

Elders Perception of Media and its Messages

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It is fact the life expectancy of human beings have improved significantly due to advancement in medical sciences. Hence, the population of older people is growing significantly. This brings with it many social, political and economic challenges. Also, it should be noted that media does not significantly include the older people in their agenda in relation to planning and consumption of media products. The media, including television, print media (books, newspapers, magazines, and advertisements) are considered a major and pervasive source of socio-cultural influence on the public's perceptions of older people and ageing. The media act as a resource for learning about the world in general and supplies information and ideas about older people and ageing that can play a role in the formation and reinforcement of these images (Lee et al. 2007; Robinson et al. 2007; Williams et al. 2007; Gilbert & Ricketts 2008). Some researchers argue that in the absence of real-world contact between younger and older people, the media is a particularly important source of intergenerational contact (Williams et al. 2007). It becomes increasingly important to gain an insight and understanding into how older people are perceived by the public as it is from these perceptions and attitudes that ageist behaviours, discrimination and mistreatment of older people can develop. This paper tends to understand the public perceptions of older people and ageing, describe the factors that influence them, and the consequences of these perceptions on the lives of older people.

Perception about Elders in Media

Many researchers have argued that the media, particularly in the US, celebrates and promotes youth, and has a central role in perpetuating ageist images and stereotypes (McConatha et al. 2004; Barrett & Pai 2008). Children are believed to be particularly vulnerable to the consequences of negative media images (Montepare & Zebrowitz 2002). Exposure to stereotypical portrayals of older individuals may lead to distorted views of the realities of old age and of older people in society, and may influence the way in which people interact with older individuals (Kessler et al. 2004; Robinson et al. 2007).

Research in this area has examined how older people are represented or portrayed in the media, documenting their presence in television programmes, films, advertisements and books, the types of roles they play, and the traits most frequently associated with older characters, which may reflect ageing stereotypes (Zhang et al. 2006; Lee et al. 2007). Television in part, because of its ubiquity, is believed to play an especially significant role in shaping public attitudes, and is frequently blamed for perpetuating negative stereotypes of ageing and older people in society (Cohen 2002; Horton et al. 2007; Lee et al. 2007). Donlon et al. (2005) for example, found that greater exposure to television was a significant predictor of more negative stereotypes of ageing amongst older people.

Portrayal of Elders in Television Medium

Television characters can both consciously and unconsciously create standards of social comparison and role models for viewers (Kessler et al. 2004). Older people participating in a study by Healey and Ross (2002) suggested that the generally negative and disrespectful portrayals of older people on television have a direct relationship to the way they are treated in real life. However, participants also acknowledged that to a certain extent television merely

reflects values of society at large and therefore cannot be entirely blamed for ageist attitudes (Healey & Ross 2002). Older people have been found to be both under-represented on television and film and also portrayed in a negative light, often reflecting stereotypes around physical and cognitive decline and sexual impotence (Montepare&Zebrowitz 2002).

A body of research has focussed on how older people are represented in children's programmes. Robinson and Anderson (2006) reported that older people remain underrepresented in children's animated television programmes, accounting for just 8% of the total characters. A similar representation of older people was also found in other countries such as in Germany (Kessler et al. 2004). More recently, Robinson et al. (2007) argued that the number of older characters in Disney films for example, has been rising over the last four decades. However, despite appearing in rising numbers, the majority of these older characters tend to be minor roles with little significance to the plot (Robinson & Anderson 2006; Robinson et al. 2007). According to these studies, older characters in television and film were deemed in the majority of cases to be portrayed in an overall positive light based on physical and personality traits (Robinson & Anderson 2006; Robinson et al. 2007). However, 44% of negative representations of older characters were also reported (Robinson et al. 2007).

There are also differences in the portrayal of older men and older women on television, which may have utility in explaining the gender differences discussed earlier. Robinson and Anderson (2006) reported that a large majority of older characters in children's animated television programmes were male. In Germany Kessler et al. (2004) noted that nearly two-thirds of animated characters were men, which is not representative of the German population. Furthermore, they found a tendency for men to be portrayed as having more socio-economic resources than women, especially with regard to status, education and profession (Kessler et al. 2004). Further supporting the prevalence of gender inequality in television and film, Robinson et al. (2007) found that in a sample of thirty-four Disney animated films, older male characters portrayed all the roles of authority (e.g., clergy, ruler, and mentor), while the only role dominated by older females was the role of villain.

Elders Perception about Media

The media has been noted to have very persuasive power in influencing people's perceptions and stereotypes. Older people are underrepresented in the media, particularly in television, which is watched by all groups in society and those that are represented are usually older men who tend to play a powerful dominant role. Therefore, the media is a pertinent mode of communicating stereotypes of how older people and how ageing is portrayed. One possibility that older adults may enjoy TV more than younger adults because they have fewer alternative demands of their time (e.g., working). Another possibility is that older adults may use TV to regulate negative emotions. In one study that used experience sampling across a 7-day period, older adults reported lower levels of both positive and negative affect while watching TV compared to other activities. In light of the negative health associations with TV use in older adults, understanding the affective and social contextual experience of TV use in older people will aid in directing efforts to alter TV use.

Younger people reported lower negative affect while watching TV, but older people did not. The attenuated effect of TV on experienced stress appeared to be due to the lower stress ratings among older compared to younger adults, and alternative activities were not as stressful in older age. These findings were not better accounted for by demographic or social contextual

issues related to age. In addition, there were age-related increases in TV watching in older adults with lower and higher life satisfaction, suggesting that TV is not simply a “refuge” for less happy older adults. There are some practical reasons why older adults may watch more TV than younger people. Older adults have more leisure time due to retirement. Watching TV is an easy leisure activity, and the barriers to participating in other leisure activities often increase with age, particularly for more active leisure activities such as exercise. Another possibility discussed elsewhere is lifespan TV use pattern may follow the typical course of addiction in that greater consumption occurs even though pleasure derived from TV declines; alternatively the content of TV may be more directed toward and thus more pleasurable to younger people. Nevertheless, at the population level, encouraging alternatives to TV use may have its greatest impact in older adults.

John Tulloch (1989) is one of the few to have paid attention in the past couple of decades to the older audience. In a study based on interviews with twenty elderly people, Tulloch found that his subjects were keen to talk about and engage with the world of television, but being often more isolated than young people or larger families, they usually had less of an opportunity to do so. In contrast to younger science-fiction fans (whom Tulloch had studied previously), he found that these retired people – living in Bournemouth, England – related soaps and dramas to their own lives, rather than back to the shows’ own on-going narratives and ‘back story’. Tulloch also notes that this older audience, being less attractive to advertisers and not being organised into ‘fan groups’ as some younger viewers are, have to battle valiantly to protect their favourite shows – often by writing letters from their isolated positions which take strength from an assumption that ‘many other viewers’ share their views.

Conclusion

We live media mediated world and media pines with commercial interest. In this aspect the older people and their yearning are accounted. It should be noted in spite of conscious negligence of the media and their institution, elders consume media products to satisfy their social and cultural cravings. Elders are significant part of the society, their participation in the society and cultural aspects should be duly recognised and respected. Media institutions should not perceive audience as mere commodities but their interest and needs should be considered.

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