Representations of ageing in the media

Ageing, Society and Policy

Take two types of media and critically examine the dominant representations of later life, noting key points of similarity and difference.

' Age is an issue of mind over matter, if you don't mind, it doesn't matter' (Laham, 2015: para. 19). This quote resonates well when discussing the mass media and its dominant representations of later life. Particularly, because ' The Mass Media have long been critiqued by researchers for often representing seniors in a negative light'. The Mass Media tends to portray the old as unhealthy, ugly and badly dressed rather than showing positive portrayals as healthy, productive and attractive (Rozanova, 2010: 214). ' The impact of the negative stereotyping can damage the self-concepts of the elderly and disrupt the socialisation of young people with respect to the elderly which contributes to ageism' (Miller, Leyell & Mazachek, 2004: 315). The most dominant representations of ageing are repeated across the media over time and so are the values. Therefore, to identify which are most dominant we will critically examine the key similarities and differences of ageing within film and magazine advertisements and to what extent these representations of ageing have shaped society. Next, I will be discussing how the media representations add pressure for seniors to age successfully by fighting the ageing process. Lastly, I'll be examining how the media represents the third and fourth age in films and adverts.

(Kriebernegg & Maierhofer, 2013: 107) maintain that ' Social realities of age and ageing are not primarily based on biological facts but on social constructions of what it means to be and grow old'. Positive ageing

encourages those who are healthy and productive known as the young – old who are actively ageing but isolates those who are ill and must deal with the realities of ageing. The negative concept of old age refers to images of them being dependent and frail (Kriebernegg & Maierhofer, 2013). Through using the Cultivation theory, we can understand how content released by the mass media has the power to shape the minds of society and their opinions of the world regardless of the effects the negative representation of later life has on others (Vickers, 2007). Through defining the most dominant representations of ageing we can determine if age is an essential factor in establishing one's identity and how they are regarded by others (Hatch, 2005). ' Ageing has come to occupy such a central position within Postmodern culture because there Is more age about than ever before, more varied resources to shape its experiences'. This suggests that the arrival of pop culture has shaped the experiences of how we view later life (Gilleard & Higgs, 2000: 10).

The most dominant representations of old age fall into three classifications. Firstly ' Old age as a Human Decline' whereby the old are stereotyped as always suffering from either physical or mental decline (Kriebernegg & Maierhofer, 2013). This idea is further developed by identifying the old as having to rely on others and incapable of being in control of their own lives due to physical limitations. Additionally, they are subjected to exploitation by criminals, care homes and are viewed by others as a burden particularly by family members. In other words, this leads to the old being lonely and isolated by family and society. Examples of these representations can be

found frequently in the media in the form of an ad or a character in a film (Rozanova, 2010).

' Age as a human decline' is demonstrated by Lewis, Medvedev, Seponski (2011) via Fashion magazines which tend to be ageist and portray age negatively, especially when discussing physical limitations. For example, In Elle and Glamour magazine the focus of the advertisements is on youthfulness and anti-ageing methods mainly featuring younger models. This representation echoes a culture which favours youthfulness and competent individuals over those ageing naturally by using younger models and encouraging cosmetic surgery to delay the ageing process (ibid). Similarly, ' Being physically attractive counts much more in a woman's life than in a man's, but beauty, identified, as it is for women, with youthfulness, does not stand up well to age '(Sontag, 1972: 31). In Film, a man's success is determined by power and authority, a woman's is determined by looks, they are expected to adapt to societies requirements of appearing youthful to others to obtain particular roles on the big screen (Lauzen & Dozier, 2005). In this case, there are similarities within the representations of older women in Films and Ads as a human decline in regards to beauty.

The second classification of old age is ' Old age as a New Beginning', this is viewed more positively and encourages active behaviour in later life. Old age is viewed as happy and satisfying. It comes in three forms, the old being independent and the director of their own lives and how fulfilling it becomes. Being able to adapt and keep up with societies changes mentally and physically whilst copying the behaviours of their children and grandchildren, and the association of old age with an eternal sexless love (Kriebernegg &

Maierhofer, 2013). This is a new way of ageing which is promoted as inspirational and positive, an active way of maintaining one's youth and ageing well (Ylänne, 2015). This representation of old age is prevalent in films with an older cast but can be difficult to identify in magazines which usually focus on cosmetics as a way of maintaining youth.

Vogue magazine are aware of the changes in demographics and try to support the ageing process, particularly because the positive portrayal of old age is usually in ads which promote food and health and rarely in Fashion which society have become familiar with. Up until 2007 Vogue had never paid attention to the older demographic, until their ageless style issue was released which endorsed old age as a new beginning with their sell in lines ' Ageless style: the best pieces at any age' ' How to grow fashionably'. This attitude affirms societies aim to look younger and remove any signs of ageing (Twigg, 2010). Similarly, films which try to support old age as a new beginning the message occasionally gets lost. For example, in the movie ' RED' (Retired, extremely dangerous), the focus is on a Bruce Willis and his team of ageing retired black ops operatives who are no longer living a fast-paced life. Although the messages support living an active lifestyle and having a zest for life where by retirement shouldn't be the first choice, it suggests that to remain youthful you must imitate the behaviour of the young. The Postmodern Life Course supports this way of living where there's a shift from the dark days of ageing to a postmodern time where seniors are urged to dress like their children and grandchildren, to live a similar lifestyle and enjoy the benefits of pop culture (Estes, Biggs & Phillipson, 2003). However, this is difficult for those who can't due to physical limitations, the

focus shouldn't be on the inescapable horror of age but what ageing means for one may differ for another (Cox, 2012).

Equally, ' The Intern' another film with a mixed message about old age concentrates on Ben, a Retired executive who applies to a senior citizen intern program after retirement has become too boring for him and is eager to learn how to use technology. This displays old age as a consumer market whereby the old are independent, competitive and willing to learn (Dhar & McKinney, 2015). Moreover, these qualities suggest that not all people distinguish themselves as old and don't expect anyone else to either, they enjoy being identified alongside the young and be integrated. This is seen in Films such as ' Meet the Fockers' with Barbara Streisand's who plays a sex therapist who teaches sex exercises to senior couples, this is a positive reinforcement of old age as a new beginning because it removes the dominant stereotype that senior partnerships are sexless (Gatling, 2013). Therefore, it can be said that we are living in a third age demonstrated by self-realization and consumption of the elderly (Twigg, 2010).

' The Third age concept captures an economic and demographic shift describing the emergence of a cohort of relatively healthy and financially secure older people who were entering the age of personal achievement and fulfilment' (Laslett, 1987: 135). This concept has crawled into the advertising industry and suggests a period of liberation from old age whereby older people are used for the promotion of products and endorsements (Marshall & Rahman, 2014). Old age is understood to be a consumer market with competitive seniors in the advertising industry. This representation of the third age is comparable with old age as a new beginning hence a dominant

representation of old age. Publications such as: Yours and Saga magazine, endeavour to remove the negative stereotype of age and encourage a more active lifestyle via educational and inspirational advertisements endorsing a healthier and vigorous standard of living (Ylänne, 2015). An example which further illustrates this dominant representation of old age as a means of self-realisation is the movie: ' The Best Marigold Hotel'. The story engages with a group of retired seniors who travel for a holiday to India and embark on a journey where later life isn't a disadvantage but a chance of fulfilment, financially or romantically. The film suppresses the fear of ageing for seniors and the youth and acts as a guide for enjoying old age (Cox, 2012).

The concept of the Fourth Age unlike the Third age, focuses on the fear of ageing. ' The Fourth age embodies all the fears of old age: it brings fragility, helplessness and loss of autonomy'. Especially because not being in control of your own ageing process can be daunting compared to the third age which promotes successful ageing as a personal choice. Instead the fourth age describes the disabled as ' them' and questions if this illustrates the real process of ageing (Kafková, 2016: 23). This description of old the ageing process comes under the third classification of ' Old age as Superiority' where the elderly are an inconvenience and later life is an ageing horror (Kriebernegg & Maierhofer, 2013). However, advertisements promote health issues in a positive light using the third age concept ' Leisure-oriented exercise benefits older people, reducing both their morbidity and mortality' (Gilleard & Higgs, 2000: 80). Rather than instilling fear in the minds of consumer's, advertisers use seniors to sell health products and encourage older people to live an active lifestyle to age well and by use of autonomy

they can postpone the fourth age (Ylänne, Williams & Wadleigh, 2009). On the other hand, health in films are a dominant representation of old age as a human decline and horror. Old age is presented by considering the fourth age in relation to dementia ' Ageing and disability are commonly assumed to go hand in hand' (Kriebernegg & Maierhofer, 2013: 57). This can be seen in the Simpsons film where Grandpa Simpson has trouble remembering the names of family members and confuses items such as the phone for an iron. These representations of Alzheimer's and Dementia are usually inaccurate and fail to bring awareness to the issue. Although the representation may be comical, for children watching it leads them to identify the old as a nuisance and helpless (Alexander, 2015). In other words, the representation of health concerns as an ageing issue in a magazine ad is not as negative as it is a film and doesn't have the same influence on the youth as films do.

' The major premise of cultivation theory is that the more time individuals spend consuming media e. g. watching TV, the closer their views are to the world created by media. In other words, repeated and extensive exposure to media images influences viewers' perceptions of social reality in the direction of the world constructed by media' (Zhang, 2006: 265). This suggests the stereotypical images the youth have of the elderly is as a result of the media. They are represented as dependent, grumpy and disabled which cause the young to behave in a disrespectful way and shapes the interactions they have with older people (Magoffin, 2007). Film more than advertisements plays a big part in constructing the views of the youth even if the representation doesn't accurately reflect society. The dominant representations include grumpy old characters who refuse to adjust to the

changes of modern society and believe the youth are impolite. For instance, the film ' UP' features Carl a cranky, hard of hearing and frail old man who accidentally injures a construction worker over damage to his mailbox. Carl is deemed a " public nuisance", and the court orders him to be admitted to a nursing home, to get him out of the way, exhibiting age as a human decline. This is supported by children who restrain the old within two categories: " Evil & powerful' and ' Benign but helpless' which is where Carl is placed (Gatling, 2013). This aligns the image which the youth maintain of the old and influences communication ensuing a self-fulfilling prophecy. The old internalise those stereotypes and interactions causing low self-esteem and a need to slow the ageing process (Kriebernegg & Maierhofer, 2013).

Magazine advertisements publicise anti-ageing representations of old age more so then Films and particularly for women ' Anti-ageing attempts to slow, stop or reverse, rejuvenate the ageing process' (Ylänne, Williams & Wadleigh, 2009: 56). Magazines promote anti-ageing practices including: cosmetic surgery, anti-ageing creams and hair dyes as solutions to the ageing process through concealing indicators of old age which is deemed unattractive. This process is not limited to the elderly, it is also used by those in their 20s and 30s who begin the ' staying young' process at a young age (Gilleard & Higgs, 2000). Using the example of an Olay magazine ad featuring model Twiggy promoting a beauty product, it was reported by consumers as misleading and extremely airbrushed with a slogan captioned ' Because younger – looking eyes never go out of fashion'. Although a mature model was used the promotion is selling how to achieve younger looking skin which not only gives false promises but has a negative outcome for those

who endeavour to age naturally (Sweney, 2009). Ultimately, we can see how anti-ageing practices shapes the ageing process for older people where they view ageing as a human decline. Disney films create negative stereotypes which impact how kids perceive older adults and fear the ageing process. Using toothless characters and portraying them as evil for example, the old woman who tempts snow white to eat the poisonous apple (Robinson et al 2007; Gatling 2013). Children internalise the most widespread representations of old age when young which are usually negative in films and hang on to them which creates a fear of ageing.

Although the mass media continues to be a popular discourse which shapes the representations of old age in society ' advertising does not have the power to alter or shape social values, but merely reflects the values of its target audiences', the same can be said for films (Miller, Leyell & Mazachek, 2004: 316). The most dominant representations of ageing are: ' Old age as a Human Decline' and ' Old Age as a New Beginning' which are shaped by the stereotypes society created. Although the representations in magazine ads and films have relevant similarities and differences individually they contribute to the interactions amongst the old and young. Despite this, can we suggest ' there been a trend from less negative to more positive portrayals consistent with a shift toward more favourable attitudes toward the elderly and the increasing size of the elderly population?' (Miller, Leyell & Mazachek, 2004: 316). This suggests representations relating to old age are limited. Then again, should we educate society particularly children that ' opposing depictions of strength and agility on one hand, and frailty and stiffness on the other stimulate the viewer to ponder that we all live

somewhere along the weak/strong continuum. Some older people may be weaker than younger people, some may not (Gatling, 2013: 77).

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