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Chapter 11
Visual Ageism in the Media

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11.1 Introduction

Since the introduction of the term "ageism" in the literature by Butler (1969), the number of studies documenting the process of systematic stereotyping and discrimination against people because they are old, and analysing the way these stereotypes are shared in the population and how they persist over time (Nelson 2004; Palmore 2001), has continued to expand. In this chapter, we analyse representations of older people in the visual media—print advertisements, television advertisements, and television programs. We examine whether older people are represented as third agers, who are active, enjoy life, and who maintain a healthy life style, which are all part of the successful ageing discourse (Rowe and Kahn 2015), or as fourth agers, who are inactive and unable to live independently. We assess empirical evidence that suggests a shift away from negative representations of older adults in visual media towards more positive representations, and illustrate the way in which this change has occurred in advertisements and television programs.

Previous media studies research has mainly focused on the frequency with which women and various minority groups are characterized in television content and advertisements. In media research, ageism, like other forms of stereotype, is seen as "a coherent set of shared ideas and beliefs that constitutes a particular justification of the interests of dominant groups: the state, employers, hospitals, media" (Bytheway 1994, p. 130). Albeit not explicitly, media studies have approached ageism as an asymmetric power structure based on age, a constructed justification of

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inequalities between age groups (Angus and Reeve 2006), by focusing on groups that are systematically under- or misrepresented in the media. They criticize the negative representation of older adults in the media, including the fact that they are often only given minor or peripheral roles and that they are portrayed with no positive attributes, and argue in favour of more positive, more realistic and nuanced representation, in which the portrayals of older adults more accurately reflect the characteristics of the audience.

Media content, including visual media, 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." Media representations offer a means to examine the logic according to which the social construction of ageing is made and maintained (Minichiello et al. 2000). However, media studies are often criticized for the overuse of content analysis as a method, the lack of theoretical discussion (Seiter 1986), and the fact that they focus on the sender and neglect the receiver in the communication process. To address some of these issues, ageism researchers have started to document the frequency of stereotypic representations from a communicative perspective, regarding aging as an interactive process between society and the individual (Nussbaum and Coupland 2004).

We coined the term "visual ageism" to describe the social practice of visually underrepresenting older people or misrepresenting them in a prejudiced way. We believe that this concept could be useful in researching the way older people are presented in visual media content (see also Nelson 2004). Visual ageism includes older adults being depicted in peripheral or minor roles without positive attributes; non-realistic, exaggerated, or distorted portraits of older people; and over-homogenized characterizations of older adults. At the end of this chapter, we discuss an alternative to reduce visual ageism: the "design for diversity" approach.

11.2 Why Visual Ageism in the Media Matters

Empirical studies conducted by Roy and Harwood (1997) and Walker (2012) showed that in print advertisements, television advertisements, and television programs, older adults are sometimes depicted as posing a financial burden on society. Atkins et al. (1990), Roy and Harwood (1997), Simcock and Lynn (2006), and Van Selm et al. (2007) showed that older people were often underrepresented in television programs, relative to the percentage of older people in the population. According to Ylänne (2015, p. 370), "under-representation has been found to be particularly pertinent in relation to people over 65." An explanation could be that companies feared that the image of their products and services would suffer if they were associated with the idea of being old. The portrayals of certain social groups in society, as well as the type of characteristics depicted in those portrayals, matter in societies that value social justice and power balance. These representations, visual and otherwise, can reinforce stereotypes and play a role in stereotype formation. Encountering such stereotypes in the media can negatively impact the self-esteem, health status,

physical wellbeing, and cognitive performance of older people (Levy et al. 2002a, b). As Williams et al. (2009) found, "groups that appear more often in the media are more 'vital' and enjoy better status and power in daily life" (p. 818). Taking this into account, we agree with Lester and Ross (2003) that "pictures can injure." The act of visually underrepresenting older people in the media or representing them in a stigmatized way is not harmless, as it not only reflects societal practices, but also produces meaning about these practices (Hall et al. 2013).

11.3   Changes of Visual Ageism in the Media

To gain insight into the under- and misrepresentation of older people in our society, we reviewed empirical studies that focused on images of older people in print and television advertisements and television programs. Some authors, such as Ylänne (2015), have found a steady increase in visibility of older people in the media and a switch towards more positive portrayals. As Cole (1992) noted, "during the 1970s, an emerging consensus among health professionals, social workers, and researchers insisted on a view that was the mirror opposite of ageism: Older people are (or should be) healthy, sexually active, engaged, productive and self-reliant" (p. 229). We examined studies conducted in Europe and North America since 1950 to explore empirical support for this change in visual ageism in print and television advertisements and television programs.

In order to explore changes in visual ageism in the media in detail, we asked the following research questions:

1. Do changes in the visual representation of older adults in the media relate only to younger-old (third age) adults, or are older-old (fourth age) adults also represented?
2. Are changes in the representation of older adults evident only in the attributes of depictions of older adults, or are they also evident in the roles in which older adults are depicted?
3. Are these changes in visual ageism consistent with successful aging discourse?

To answer these research questions, we present a narrative literature review (see Green 2006) of empirical studies that analysed the visual representations of older people in print and television advertisements and in television programs. We took the systematic review of television advertising by Zhang et al. (2006) and a study by Ylänne (2015) on representations of ageing in the media as starting points, using key references to lead to other empirical studies (see Ridley 2012). We selected only empirical studies conducted in Europe and North America because (a) most empirical studies of the representation of older people in the visual media in the past 40 years have been conducted in these socio-cultural contexts; (b) the above-mentioned changes over time in the way older people are represented in the media refer specifically to Europe and North America; and (c) successful ageing discourse is particularly dominant in the West (Kendig 2004).

Table 11.1 illustrates the literature on changes in visual ageism over time. We looked at the presence of negative versus positive visual representations over time in terms of roles (peripheral, incidental, or minor roles; major/leading roles; other roles, such as advisory roles) and in terms of attributes (positive, negative, exaggerated). Table 11.1 also shows whether each study differentiated between the younger-old and older-old, and whether the characteristics used to portray older people match the successful ageing discourse, in which older people are active, enjoy life, and maintain a healthy lifestyle (third age: younger old), or whether they are depicted as passive, dependent, and withdrawn from personal responsibility (fourth age: older old).

Table 11.1 shows that older people were underrepresented in television and print advertisements until the 1990s, when older people started to become more visible, first in television and print advertisements and around 2001 also in television programs.

These findings are in line with Vickers (2007) and Ylänne (2015). One possible explanation for this trend could be that at a certain point older people were spotted by marketing strategists as potential consumers (Loos and Ekström 2014), which is part of the successful ageing discourse we explore below.

Since the 1990s, older people, particularly the younger-old, have increasingly been depicted as having positive attributes (see Table 11.1). The older-old age group has continued to be underrepresented in programs and advertisements and to be portrayed with fewer positive attributes than younger people. In the last 15 years, there has been a shift toward another kind of representation, that of younger older people having the positive attributes—consonant with successful ageing discourse—of being active, enjoying life, and maintaining a healthy life style. The data presented in Table 11.1 show that the change in the way older people are represented relates solely to their attributes and not to their social roles, as they continue to be depicted in minor, peripheral, and incidental roles. We found only one empirical study (Kessler et al. 2010) in which the proportion of older people portrayed in major roles was higher than in other age groups, and these findings only described the younger-old group. Kessler et al. (2010) also noted the underrepresentation of the older-old in the television programs they analysed.

The literature shows that the changes in visual ageism are consistent with successful ageing discourse, in which especially the younger-old are depicted positively as being active, healthy, and independent. In an appeal to our pursuit of everlasting youth, the advertising industry uses images invoking eternal youth, with marketers depicting older adults as a wealthy and healthy target group (Loos and Ekström 2014). The problem of our mortality is "solved" by the concept of the third age, a long period of wellbeing, which precedes the fourth age, a short, painful descent into decay (Laslett 1991; Loos 2013). It comes as no surprise that our desire to remain forever young should be commercially exploited; the narrative of eternal youth has deep historical roots and taps into the universal yearning to live a long and healthy life (Loos 2013).

Table 11.1 Changes in visual ageism by media type and time period

Author/Year	Media type[a]	Country	Time period	Representations of older people	Age of the sample	Differences between younger-old and older-old[b]
Television advertisements						
Miller et al. (2002)	TA	USA	1950–1990	Increasing trend in positive attributes from 1950–1990	60–74; 75+	Older-old represented in a less positive way than younger-old
Hiemstra et al. (1983)	TA	USA	1981	Underrepresented; peripheral roles	50–59; 60+	Older-old underrepresented for some categories of products (food, health, recreation, services)
Swayne and Greco (1987)	TA	USA	1987	Underrepresented; peripheral roles; advisor roles	65+	Older-old underrepresented for some categories of products (food, services)
Atkins et al. (1990)	TA	USA	1990	Underrepresented; peripheral roles	50+	NS
Peterson and Ross (1997)	TA	USA	1991	Underrepresented; less favourably portrayed (fewer positive attributes than younger people)	45–64; 65+	Older-old underrepresented; less favourable attributes (significant differences)
Roy and Harwood (1997)	TA	USA	1994	Positive attributes (3rd age) – food, retail and health/beauty	50+	Older-old underrepresented (food, retail and health/beauty)
Van Selm et al. (2007)	TA	Netherlands	2003 compared to 1990–1994	More positive attributes (3rd age); more diverse attributes; underrepresented	NS	NS
Lee et al. (2007)	TA	USA	2003	Positive attributes (3rd age); minor roles	55+	NS
Simcock and Lynn (2006)	TA	UK	2004/2005	Positive attributes (3rd age); underrepresented in major roles	50+	Older-old underrepresented (food, retail, holiday/leisure, insurance/financial)

Table 11.1 (continued)

Author/Year	Media type[a]	Country	Time period	Representations of older people	Age of the sample	Differences between younger-old and older-old[b]
Kessler et al. (2010)	TA	Germany	2005	Positive attributes (3rd age); more present in major roles	60+	Older-old underrepresented
Print advertisements						
Ursic et al. (1986)	PA	USA	1950–1980	Overall increase in frequency of representations, but non-significant roles	NS	NS
Miller et al. 1999	PA	USA	1956–1996	Negative attributes	55–64; 65–74; 75+	Older-old; fewer positive attributes (significant differences)
Lohmann (1997)	PA[c]	Germany	1989–1991	Negative attributes	NS	NS
Lohmann (1997)	PA[d]	Germany	1990	Underrepresented; unrealistic portraits (exaggeration)	NS	NS
Lohmann (1997)	PA	USA	1989–1991	Positive attributes	NS	NS
Williams et al. (2007)	PA	UK	1996–2003	More positive attributes as time progresses	NS	NS
Williams et al. (2010)	PA	UK	1999–2004	Positive attributes (3rd age)	60+	NS
Ylänne et al. (2009)	PA	UK	1999–2004	Positive attributes (3rd age)	60+	NS
Coupland (2007)	PA[e]	UK	2004–2005	Positive attributes (3rd age)	50+	NS
Television programs						
Aronoff (1974)	TP	USA	1969–1971	Negative attributes	NS	NS
Bosch (1990)	TP	Germany	1982	Underrepresented; peripheral roles; when present—active, healthy	NS	NS
Vernon et al. (1990)	TP	USA	1987/1988	Underrepresented: rather positive attributes		

(continued)

Table 11.1 (continued)

Author/Year	Media type[a]	Country	Time period	Representations of older people	Age of the sample	Differences between younger-old and older-old[b]
Harwood and Anderson (2002)	TP	USA	1999	Negative attributes; peripheral roles	60+	NS
Kessler et al. (2004)	TP	Germany	2001	Positive attributes (3rd age)	60+	Older-old underrepresented

[a]*TA* Television Advertisements, *PA* Print Advertisements, *TP* Television Programs; [b]*NS* not specified; [c]Magazines; [d]Popular illustrated magazines; [e]Study includes print advertisements and magazines

11.4   New Visual Ageism in the Media: The Trend Towards a Positive Representation of Older People

The trend towards a positive representation of older people in visual media is embedded in a larger discourse of successful ageing (e.g., Rowe and Kahn 1997; Ylänne 2015) and active ageing (e.g., WHO 2014). This discourse empowers older people to live as healthily as possible, and focuses on the quality of the ageing experience, described by Rowe and Kahn (1997) as "the avoidance of disease and disability, the maintenance of high physical and cognitive function, and sustained engagement in social and productive activities" (p. 433). The positive consequences of this discourse could include adopting an active lifestyle, maintaining functional health, and enhancing capacities, such as individual responsibility and civic engagement, which could lead to a reduction of older people's dependability on public system provision (Neilson 2006). On the other hand, the possible negative consequences of this discourse, including the marginalization of the ageing process and the societal exclusion of the older-old, especially those who are no longer able to enjoy so-called successful ageing, are also being debated in the literature today (e.g., Cole 1992; Neilson 2006; Rozanova 2010; Ylänne 2012).

Katz and Calasanti (2015) state that the dominant successful ageing discourse poses at least two negative consequences for the ageing process, which are reflected in the imagery used in the media. Successful ageing is associated with individual choices in terms of lifestyle and the level of empowerment: success or failure is seen as the responsibility of the individual and something which an individual is able to control. In fact, the lifestyle of an individual is rarely a matter of volition, but an issue of economic opportunities and constraints, of power and inequalities in access to resources (Rozanova 2010). Once we categorize older people as "winners" or "losers", the social and structural factors involved in people's "choices" to age successfully are ignored. Older people in the so-called fourth age in particular are not able to meet the obligations imposed on them by the dominant successful ageing

discourse (Loos 2013). As Rozanova (2010) argues, successful ageing is problematic "in prescribing how older adults should age, rather than seeking to understand and to describe how different people make meaning of their lives as they age" (p. 213).

Successful ageing discourse can be seen as having been produced by a consumerist approach, a marketing manoeuvre to make senior consumers treat ageing as a controllable disease, rather than as a natural, universal process (Vincent et al. 2008). Trying to eliminate the signs of ageing and to deny the natural process of ageing can be seen to stem from a fear of the signs of the ageing process, because these signs act as reminders of our mortality (Martens et al. 2004, 2005). Consumers have only two options: to continually attempt to control age-related "problems" or to refuse to incorporate consumerist choices in their life as part of their wellbeing (Ylänne et al. 2009). The anti-ageing trend can be seen as the expression of a marketing discourse to consumers to take responsibility for their wellbeing, for control of their bodies, and to avoid social exclusion (Vincent et al. 2008).

Our review of empirical studies showed that although the past decades have seen a gradual increase in the presence of older people in the visual media, ageism is still prevalent. In the past, ageism in the visual media was characterized by negative attributes Aronoff 1974), such as being "ineffective, unattractive and unhappy" (Vickers 2007, p. 101), "senile, stupid, ugly, unskilled, unproductive, unhealthy, badly dressed, sedentary, and inactive" (Rozanova 2010, p. 214), and "frail, lonely, dependent and technologically illiterate" (Joyce et al. 2015). Visual ageism has changed and older people in today's society are depicted as having positive attributes, such as being "healthy, sexually active, engaged, productive and self-reliant" (Cole 1992, p. 229); or "healthy, vigorous, productive, attractive and smart" (Rozanova 2010, p. 214). Still, as our empirical work shows, not much has changed in the roles assigned to older people—they still tend to be visually represented in minor, peripheral, or incidental roles—or in the way older-old adults are visually represented, namely, as possessing fewer positive attributes than the younger-old group.

It is also important to remember 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 (e.g., Katz and Calasanti 2015). As Ylänne (2015) states: "In particular, 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" (p. 369).

The point we would like to make is that this portrayal of positive attributes of older people in our society could also have an ageist dimension. As Giddens (1984) states: "The structural properties of social systems are both medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organize" (p. 25). New visual ageism in the media means that, on the one hand, positive attributes associated with older people as part of the successful ageing discourse encourage them to live as healthily as possible. On the other hand, this can act as an enabling constraint, suggesting that good health in later life is fully the choice and responsibility of the individual, and that older people who fail to age successfully are somehow themselves to blame (Katz 2009).

We are facing a shift from visual ageism characterized by underrepresentation and the negative representation of older people to a representation of older age characterized by images of stereotypically third age older adults, in incidental roles, enjoying life and living their golden years, while older adults in their fourth age remain invisible.

11.5 Designing for Dynamic Diversity: An Alternative to Visual Ageism

One could ask whether it is possible to visually represent older people in a non-ageist way. In our opinion, pictures are never neutral, as signifying practices cause each of us to consume them in our own way (Hodge and Kress 1988; Hall et al. 2013). The *prejudicial* effects of stereotyped visual imagery injure and exclude, and should therefore be avoided (Lester and Ross 2003). Several recommendations for reducing visual ageism have been formulated since the 1980s. For example, Hiemstra et al. (1983) suggested that educators play a role as social interventionists and agents of change by teaching people to correct misleading and exaggerated images, both on the side of the marketers and of the consumers. As our review of empirical studies revealed, though, visual ageism is still prevalent today. Richards et al. (2012) referred to the *Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing*, which "identified as one of its objectives the need to facilitate contributions of older women and men to the presentation by the media of their activities and concerns" (United Nations 2002, p. 45) and underlined how important it is to create expectations in both younger and older people about ageing and old age. They pointed to the New Dynamics of Ageing initiative, "Representing Self—Representing Ageing",[1] which argues that "new sets of images need to be presented to the media" that counteract current ageist preoccupations and instead reflect the "contributions, strengths, and resourcefulness" of older women (United Nations 2002, p. 44).[2]

Vickers (2007) suggested that an increase in the visibility of older people in society would foster more respect and a better understanding of old age. She expressed the hope that visibility advocacy groups succeed in changing our attitudes towards 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" (p. 104). In 2007, personal care products brand Dove did just that, by launching Pro Age as part of their Campaign for Real Beauty.[3] It featured several women

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[1] http://www.representing-ageing.com/

[2] http://www.un.org/en/development/devagenda/ageing.shtml

[3] See https://www.google.nl/search?q=dove+campaign+older+people&rls=com.microsoft:en-US:IE-Address&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjYk8bi2p3MAhVCD8AKHaNnCW0QsAQIHw&biw=1920&bih=986

in their 50s and 60s. The campaign captured the imagination of baby boomer women around the world. The campaign presented images of women who were not professional models, literally laying bare their age spots, grey hair, and curves, and demonstrating that women are beautiful at all ages.[4,5] Despite critical remarks from Johnston and Taylor (2008, p. 962), who said that "although broadly accessible, Dove's critique of beauty ideology is diluted by its contradictory imperative to promote self-acceptance and at the same time increase sales by promoting women's consumption of products that encourage conformity to feminine beauty ideology" (p. 962), in our opinion, this is one of the rare efforts to visually depict older people in a non-ageist way (see also Brossoie 2010 on the societal resonance and success of this campaign).

Other campaigns, such as those of Specsavers in 2013[6] and Swiss Life in 2016,[7] have tried to do the same. In the Specsavers advertisement an older couple thankfully sinks down onto what they think is a bench in a park, but which turns out to be the seat of a roller coaster. The commercial concludes with a voice-over saying, "Should've gone to Specsavers". The Swiss Life campaign also makes use of humour to sell insurance and provide financial advice to older people. In one commercial, an older man is ably competing with a much younger man at the gym. Unlike the Dove Pro Age Campaign, however, the Specsavers campaign pokes fun at older people (their poor eyesight causes them to sit on the wrong bench) and the Swiss Life campaign humorously exaggerates the older person's ability to perform as well as his younger counterpart.

Both the Specsavers campaign and the Swiss Life campaign reinforce positive characteristics, in the sense that they depict older people as active, but their depictions are more in keeping with what we consider to be ageist third age representations. Our review of empirical studies clearly revealed that visual ageism remains a challenge. These days, visual ageism in the media tends to come wrapped in the guise of the positive attributes of third age representations of older people, while adults in their fourth age continue to be underrepresented. One possible explanation for this is that healthy third agers might prefer not to be associated with fourth agers, as they remind them too starkly of what lies ahead in their own near future. Although this discomfort or even fear about mortality is undeniably common, from a societal point of view this kind of (self-)ageism is hurtful to fourth agers as a group and in a sense to third agers as well, as they risk to become fourth agers themselves one day.

Based on the insights of this chapter, we suggest that one way to address visual ageism is to "design for dynamic diversity", an approach originally developed by Gregor et al. (2002) as a method to create interface designs for older people having "significantly different and dynamically changing needs". Applied to the visual representation of older people in the media, this implies the use of a multiplicity of images and more nuanced imagery to combat the over-homogeneity of

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[4] See http://advertisingforadults.com/2007/02/dove-pro-age-women/

[5] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vilUhBhNnQc

[6] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K_nM0y9Hryw

[7] See http://creativity-online.com/work/swiss-life-retirement-trainees/45228

representations of older adults (see also Loos 2013). The Dove Pro Age campaign is a good illustration of this approach that could be a fruitful way to reduce visual ageism in an ever more ageing society.

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