The Portrayal of Successful Ageing in British Prime-Time TV Advertisements: A Concern for the Healthcare Sector?

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Abstract

Stereotypes conveyed by the media influence both the self-perception and behaviour of people, and may have implications for treatment and healthcare outcomes of older patients. To identify prevailing stereotypes about old age and to investigate the presentation of successful ageing, 6228 commercials aired during UK prime-time TV in September 2020 were analysed using a media content analysis. The findings indicate that the mediated ideas of growing and being old largely align with the concept of successful ageing. However, aspects of persistent ageism are also identified, which affect particularly the oldest members of society and ethnic minorities. Armed with this knowledge, proactive steps should be taken to influence stereotyping of older people, in order to better embrace equity, diversity and inclusion for both age and ethnic background.

Keywords: advertising, stereotypes, successful ageing, older adults, ethnic diversity, UK

1. Introduction

Age stereotypes are known to influence our perception and behaviour. Ideas that prevail in cultures about what it means to grow old and to be old are accepted by society and unconsciously integrated into people's self-perception (Hummert, 2011; Otrebski, 2015; Olsen & Scott, 2021; Ylänne, 2022). Like a self-fulfilling prophecy, this leads to older people exhibiting exactly those characteristics that are stereotypically associated with old age. In a series of studies spanning more than two decades, Levy and colleagues established that negative age stereotypes can adversely affect, amongst other things, the self-esteem, health status, well-being, cognitive performance, and even longevity of older people (Levy, Slade, Kunkel & Kasl, 2002; Levy, 2003; Levy et al., 2016). In a similar vein, Fernández-Ballesteros and colleagues (2020) found negative age stereotypes to be a general threat to 'active ageing'—that is, older people's health, happiness, satisfaction and social participation. For healthcare, negative age stereotypes have been reported to affect the type of care provided for older people, leading to instances of discriminatory treatment (Cuddy & Fiske, 2002; Fernández-Ballesteros, Olmos, Pérez-Ortiz & Sánchez-Izquierdo, 2020), and an increased refusal of life-prolonging interventions on the part of patients (Levy, Ashman & Dror, 2000).

Awareness amongst gerontologists of the role that age stereotypes play and the potential harms and benefits these might have for older people has existed for decades. Already in the 1990s, Featherstone and Hepworth (1995) emphasised that addressing the challenges posed by an ageing population involves promoting more positive perceptions of ageing and old age, thus improving the quality of life for older individuals and reducing age discrimination among society as a whole. Mass media communication is widely recognised 'as playing an important, perhaps key, role in the policy process, as both purveyors of information and as ciphers for competing ideas' (Saraisky, 2015, 28). The media have the power to shape perceptions and persuade societies to change attitudes of and towards social groups (Olsen, 2022). The omnipresence of the media in today's society allows for ample opportunities for media content to influence individuals and impart ideas and stereotypes—both positive and negative. Advertising often comprises well-crafted short stories, featuring condensed characters within easy-to-follow storylines; and, as one of the most readily available forms of media content, advertising plays an important part in the formation of mental images and, at the same time, reflects the prevailing attitudes of society as part of its narratives (ibid.; Schwender, 2015). It is therefore a useful tool for assessing the current public perception of all manner of issues, including how society views old age and ageing.

1.1 Ageism in the Media

The academic discourse on ageism in the media has identified two main areas of concern in western societies: (i) stereotyping; and (ii) under-representation of older people.

Arguably the most prominent of these two issues is the systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against older people in the depiction and framing of fictional characters. Although screenwriters and advertisers nowadays appear to avoid humourous depictions of older adults that explicitly rely on negative ageist stereotypes (Ylänne, 2021), implicit, hidden, unintended or unconscious stereotyping and discrimination are still at play. An example of this is the character of Abraham 'Abe' Simpson in the long-running TV series *The Simpsons* (Novak, 2018). Living in a retirement home, Abe is often portrayed as embodying various negative old age stereotypes, such as being ignorant, frail and forgetful. He also appears to be lacking any substantive social relationships beyond his next of kin; with other characters, including members of the Simpsons family, often considering him a burden and not being of sound mind.

Although it seems that these overtly negative media depictions have decreased in recent decades, they have not fully disappeared—the character of Abe Simpson, for example, is still going strong and is largely unchanged in 2022. Where they have disappeared, they have been replaced, in part, with excessively positive portrayals of what it means to grow and be old. Whilst this might appear to be an encouraging development at first glance, Thimm (2012) points out that an exaggeratedly positive portrayal of old age has its own risks. It increases pressure on older people who do not meet the ideal, thus also negatively affecting people's self-confidence and quality of life. Advertising in the UK has used both extremes in the past, with Whitfield (2001), for example, identifying the recurring stereotypes of the 'frail little old lady/man victim' and the 'deliriously active and happy couples and individuals' in her study on print magazine and newspaper advertisements. Similarly, a team at Cardiff University, Wales, identified promotional portrayals in the UK seesawing between the extremes of 'Copers'—older adults living with a disability, showing stark physical, cognitive and/or social decline—and 'Golden Ager'—those young at heart and often presented as health-conscious and physically active (Ylänne, Williams & Wadleigh, 2009; Williams, Ylänne & Wadleigh, 2010; Williams, Ylänne, Wadleigh & Chen, 2010).

The second major manifestation of ageism in the media is the neglect of older people altogether, both within fictional and factual media content. For advertising, several studies in the UK have found an under-representation of older characters compared to other age groups and/or older people's share of the British population (Carrigan & Szmigin, 1999; Whitfield, 2001; Simcock & Sudbury, 2006; Chen, 2015; Olsen & Scott, 2021). Evidence supports the notion of a link between under-representation in the media, including advertising, and ageism within wider society (Kessler, Schwender & Bowen, 2010; Prieler, Kohlbacher, Hagiwara & Arima, 2011).

1.2 Relevance for the Healthcare Sector

The previous sections underline the importance of knowing what ideas of old age exist within society that play into the self-perception of older people and people's expectations about ageing. This knowledge might inform healthcare professionals' therapy and care choices, thus contributing to better health outcomes and quality of life for older patients. As Whitfield (2001, 10) pointedly puts it: 'Images are an important influence on how we feel about people, react to them and act about them and this applies to all who work with older people—NHS [National Health Service] and government policy makers, care managers, doctors, nurses, neighbours, family and friends.'

By way of illustration, if the prevailing image of old age in society is of a sedentary, inactive period of life, a healthcare professional might be more likely to prescribe medical intervention over lifestyle changes such as regular light exercise, due to an unconscious bias as to what older people can achieve. Equally, older people themselves and their social support system—such as their family members—are likely to act according to their idea of what it means to be old. If they also see old age as a period that lacks the requirement for any physical activity, they may be less inclined to try to incorporate lifestyle changes to improve their health, ultimately leading to them resorting to medical interventions that might otherwise have been avoidable.

With an awareness of the old age stereotypes that exist, and their effects on both the perception of healthcare practitioners and the patients, one can anticipate how this may affect the therapeutic strategy that might be recommend. Further, one might anticipate how an older person might respond and adhere to such therapeutic strategy, and mitigate against any negative effect that those stereotypes could have, including preventable impairments. Improving upstream prevention is one of the strategic goals outlined in the NHS's Long Term Plan, which is estimated to save health services £4.8 billion a year (National Health Service, 2019).

1.3 Successful Ageing

The concept of successful ageing is one of the most influential frameworks for understanding ageing in modern society. Dating back to the 1960s or even earlier (Martin et al., 2014), it is Rowe and Kahn's works from the late 1980s, and

their specific idea of 'successful ageing', that have been repeatedly cited as the point of origin for the popularity of this model within age-related research (Urtamo, Jyväkorpi & Strandberg, 2019). According to Rowe and Kahn (1997, 433), successful ageing is characterised by 'low probability of disease and disease-related disability, high cognitive and physical functional capacity, and active engagement with life'.

Although not free of criticism (see Martinson & Berridge, 2014, for a Systematic Review on the critique concerning successful ageing), successful ageing has dominated the gerontological discourse on age-related research for the past three decades (Alley, Putney, Rice & Bengtson, 2010; Urtamo, Jyväkorpi & Strandberg, 2019). This has led to a variety of definitions attempting to address criticisms of the model—such as the loosening of Rowe and Kahn's criteria to include a broader spectrum of aged people (e.g., McLaughlin, Connell, Heeringa, Li & Roberts, 2010), or the adding of new criteria to Rowe and Kahn's concept in order to fill perceived gaps (e.g., Young, Frick, & Phelan, 2009). However, none of these 'evolved' understandings of successful ageing can claim universal acceptance to date (McLaughlin, Jette & Connell, 2012; Urtamo, Jyväkorpi & Strandberg, 2019). Martinson and Berridge (2014, 59) state in this context that '[o]ver time, successful aging has been modified and interpreted in many different ways to the point where it is widely acknowledged that there is no agreed upon definition of the concept'. The ongoing popularity of the classic definition by Rowe and Kahn, however, makes its use as a backdrop for the current study a reasonable choice.

1.4 Study Aim

The aims of this paper are therefore to explore the current public perception of ageing and old age in the UK, as portrayed in contemporary TV advertising, and to evaluate its alignment with the concept of successful ageing.

2. Method

TV commercials featuring people aged 65 years and over are examined using media content analysis (Macnamara, 2005). Variables for the quantitative analysis derive from the concept of successful ageing, including a person's health, physical and cognitive activities, social interactions and degree of self-sufficient living. Each person's sex, age and ethnicity are also recorded. In addition to analysing frequencies, tests for association are conducted (chi-squared test, Cramér's phi).

The sample comprises commercials aired in the UK on ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5 during prime-time (6pm – 11pm) between 1 and 14 September 2020. Every commercial aired during this time is included in the analysis, resulting in a total of 6228 adverts. Duplications are not excluded, following the idea that the frequency of exposure to media content plays an important role when conveying ideas (Chen, 2015). All channels were accessed via Box of Broadcasts (BoB).

Coding was conducted by two female and two male coders, aged between 22 and 74 years. All coders were based in the UK. Their selection is intended to counteract potential cultural, sex and/or age biases during the coding process (Olsen, 2019). Training of coders took place via video conferencing and lasted between two and three hours each. All involved used IBM SPSS Version 27 for the coding process; an introduction to the programme was part of the training. After the training, coding took place independently and without consultation or guidance (Lombard, Snyder-Duch & Bracken, 2002). Reliability coefficients for inter-coder reliability were determined via percent agreement. All variables achieved satisfactory results of between .91 and 1.0.

3. Results

For the investigation period, 367 older people are recorded, predominantly comprised of older women and those aged between 65 and 74 years (table 1). The data indicate a skewed representation compared to the overall British population, with those aged 75 years and over only making up 3% of the older people encountered in the advertisements. Similarly, with almost twice as many older women featured, older men are also under-represented relative to their share of the British population (Office for National Statistics, 2020). Regarding ethnic diversity, only older white, black and south Asian people are shown.

Table 1. Frequency of older people during the investigation period

Total (N)	Sex (in %)		Age (in %)		Ethnicity (in %)		
	Female	*Male*	*65 – 74*	*75+*	*White*	*Black*	*South Asian*
367	64.6	35.4	97.0	3.0	87.2	6.3	6.5

One aspect of successful ageing is the absence of 'disease and disease-related disability' (Rowe & Kahn, 1997, 433). In 2020, UK advertisements craft narratives that predominantly feature healthy and vital older people, or at least an idea of old age without noticeable health-impairments or age-related deficits (table 2). In over 95% of appearances, the health status is depicted as positive and vital.

Table 2. Health status of older people in UK advertisements (in %)

Health status	Total	Sex		Age		Ethnicity		
		Female	*Male*	*65 – 74*	*75+*	*White*	*Black*	*South Asian*
vital	95.6	95.8	95.4	96.1	81.8	95.6	91.3	100.0
neutral	1.4	-	3.8	1.4	-	1.6	-	-
impaired	3.0	4.2	0.8	2.5	18.2	2.8	8.7	-

It is conspicuous, however, that in the rare cases where impaired health is part of a promotional narrative, women are affected more than five times as often as men (X^2 (2) = 12.451, $p < .05$, $\varphi_c = .184$). Advanced age, unsurprisingly, sees a decline in health, with people aged 75 and older more often featured with mobility issues and living, for example, with dementia. Nevertheless, even the oldest people in the sample are still largely in good health (81.8%) (X^2 (2) = 9.104, $p < .05$, $\varphi_c = .158$). Breaking the health status down according to ethnicity, older black adults feature most often with compromised health (8.7%). Although older white and South Asian adults appear healthier, findings regarding the relationship between ethnicity and health status lack statistical significance, and thus should not be overemphasised (X^2 (4) = 4.075, $p = .292$).

Closely related to the status of one's health is having 'high cognitive and physical functional capacity', which forms part of Rowe and Kahn's (1997, 433) definition of successful ageing. During the investigation period, almost half of the older people in the advertisements meet this criterion due to the activities they are undertaking (table 3).

Table 3. Activities of older people in UK advertisements (in %)

Activity	Total	Sex		Age		Ethnicity		
		Female	*Male*	*65 – 74*	*75+*	*White*	*Black*	*South Asian*
Physical	20.7	14.3	32.3	21.1	9.1	20.9	39.1	-
Cognitive	27.0	30.0	21.5	27.8	-	30.9	-	-

20.7% of older people are shown pursuing physical activities, from walking their dogs, to cycling, dancing and exercising on a treadmill. 27% of older people are engaged in activities demonstrating a high cognitive functional capacity, including playing chess, confidently using technology such as smartphones, multitasking, and being still an integral part of the workforce even beyond retirement age. However, the data indicate a gender bias, with older men significantly more often seen as physically active, and older women, in contrast, more often pursuing cognitive activities (X^2 (2) = 16.746, $p < .001$, $\varphi_c = .214$). Looking at the portrayals according to age group reveals a marked drop in both physical and cognitive activities with advancing age. Only one in ten of the over-75s pursues any physical activity, less than half compared to younger old people (aged 65 – 74); and not a single person aged 75 years or older showcases their cognitive capabilities (X^2 (2) = 7.026, $p < .05$, $\varphi_c = .138$). Also of note is that only white older adults are featured in narratives concerned with both physical and cognitive activities. Black older adults, in contrast, are only physically active (39.1%), and South Asian older adults never feature in any activity embodying successful ageing as part of the advertisements (X^2 (4) = 35.115, $p < .001$, $\varphi_c = .219$).

The final aspect considered is an 'active engagement with life' (Rowe & Kahn, 1997, 433), which is reflected in the engagement with the social environment and level of self-sufficient, independent living (Lee, Lan & Yen, 2011). Again, older people in contemporary UK advertisements seem largely to fit this ideal, with 71.7% shown interacting with others (table 4).

Table 4. Social interaction of older people in UK advertisements (in %)

Social interaction	Total	Sex		Age		Ethnicity		
		Female	*Male*	*65 – 74*	*75+*	*White*	*Black*	*South Asian*
No interaction	28.3	32.5	20.8	27.0	72.2	31.9	-	8.3
Couple	18.3	12.2	29.2	18.8	-	20.0	13.0	-
Family	34.6	34.6	34.6	35.7	-	30.0	39.1	91.7
Friend(s)	18.8	20.7	15.4	18.5	27.3	18.1	47.8	-

Both older men and women are regularly depicted engaging with a range of people. Although older women are more often seen without social interaction, they are also more often in the company of friends, demonstrating that one's social network in old age can extend beyond the family unit (X^2 (3) = 18.600, $p < .05$, φ_c = .225). Those aged 75 years and over are, once again, more homogeneous, with fewer social interactions overall and, where they do interact, it is exclusively with friends of a similar age (X^2 (3) = 14.312, $p < .05$, φ_c = .197). Considering ethnicity, it is white older adults who are most often seen without social interaction. Black and South Asian older adults are significantly more often depicted among family and friends (X^2 (6) = 56.152, $p < .001$, φ_c = .277). It must also be noted that, even in instances where older people do not interact with others, they are rarely depicted as lonely (1.1%) and in only 1.9% of instances are they shown to not live self-sufficiently.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

With the stories told in UK advertising largely neglecting older people, ageism seems still to be prevalent in 2020. Similar to previous studies (e.g., Simcock & Sudbury, 2006; Chen, 2015), the data indicate a level of under-representation of older people overall; but, specifically of older men and ethnic minorities. With only eleven instances of over-75s featuring in a total of 6228 advertisements, the oldest members of British society are severely under-represented.

When older people are featured, lasting vitality and the absence of age-related impairments appear to dominate the idea of old age. This echoes findings by Chen (2015), amongst others, and is in clear contrast to earlier decades that promoted a grimmer outlook on ageing (Carrigan & Szmigin, 1999; Whitfield, 2001). Any age-related issues presented in current advertising are those that can be successfully managed. Even those more serious problems are framed positively. In a spot for the *People's Postcode Lottery*, for example, older people are seen partaking in singing therapy, seemingly approaching dementia with a smile and socially fully engaged. An advert for online supermarket *Ocado* crafts its narrative around COVID-19, featuring older people joyfully awaiting the arrival of their food delivery during shielding—a public health directive to protect the most clinically vulnerable in the UK during the pandemic. As featured in UK advertising, old age in current Britain, so it appears, is not a period dominated by sickness, impairment, or suffering. The focus is on healthy ageing; though it might occasionally need a helping hand from a third party, not coincidentally the product or service being promoted.

This goes together with the idea of continuous physical and/or cognitive capabilities in old age observed in the advertisements. Surprisingly, however, these activities appear never to be undertaken for maintaining physical or mental fitness. Instead, all narratives underline a social dimension: for example, older people enjoying a bike ride alongside their families during a vacation (*Park Dean Resorts*), having a good time dancing with their spouse or with friends in a nightclub (*Guinness, Vanish*), connecting via technology with family (*Virgin Media*), or playing chess while having a conversation with their child (*Skipton Building Society*). A connection between physical and cognitive wellbeing and an activity is never explicitly drawn. Moreover, the gender bias observed raises concerns. Ideally, both types of activity should be perceived as achievable by either sex, as remaining both physically active and mentally fit in old age have been shown to reduce morbidity and increase one's quality of life (World Health Organization, 2002).

In all social settings, older people are always at least on a par with the people with whom they interact; this includes social interactions with children and younger adults. There are no instances where old age is infantilised via, for example, 'elderspeak'—a simplified way of speaking, resembling baby talk (Novak, 2018)—which contrasts with observations in other countries (Kautt, 2013). A high level of self-sufficient and independent living amongst older people rounds off a largely positive portrayal of old age that meets most requirements of successful ageing.

Whilst this can broadly be understood as a positive observation, one must still exercise caution. The current image

appears somewhat too optimistic, particularly in terms of older people's health status, where it bears little resemblance to the diverse realities of ageing. A one-dimensional, sanitised, positive view of old age that ignores other aspects or fails to represent older people other than those who appear healthy, active and socially engaged is a form of ageism in itself (Thimm, 2012). The oldest members of British society (75+ years) in particular, and older people from ethnicities other than white, appear to experience less nuanced and less positive portrayals in all aspects of successful ageing. While ageism overall might have decreased from previous decades, this appears to hold true only for certain sub-sections of the older population.

Considering the potential effects of media images on both care provision and outcome, this raises concerns. The idea of solid health and being still physically, cognitively and socially capable in old age should be inclusive of all parts of society. Healthcare professionals and National Health Service policy makers might want to consider actively influencing and reinforcing certain ideas of ageing within the public, specifically for those groups neglected and most affected by prevailing ageism: people aged 75 years and over, and those from a non-white ethnic background. One way of achieving this could be via a targeted communications campaign, similar, for example, to the initiatives accompanying the *Valuing Older People* programme seen in the UK in the 2000s as part of Manchester's on-going age-friendly city concept.

Another way would involve intervention on policy level. In summer 2019, the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA), UK's regulatory body for the advertising industry, introduced new regulations to decrease the amount of harmful gender stereotypes in British advertising (Advertising Standards Authority, 2018). Something similar could be conceived for age stereotypes, thus reducing harmful ideas prevailing in the public's perception. Such change in advertising codes is often triggered by collective actions and lobbying from subject experts. National Health Service trusts and professional healthcare bodies might want to initiate a dialogue with the ASA, taking a first step in facilitating a systemic change. Moreover, the NHS's Long Term Plan, which draws on the experience from front line staff such as doctors, nurses and carers of older people, should include the objective to abolish harmful old age stereotypes in the media, including advertising. In the long run, this will positively contribute to older people's quality of life and might help to spare National Healthcare Service resources by upstream prevention.

Acknowledgements

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