Visual Ageism

Subjects: Sociology
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(This entry belongs to Entry Collection "Society 5.0")

Definition

The concept of “visual ageism” describes the media practice of visually underrepresenting older people or misrepresenting them in a prejudiced way. Visual ageism refers to visual representations of older people being in peripheral or minor roles without positive attributes; non-realistic, exaggerated, or distorted portraits of older people, and over-homogenized characterizations of older people.

1. Introduction

Ageism is the process of systematic stereotyping and discriminating against people because they are old. Ageism is an umbrella concept consisting of beliefs, attitudes expectations, behaviors shared by community members towards older people. Ageism presents itself and is experienced at the micro-level, for example in interactions between service providers and older people, and at the same time encompasses societal practices, recurrently verbalized and visualized in different social contexts (see and Section 3.1). Institutional ageism is more implicit and holds an ambivalent meaning. On the one hand, senior citizens are the focus of political discourse, because older people tend to be an important segment of the actual voters (for example, in 2019, 55% of the total voters for the European elections were 55 years and above, and this percentage has been relative stable for the past five years) (https://data.europa.eu/euodp/en/data/dataset/-2019-post-election-survey-first-results). On the other hand, governments act to prevent a perceived social burden of the increased older population, by making people responsible for the way they age; namely, whether they do this “successfully” or not.

Ageism frames the way policymakers shape policy design, legitimizing paternalistic values, leaving senior citizens out of the policy conversation and ultimately affecting their quality of life. Institutional ageism implies forms of passivity and acceptance of dominance directed towards older people, reinforcing each other and making difficult for everybody to think outside the box. To give an example of institutional ageism, we refer to Lloyd-Sherlock et al., who present current strategies in the Global Health Policy of WHO’s actions plans aiming to reduce premature mortality from cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancers, and respiratory disease by 25% between 2010 and 2025. In this case, “premature mortality” refers to 70 years and below, thus discouraging data collection at the national level on people over 70 years of age and the reallocation of the resources from older people to younger groups. The same study revealed forms of institutional aims in The United Nations reports on HIV and sexually transmitted diseases, which excluded people 50 years and over. The institutional ageism in such cases translate not only in national policies, accentuating and justifying the already existing age discrimination in healthcare resources, but also excluded older people from many of the epidemiological studies—as a 70-year threshold applies also in the clinical trials: the idea of reducing premature mortality comes along with the preconception that survival after the age of 70 is less important than survival at a younger age. Many other examples of institutional ageism are to be found when looking at the missing data about people over 70 years in the official statistics, including the ones provided by the Eurostat data base (https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database), see also Rosales and Fernández-Ardèvol discussing structural ageism in big data approaches.

Our society is ageing, which has lifestyle implications (see for example https://aging.com/guide-to-living-a-healthy-lifestyle-at-an-old-age/). Media content related to such issues becomes more and more visual, especially in the case of digitalized media. Visual media, to a large degree institutionally produced, risks to convey implicit forms of ageism (see also Section 3.1), and therefore, visual communication rights are more than ever necessary. In this paper we, therefore, focus on a specific aspect of institutional ageism: “visual ageism,” a phenomenon that we define as media practices of visually underrepresenting older people or misrepresenting them in a prejudiced way (see sections 2 and 3). We pay attention to international bodies having initiated discussions on the rights of older individuals (see Section 3.7 for more information). For instance, the United Nations have established the Open-ended Working Group on Ageing (OEWG) in
2010, with the purpose to strengthen the protection of older people’s rights. While the basic human rights of older individuals are emphasized, there are areas that remain unaddressed or rather ignored [13][14], such as the visual communication rights of senior citizens: the right of having a voice about the manner in which they are visually represented and the power of older people to influence specifically the images representing them is crucial [4][5].

2. Visual Ageism—Visual Practices to Represent Older People in Digital Media Content

Ageism in the media has been particularly treated as an asymmetric power structure based on age, a constructed justification of inequalities between different age groups, legitimizing domination [17]. By systematically under- or misrepresenting older people, media content legitimizes the dominance and reinforces the logic according to which the social construction of ageing is made and maintained [18]. Media content (textual and visual) is a continuous reflection of societal practices. It influences everyday interactions, including the way we relate to older people, as well as the way we see ourselves as “being old.”

Ageism in the media content has been investigated by analyzing the presence of older people in the media, by focusing on their under-representation, their portrayal often lacking positive attributes in their given minor or peripheral roles and, generally speaking, not reflecting the characteristics of the audience (see Zhang et al. [19] for a systematic literature review).

In the past decades we have seen a gradual increase in the presence of older people in the media content and a switch towards more positive representation [17]. This change happened particularly for younger older people—below 65 years of age [20]. Older people, especially the third agers (more information follows below), are more present in traditional media (television programs, print press, advertising, and movie series), represented as active and maintaining a healthy lifestyle, while fourth agers continue to be underrepresented. The increased visibility of older people in the media is part of the dominant discourse of “ageing-well”—an implicit form of ageism in which people are held responsible for the universal and irreversible ageing process [4][5]. This “positive” trend started especially in television and printing advertising, where older people were spotted by marketing strategists as potential valuable consumers already in the early 1990s [16].

As stated in Section 1, nowadays, media content is becoming more and more visual, especially when we talk about the digitalized media. Consequently, visual media convey implicit forms of ageism: older people are presented in couples, happy and enjoying life, but not everybody has a partner or has the resources to travel, not to mention the dominance of white people in visual media [4][5] (see also Section 3.1). Furthermore, this “ageing-well” ideology is putting pressure on the individual [4][5], and it leads to the marginalization of the aging process with the exclusion of the older elderly, especially those who are no longer able to enjoy “successful ageing” [18]. The different ways people create meaning in their lives as they age are often ignored. We agree with Ylänne (p. 369) [20] stating that: “what might be considered ‘positive’ portrayals can turn out to be more ambiguous in their construction of older age than might at first appear to be the case.”

The concept of “visual ageism” that we introduced earlier to describe the media practice of visually underrepresenting older people or misrepresenting them in a prejudiced way is particularly useful when we research the way older people are represented in digital visual media content. Visual ageism describes visual representations of older people in peripheral or minor roles without positive attributes; non-realistic, exaggerated, or distorted portraits of older people; and over-homogenized characterizations of older people.

We will discuss now some empirical studies revealing the visual ageism in the digital content of public institutions. Loos [4][5][21], for example, gained insight into the ways senior citizens’ organizations in the Netherlands portrayed their members on their websites. The older people were without exception shown as enjoying an active lifestyle in the ‘third age’ [22][23], a long period of being well, for example by engaging in sports or taking a leisurely time. The ‘fourth age,’ painful descent into decay [24], was absent from the digital content of the three Dutch websites from senior citizens’ organizations included in the research [4][5] that showed that older people with a non-white ethnicity background were a minority, that older people gained visibility as being healthy and vital, in the company of others, and that the range of images excluded frail people and people from different ethnic backgrounds.
Similar empirical studies have been conducted in other countries and drew similar conclusions regarding the stigmatized ways older people are visually represented: “a dominant visual representation of older people as happy, socially involved and extroverted, while representations of older people as weak, introverted and alone constitute a minority” (pictures’ analysis from DaneAge association’s website, 2016–2018, Danish advocacy group for older people (p. 111[25]). In a study conducted by Xu[26] in Sweden using picture analysis from documents of Swedish municipality guidelines, as well as an in-depth visual analysis of Facebook photos published by the municipality in 2018, the conclusions were similar: the visual portrayal of citizens is communicated using a set of traits stereotypical attributed to different life stages. Specifically, these findings suggest that the visual content “serve to categorize older people as a vulnerable group, while perpetuating age stereotypes and ageist perceptions in society”[29], p. 93. In conclusion, senior citizens’ organizations, and other public institutions (such as municipalities) visually promote a positive image of older people, while at the same time representing them as excluded from other age groups and from culture and society in general.

A shift towards a more diverse visual representation of older people on the digital content of public institutions has been recorded recently. Thus, an empirical study conducted by Sourbati and Loos[3], p. 275, in the UK analyzed pictures of the people social care services homepages run by local authorities in the five largest most ethnically diverse cities where older people comprise a growing diversity of ethnic groups (according to national Census data): Birmingham, Bradford, Leicester, Manchester, and the City of London. This study identified three patterns in visual imagery: “(1) stereotypical representations of group membership as homogenous in terms of age groups, sex, health status and ethnicity, with older people typically represented as white, (un)healthy men or women; (2) new visibilities, of older people as socially and culturally diverse groups; and (3) new approaches to inclusive digital service design where age becomes a demographic variable.” Moreover, the findings that resulted from a cross-country study analyzing pictures of senior citizens’ organizations websites in Finland, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Spain, and the UK, conducted by Loos et al.[27] between December 2016 and February 2017 showed that senior citizens’ organizations tend to represent older people together with others and not alone, a form of counter discourse to the dominant “ageing-well” ideology.

In recent years, we acknowledge a trend of visually representing older people using younger elderly people. This is not only an unrealistic picture, but it also puts a lot of pressure on older persons, as such a picture communicates that a younger looking body and face are of higher value than an older looking body and face. It reinforces the idea of the older age as something that people need to conceal their features, and obtain a “younger look.” However, one cannot be a teenager forever. Furthermore, the picture sends a more subtle message, because it implies that the failure to adhere to this stereotype of looking younger is the responsibility of the individual. Katz and Calasanti[24] warned that “what might be considered “positive” attributes in the depiction of old age could in fact be a normative construction which has nothing to do with the real experience of older people in everyday life.” Thus, even “positive” images could be harmful, creating obstacles related to the way we think about the natural ageing process: they could pressure us to conceal our wrinkles and being constantly preoccupied to look young and healthy. At the society level, policymakers could use age thresholds following the same logic: the overrated idea of “active aging” underpin many of the policy papers addressing older people[28].

References

Keywords

Ageism; Visual ageism; Older people representations; Media representation of older people

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