereas older women are shown with more undesirable characteristics (e.g., low intelligence, socially isolated, and poor) (Vernon et al., 1990). Older female characters are shown as failing, while the same is true for male characters only when they are villains (Aronoff, 1974). Furthermore, leadership and occupational power are portrayed as increasing with age for men but not for women (Lauzen & Dozier, 2005b). Thus, older women receive less respect than older men in these programs (Signorielli & Bacue, 1999).

However, there are certainly also some incidences of older people being represented more positively on television. For example, Jane Fonda and Lily Tomlin were shown in the title roles of “Grace and Frankie” for Netflix. These changes might be connected with the new media developments mentioned later in the article which can target and segment audiences more effectively.

Similar results for television programs targeting a general audience have been found in studies on television programs targeting children. Götz and Lemish (2012) have found that older people in children’s television are highly underrepresented, making up only 4.1% of characters, and this underrepresentation is even stronger for older women. Another study (Rovner-Lev & Elias, 2020) analyzed episodes of the television show “Grandpa in My Pocket,” which depicts older people, particularly older women, in negative ways. Older women are shown as socially isolated, devalued, weird, bizarre, and mean and are often humiliated and intimidated in the television show.

Considering these findings, unsurprisingly, television audiences also take note of these representations. Focus groups among older people in the UK showed that older people thought that they were negatively stereotyped on television and that older women were invisible in this medium, since women need to be young and beautiful, and older women are assumed to be off-putting to a young audience (Healey & Ross, 2002).

Advertising

Older people are portrayed similarly in advertising, television, and movies. Older people in general and particularly older women are underrepresented and

portrayed as younger than men in advertisements across the globe (Prieler & Kohlbacher, 2016). This underrepresentation also occurs in North America (Atkins, Jenkins, & Perkins, 1990/1991; Baumann & de Laat, 2012; M. M. Lee, Carpenter, & Meyers, 2007; Roy & Harwood, 1997), Europe (Simcock & Sudbury, 2006), and Asia (B. Lee, Kim, & Han, 2006; Ong & Chang, 2009; Prieler et al., 2011; Prieler, Kohlbacher, Hagiwara, & Arima, 2017; Prieler, Ivanov, & Hagiwara, 2017; Singh & Cole, 1993). This observation is in line with an analysis of advertisements in the magazines *Vogue* and *GQ* from the United States, UK, South Korea and Japan, in which the mean age of models was 28.99 years for women and 39.79 years for men—nearly an 11-year age gap (Han & Rudd, 2014). In contrast to these findings, one study in the UK showed that magazines specifically targeting older consumers used older characters (50+) more often in their ads and depicted them in a more favorable way than other magazines (Carrigan & Szmigin, 1999). Gender differences in representations of older people, however, go beyond numerical differences; research in Canada has also shown that while older men are often shown as still working in jobs with authority, older women lack any clear role—whether occupational or familial—and are not associated with any socially valued schema (in contrast to younger women in domestic contexts) (Baumann & de Laat, 2012).

However, there have been examples breaking with these traditional depictions of older women and their number may have increased over the past years (Jerslev, 2018a). The most famous example in this context is Dove's Pro-Age Campaign that highlighted older women in advertisements. This campaign depicted older women naked and added slogans such as “too old to be in an anti-aging ad,” “wrinkled? wonderful?,” “grey? gorgeous?,” or “beauty has no age limit.” This campaign clearly broke with what the audience was used to seeing in ads because even anti-aging ads generally use middle-aged women and are based on the anxiety of aging. Beauty and age is communicated as something that can be controlled and signs of aging are read as failure, and the primary responsibility lies on the individual to succeed or fail (Twigg, 2004). The inclusion of older women in advertising from which they were previously excluded might be a step forward in the representation of older women in the media. However, these representations of older women can also be criticized on several accounts. Some have argued that the Dove campaign commercializes feminism or is “consumer feminism (Johnston & Taylor, 2008). In other words, the power of feminism is used for commercial purposes (Murray, 2013) and feminism becomes a marketing strategy to attract attention. Despite ads like the ones from the Dove Pro-Age Campaign, the

majority of ads (particularly anti-aging ads) still do not portray older women or portray them in highly stereotypical ways (Calasanti, Sorensen, & King, 2012).

Even though each medium has its own specific characteristics, these examples of movies, television, and advertising have used similar representations of older women over the years. The same is true for other types of media, such as fashion magazines, in which images of women over 40 are scarce (Lewis, Medvedev, & Seponski, 2011), children's picture books in which 60% of older characters (55+) are male, and only 40% are female (Danowski & Robinson, 2012), and also newspapers in which older people are underrepresented with only 22.1% older characters, while 54% of the population in the Netherlands are 55 years or older (Lepianka, 2015).

Therefore, overall, gender representations of older people are rather similar across different media, leading to the question of how such representations affect the audience, which will be outlined in the following section.

Effects of the Underrepresentation and Misrepresentation of Older Women and Men

Numerous studies have repeatedly confirmed that media representations have real consequences. For example, a literature review and meta-analysis summarized the findings that the media affects gender roles and stereotypes and how people regard others and themselves (Oppliger, 2007; Smith & Granados, 2009). The same is also true for older people. Studies on the possible effects of media representations of older people have used quantitative-based experiments and surveys and qualitative-based interviews and focus groups. Research has found that older people who watch more television have more negative images of aging and are less likely to have positive self-concepts (Donlon, Ashman, & Levy, 2005; Korzenny & Neuendorf, 1980). Furthermore, younger television viewers have more negative and unfavorable perceptions of older people (Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, & Morgan, 1980). Limited media representations of women as young, sexy, and slim affect the self-perceptions of both younger and older women. These representations lead to negative attitudes toward older women (Haboush, Warren, & Benuto, 2011) and have an impact on the self-image and even the mental health of older women (60+), resulting in sadness, anger, concern, envy, desensitization, marginalization, and discomfort (Hine, 2011, focus groups in Australia), as well as feelings of unhappiness with their bodies (Tunaley, Walsh, & Nicolson, 1999, interviews in the UK).

Older women think more about their body shape than men (Ferraro et al., 2008) and more often want to lose weight (Allaz, Bernstein, Rouget, Archinard, & Morabia, 1998, survey in Switzerland), which is often triggered by considerations of appearance (Clarke, 2002, interviews in Canada). At the same time, older women become more accepting of their bodies with age and reject pressures surrounding body size and food (Tunaley et al., 1999, interviews in the UK), thus becoming more satisfied and accepting of their body size and appearance than younger women, as shown in interviews in the United States and the UK (Borland & Akram, 2007; Montemurro & Gillen, 2012). These findings are consistent with objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), which suggests that older women are less objectified and accordingly experience less body (self-)monitoring and feel better about their bodies and themselves (for an overview, see Kipala, Becker, Wesley, & Stewart, 2015). This theory is in line with research noting that the societal demand for attractiveness lessens with age. However, this situation is not considered to be positive because it demonstrates the growing invisibility of older women in society; looking older is an indication of decreased status and power for women (Halliwell & Dittmar, 2003). This trend can also be clearly seen in the media.

Based on the findings of previous research on gender representations of older people in the media and their possible effects, the next section will identify research gaps and provide suggestions for how to move the research field forward in the area of gender representations of older people, outlining which types of research will be necessary during the coming years.

Future Research Recommendations

Overall, substantial work remains in terms of gender representations of older people in the media. This situation is true not only for media producers and society in general but also for academics, who should conduct additional analyses in many different research areas in which research is still scant. Based on the literature review, we have identified several areas for future research to close the still existing gaps in the literature: Research that goes beyond (1) women and the gender binary, (2) lumping age groups together, (3) numerical representation, (4) content analysis, (5) traditional media, (6) single-country studies, and (7) academia. Each of these areas will be explained in the following.

Beyond Women and the Gender Binary

As seen in the previous literature review, the majority of research on gender representations of older people has been on older women. While this area of research is important and there is definitely more to do in that area, future research should also focus more on representations and images of older men (Twigg, 2020), which is an important area of research, since studies show that older men are also struggling with their aging bodies (Calasanti, 2004; Thompson, 2006; Thompson & Langendoerfer, 2016) and the media can play a role in this process.

In addition to more research on older men, gender research in the media should also go beyond the binary concept of gender and capture the diversity of gender identities (Eisend, 2019). While there have been some studies on media representations of different gender identities (Gomillion & Guiliano, 2011; Poole, 2014), research on gender representations of older people generally use a binary concept of gender, and more research should go beyond this binary concept.

Finally, research should further consider intersectional research on gender representations of older people and how older men and women are represented differently in the media based on their social status (class), their race/ethnicity, or their disability. There have been only a few studies that have investigated several dimensions; for example, Rivadeneyra (2011) analyzed gender, race, and age. Generally, quantitative studies have faced problems using intersectional analysis examining several dimensions at the same time since this approach has led to very small sample sizes (e.g., older male black individuals versus older female black individuals), which made statistical analysis less powerful. Thus, in such instances, qualitative analysis methods might be more appropriate.

Beyond Lumping Age Groups Together and Defining Older

The term “older people” or similar terms, such as “mature” and “elderly,” have been used in the literature to describe people ranging in age from over 45 to over 65 (Prieler & Kohlbacher, 2016). In fact, marketing literature interested in target groups often starts the definition of “older people” with 50+; Peterson and Ross (1997) even start calling those aged 45+ “mature models” but explicitly state that the terms “mature,” “elderly,” and “older” are used interchangeably in their article. This age range is rather wide, which makes it difficult to summarize research findings adequately and to compare results. For example, the age range includes people who are still in the workforce and those who have left the workforce. Future

research should be more careful in following similar definitions of who “older” people are, especially given the fact that increasing lifespan and different life expectancies in many parts of the world means the definitions of “older” people might differ and change over time. For example, while the United Nations and the World Health Organization (WHO) generally use a definition of 60+ for older people, the WHO used a definition of 50+ for a study on sub-Saharan Africa (Kowal, Wolfson, & Dowd, 2000).

In addition, it might be advisable to subdivide age groups. Many studies lump older people together in a rather large age span, but it can be assumed that these different age groups will be represented in rather different ways. This situation is problematic in terms of analysis; 65-year-olds might still be shown to be rather fit and active (Givskov & Petersen, 2018), which is not necessarily the case for people in their 80s. As a result, some researchers have further subdivided older people into smaller age ranges, e.g., 50–64 and 65+ (Prieler et al., 2011); young-old (60–69), old-old (70–79), and oldest-old (80+) (Garfein & Herzog, 1995); and youngest-old (65–74), middle-old (75–84), and oldest-old (85+) (S. Lee, Oh, Park, Choi, & Wee, 2018). Such divisions make particular sense in regard to media representations since previous research has shown that the oldest age segment among older people is virtually unrepresented in the media (Prieler et al., 2011). For example, Gerbner et al. (1980) have shown that older women and men over 75 are nearly nonexistent in primetime television, while there are at least some older people in the age segment between 65 and 75 years of age.

Since people within one age segment are highly different from each other based on their health, roles, and interests, researchers might also consider other categorizations, such as biological age, or a person’s physical and mental condition (Jarvik, 1975); social age, or the age of the person in terms of his/her social roles and habits (Birren & Renner, 1997); cognitive age, or the age people perceive themselves to be (Barak & Schiffman, 1981); or gerontographics, which focuses on the needs, attitudes, lifestyles and behaviors of older people (Moschis, 1996; Nimrod, 2013). Such age categorizations might often be more useful than chronological age, especially in regard to surveys or experiments.

Beyond Numerical Representation

As our literature review has shown, the majority of studies on media content highlight gender differences in terms of numerical representations, with little research going beyond that aspect. However, scholars should conduct additional

analyses beyond the simple question of whether older women and men are under-represented since numerical representation alone does not necessarily tell us whether representations are negative or positive and might even exacerbate any problematic effects of media use (Collins, 2011). Thus, research should be expanded to include the nature of the depictions, for which research is comparatively scant. While numerical representation of older men and women is a sign of their “recognition,” more studies should analyze what Signorielli and Bacue (1999) call “respect,” or how people are portrayed in the media, for example, in terms of occupation or age.

In addition to comparing representations of older men and women, researchers should be careful to compare media representations not only in terms of equal distributions of age groups but also of the actual realities of each population and its real-world situation, e.g., regarding areas such as occupation (Eisend, 2019). The media can improve the status quo if media portrayals are more positive than the reality; however, it is also important to understand whether the media is merely reflecting the status quo or might even lag behind it.

Research should not only analyze the existence or nonexistence of representations and stereotypes of older men and women but also try to measure the degree of such stereotypes (Eisend, 2019), which has rarely been done in research to date. An exception is Royo-Vela, Aldas-Manzano, Küster, and Vila (2008) who rated sexism on an ordinal scale from nonstereotypic behavior to putting someone down in a study of gender role portrayals in Spanish television advertisements. More research should also be undertaken in the future in the context of representations of older women and men and should analyze how different degrees of stereotyping lead to different effects on audience members.

Finally, research might try to differentiate between and analyze older people in other ways. For example, older people could be analyzed based on their roles, such as victims, grandparents, or sources of wisdom, among others. Some scholars (M. M. Lee et al., 2007; Miller, Leyell, & Mazachek, 2004) have used a similar approach by following a categorization of stereotypes based on Hummert, Garstka, Shaner, and Strahm (1994), which divides stereotypical traits of older people into a few different types. Williams, Wadleigh, and Ylänne (2010) have come up with several groupings: (1) frail and vulnerable; (2) happy and affluent; (3) mentors; and (4) active and leisure-oriented older adults. Other research has analyzed whether certain adjectives describe older people better, such as angry/disgruntled, active/healthy, happy/content, humorous/comical, sexy/macho, and sick/feeble (T. E. Robinson, 1998) and Langmeyer (1993) has used an even longer

list of adjectives. Research might also differentiate representations based on the type of ageism, differentiating between compassionate, intergenerational, and new ageism (Marier & Revelli, 2017). Compassionate ageism considers older people as “deserving poor” since they are unable to take care of themselves, intergenerational ageism represents older people as strong, greedy, and part of an age war and who benefit from the social system, and new ageism refers to the overly positive ideals behind concepts, such as healthy or active aging, which are impossible for many older people to reach.

Beyond Content Analysis

While there have been some studies on the effects of representations of gender or older people, of audience perceptions of such representations, and of media production culture (Donlon et al., 2005; Korzenny & Neuendorf, 1980; Oppliger, 2007; Smith & Granados, 2009), the majority of the literature has focused on media content. Thus, future research needs to more often address the question of the effects of these representations. In the context of gender content analysis, Collins (2011) correctly noted the following: “... we are short on theory and empirical evidence regarding the consequences of consuming media in which one’s gender is chronically underrepresented. Are there likely to be effects, on whom, and through what processes?” (p. 295). The same can be said for research on the possible effects of gender representations of older people. While there is some evidence about some types of representations, we know very little about what effects the underrepresentation of older women and older men has on these individuals and other groups.

Another suggestion by Collins (2011) is also relevant for this research area, namely, linking content analysis with effect studies or, more generally, mixing methods. Unfortunately, very few studies to date have used more than one method to investigate gender representations of older people. Scholars could, for example, draw on the methods of Gerbner et al. (1980) in cultivation theory in which they combined content analysis and surveys. Similarly, stimuli in effects studies could be based on the results of content analyses. In short, in the future, more research should triangulate the research on gender representations of older people in the media and not depend solely on one method.

Finally, only a few studies have focused on the conditions of media production and how production culture might affect the gender representation of older people. However, one major obstacle to changing media representations of older

people, particularly older women, is the production side, which includes very few women of any age. Only 7% of people working in television in the UK are women over 50 (MacLeod, 2015) and similar findings have been reported for other media and countries (Carrigan & Szmigin, 2000; Prieler & Kohlbacher, 2016). Studies have found a correlation between the number of female producers and writers and the number of female characters in television drama and movies (Glascock, 2001; Lauzen & Dozier, 1999). Similarly, members of focus groups thought that the main reason for the current portrayal of older people and especially older women is that the people working in television are young and that young writers have their own experiences and cannot convincingly write a part for an older person (Healey & Ross, 2002). Thus, research should also focus more on the production side.

Beyond Traditional Media

Several studies on gender representations of older people have been published during the last few years. However, the majority of these studies still have focused on traditional media with very few on new media, a phenomenon that is still mostly true for content analysis of gender in general (Collins, 2011). However, such research is crucial since the new media environment is potentially changing the representation of older women and men. Research by Makita, Mas-Bleda, Stuart, and Thelwall (2019) has, however, found results quite consistent with those for traditional media. They analyzed 1,200 tweets around the terms “aging,” “old age,” “older people,” and “elderly” and found personal concerns and health care the predominant topics. The tweets mostly reinforced negative discourses about aging, such as aging as a process that needs to be slowed or resisted. However, changes might occur in other spheres of social media, such as personal social media, in which users have become increasingly powerful by adding self-representations to traditional media representations. In addition, in streaming services, such as the previously mentioned Netflix or Amazon Prime (Jerslev, 2018b), which accommodate individualized consumer interests, more and more television series are starring older characters (Givskov & Petersen, 2018). Therefore, these developments can potentially change the representations of older people, and thus, more research should be conducted on representations of older women and men in social media in addition to media content distributed by streaming services to add to the existing research.

Beyond Single-Country Studies

Not only have there been extremely few cross-cultural studies on the gender representation of older people or even studies on older people also highlighting gender aspects (B. Lee et al., 2006; Marier & Revelli, 2017; Prieler, Ivanov, & Hagiwara, 2017; Smith et al., 2014), nearly all studies to date are single-country studies. While these studies are interesting and important, future research should in addition also focus on cross-cultural studies since single-country studies use different samples, and thus, we cannot compare the findings across countries. For example, if we see differences between two studies, we cannot be sure whether the differences are based on cultural differences or whether they are based on differences in terms of the time frame, code book, sampling, or other characteristics of an individual study (Matthes et al., 2016). Therefore, cross-cultural and comparative research is needed. Since single-country studies run the risk of ethnocentrism, only comparative research is capable of analyzing the significance of phenomena and establishing the generality of findings and the validity of interpretations derived from single-country studies. Comparative research is capable of letting us test theories across different settings and helping to develop universally applicable theories (for further discussion, see Esser & Hanitzsch, 2012). In conclusion, comparative and cross-cultural studies would definitely increase our knowledge and understanding of gender representations of older people in the media.

Beyond Academia

Finally, the findings of much of the previous research have provided few practical implications. Research should clearly go beyond the purely academic area and outline the implications of their findings for policy and industry. The responsibility of media producers should be further emphasized, and responsible gender representations of interest to older people and older audiences should be suggested (Eisend, 2019).

Some studies have suggested what should be changed. First, gender representations of older people, particularly of older women, should be increased and diversified. The media needs to help debunk myths about older people and older women in addition to depicting a more positive and diverse image of aging (Kjaersgaard, 2005) rather than just images of older women in the context of decline (Wallander, 2013). Second, there should be an increase in older people and

women on the production side. Considering that only 7% of people working in television in the UK are women over 50 (MacLeod, 2015), more older women should be involved in media production as creators, writers, editors, and producers (Kjaersgaard, 2005). Similar findings have been reported for other media and countries (Carrigan & Szmigin, 2000; Prieler & Kohlbacher, 2016). Studies have found a correlation between the number of female producers and writers and the number of female characters (Glascock, 2001; Lauzen & Dozier, 1999), which even further proves the importance of such changes. Some researchers also advocate guidelines, codes of conduct, or even laws for the representation of older people and against ageism and stereotyping (Carrigan & Szmigin, 2000). Finally, perceptions about aging are not limited to the media but are developed across society (Kjaersgaard, 2005). Without trying to change the discourse about aging in society (in which media can play a role), there will be little change in the media in the long term.

Conclusion

This article summarizes findings from previous research on the representation of older women and men, which show a bleak picture. Except for a few exceptional cases (e.g., the Dove Pro-Age campaign in the case of advertising), older people and particularly older women are still underrepresented throughout the media. When they are represented, they are often stereotypically misrepresented. Signorielli and Bacue (1999) argued that the proportion of media characters in a social group compared to demographic reality can be regarded as the recognition of that group. Considering this argument, we conclude that the recognition of older people and particularly older women is not particularly high. Older women are generally ignored and symbolically annihilated (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Tuchman, 1978). Lemish and Muhlbauer (2012) outlined four stages of representation of older women in the media: invisibility, stereotypization, ghettoization, and integration. While there are certainly exceptions, overall, we can conclude that the representation of older women in most media and in most countries is still in the first stage of invisibility. Signorielli and Bacue (1999) also proposed a second concept, which they referred to as respect. Respect indicates the variety of roles played by characters, including powerful and multidimensional roles. Again, the evaluation of previous research is not positive in this case, and media representations obviously lack respect for older people and particularly older women. One of the main findings of the literature review is not only the under-

representation of older people but also the “double standard of aging” (Sontag, 1972) in most media. Women are overwhelmingly represented as very young, while men are shown as middle-aged. Women (and their bodies) are only valued if they are young and a men’s object of desire. This representation tells the audience that a woman’s value is her appearance.

Much needs to be done in academic research on gender representations of older people. As outlined in this article, more research should be conducted on older men, and more analyses beyond the gender binary should be performed. In addition, the term “older” should be clearly defined, and age groups should not be lumped together but divided into different categories. Furthermore, research should analyze the representation of older men and women beyond simple numerical representation and analyze the nature of these representations. Finally, research on gender representations of older people should include methods beyond content analysis, such as surveys or experiments, combining different methods, and further examining new media.

While this article could only highlight gender representations of older people in some media and outline a few research recommendations, we believe that this article provides an excellent starting point for future research on gender representations of older people.

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