

Ageism and sexism in films with older people as the lead

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Abstract

Examination of ageism and sexism in films can reveal aspects of cultural norms and values. Utilizing content analysis, representations of older people who were the lead in a film were analyzed from a 20-year time frame. Forty-six characters from 28 US and UK films were evaluated employing a screening tool based on five ageism scales. Results indicated that positive stereotypes were found more often, particularly for female leads. Portrayals largely represented a model of “successful aging;” that is, active and without significant health issues. Consistent with past research, women were underrepresented, and people of color and members of the LGBTQ+ community were nearly absent, substantiating continued marginalization in film. This study also adds to the substantive literature by demonstrating that while films perpetuate the neoliberal pressure to maintain middle-age health standards, some shifts toward a more balanced portrayal of older adulthood are occurring. As many countries experience an aging of the population, pressure

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from the “silver economy” may challenge ageist presentations in film, including the double standard of aging.

Keywords: ageism, cinema, content analysis, film, intersectionality, sexism.

Introduction

Stereotypical representations of older adults in the media help perpetuate ageist cultural norms since many aging presentations are ones of failure and decline (e.g. Lemish & Muhlbauer 2012). Even though nearly 17% of the United States (US) population is over the age of 65, older people are mainly excluded from popular culture (Whelehan & Gwynne 2014) with underrepresentation across media platforms and marginalization when included (e.g. Sharry & McVittie 2016). An increase in films centered on age and aging may suggest a marked shift in interest in older people (Dolan 2018), but a critical eye might note that age-related changes are still pathologized (Chivers 2011). Therefore, older people, despite their increase in the population, will retain their minority status as they are seen as an out-group with negative associated characteristics (Chonody & Teater 2016). However, as baby boomers enter their later life stages, the “power of the grey economy” may force greater representation of older actors in film (e.g. Dolan 2018, 2020; Sharry & McVittie 2016; Whelehan & Gwynne 2014).

Similarly, women are often disempowered and/or represented in stereotypical ways in the media, including film (e.g. Sharry & McVittie 2016). Femininity and masculinity, as well as the demarcation between them, are created by gender performativities that reinforce social norms about what it means to be a woman or man (Dolan 2018). From the Marvel Universe (Olufidipe & Echezabal 2021) to Nollywood (Onyenankeya et al. 2019), women are diminished in their roles, and this marginalization intersects with age. The intersectionality between age and gender is the contemporary, 21st century frontier and battleground that stifles female empowerment – the “double bind” (Montell 2019). This dual-wield bulwark to female empowerment is nothing new, as women have historically had the impossible onus of responsibility of childcare intertwined with

subservient work in the paid labor force (e.g. Fitzpatrick 1999). Further, this intersectionality for the aging female results in the “double standard of aging” whereby women lose social value due to the importance that is placed on physical attractiveness, which is inherently associated with youth (e.g. Calasanti & Slevin 2006; Sontag 1972). For example, “agelessness” and “transcendence of age” are common advertising themes for anti-aging skin products (e.g. Ellison 2014), which dismisses the aging face in favor of ones that can overcome it. Therefore, social value can only be retained through youthfulness for the aging woman, and the maintenance of the male gaze demonstrates her success. On the other hand, studies also substantiate the way that older women are cast in a negative light by describing their bodies as repulsive (e.g. Yläne 2015). The post-menopausal female body lacks reproductive usefulness and is not viewed as sexually desirable. Hence, aging female bodies are outright dismissed or objectified to create two kinds of gendered representation.

The iterative relationship between the media and the culture at large has led to some shifts in representation in certain sectors. These changes are aimed at addressing ageism, sexism, and lack of diversity, which give pause to the dominant discourse. For example, a Dove (2024) advertisement campaign (“Real Beauty”) ran a series of printed ads aimed at body positivity and inclusivity and featured black and brown people to take a stand against distorted and narrow media images of women. Similarly, the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP 2018) produced provocative documentary-type campaigns that challenged people to examine the notion that “you look good for your age” is actually a compliment, and by asking millennials to demonstrate “what is old?” and then introducing them to older people who were not in decline (AARP 2016). Both videos directly confront antiquated ageist stereotypes and embedded ageist language.

Through critical analysis of the media, dominant cultural beliefs and associated behaviors can be revealed (Lemish & Muhlbauer 2012), and age is a useful “lens to clarify our understanding of our cultural world and its media products” (Shary & McVittie 2016, p. 7). The study of age representation in films is a relatively young discipline given the absence of older people in much of popular culture (Shary & McVittie 2016). Nevertheless, large bodies of work in this area have thoroughly examined

various aspects of age and aging in the cinema, including historically and by gender, ability, and cognition (e.g. Chivers 2011; Cohen-Shavlev 2009; deFalco 2010; Dolan 2018; Harrington et al. 2014; Medina 2018; Shary & McVittie 2016). The current study sought to add to this body of work by examining what changes in age and gender representation, if any, may be occurring in films. To do so, elements of ageism and sexism were examined in films that featured an older person as the main character and then compared at two points in a 20-year time frame.

Ageism and Sexism in the Media

Aging Portrayals

The Hollywood agenda seeks mass appeal, and as a result, older characters are not only underestimated, but are deprecated and omitted (Shary & McVittie 2016). In fact, underrepresentation of older people is consistent across media platforms, including film, and supports a youth-oriented culture that simply ignores older people (Signorielli 2004). Whether news, fiction, advertising, or feature stories, older people are less visible (Edström 2018). The exact impact of media representation is challenging to study, but the message is that those who are important and have status are the people who are featured (Vernon et al. 1990). On the other hand, when older people do appear in print or electronic formats, they are often portrayed in negative ways (e.g. death and decline) and/or marginalized within their role (e.g. Shary & McVittie 2016; Vasil & Wass 1993). On television shows, for example, they are less likely to be a leader, hold less occupational power, are less sexually active, and engage in fewer leisure activities (Lauzen et al. 2007), or they are portrayed by an idealized set of stereotypes – young-old, Caucasian, middle-class, heterosexual, and able-bodied (Markov & Yoon 2021). Some changes on television and in films may be occurring with slightly more representation, but their characterizations remain largely the same (Dolan 2018; Markov & Yoon 2021; Ng 2023). Gravagne (2012) asks the question – Do these types of films “function as a tool of oppression – exaggerating the significance of loss, papering over strengths, abilities, and talents that

someone might still be developing, blocking access to dreams that could still be realized, roles that still could be filled, and relationships that still might blossom?" (p. 71).

Films, like other media, provide a narrow and biased representation of social reality (e.g. Cohen-Shalev 2009), and Hollywood continues to placate the tastes of the dominant group – young and male (Dolan 2020). Older characters are to “fade into irrelevance, inactivity, or absurdity” (Shary & McVittie 2016, p. 3), and this was evidenced in a large study that examined portrayals from 25,000 movie scripts from 88 different countries over a 90-year period (Ng et al. 2023). The presence of keywords and the context were compiled for synonyms for “older adult” and rated on a scale from very negative (e.g. denouncing) to very positive (e.g. eminent). Overall positive representations of older adults were not found with the least negative found in East Asia and South Asia with words like “venerable” and “respectful.” The most negative representations occurred in Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa and were associated with death (Ng et al. 2023). The latter may be reflective of modernization and advances in technology that have impacted the social standing of older people in these regions leaving their skills and knowledge seen as obsolete (Manor 2019).

Similarly, in American teen movies older people were marginalized in their role and depicted stereotypically (Robinson et al. 2009), which is noteworthy given that these movies are geared toward an age group that may have little interaction with older people and thus may be more susceptible to acceptance of these negative representations. In addition, when older people are represented in negative ways, aging anxiety is increased (Whelehan & Gwynne 2014) and internalized ageism can be reinforced. In contrast, Disney films seem to take the lead in terms of both positive portrayals and representation of older people, which could help to shape aging narratives for younger audiences (Robinson et al. 2007).

Nonetheless, both positive and negative depictions of older people are likely ageist in nature given their reductionistic quality (Rozanova et al. 2006), and the “successful aging” narrative is often employed as a positive aging portrayal (Dolan 2013, 2018; Rozanova et al. 2006). Yet, some successful aging stories are overly positive and act to disempower those who cannot maintain what are often middle-aged health and wealth standards.

This model of success can be detrimental to the self-esteem of older people in that they imply “failure” when one can no longer run a marathon or maintain youthful beauty standards (Chonody & Teater 2016; Teater & Chonody 2017). Interestingly, positive portrayals of older people that are “too positive” may backfire, at least for older people. In a series of studies, Fung et al. (2015) found that exposure to a positive representation of an older person led to less negative beliefs about their own aging and greater physiological calming, but when the portrayals were too positive, downstream memory performance was lowered. These results suggest that achieving more realistic portrayals of older adulthood could contribute to a shift in thinking about this life stage.

The Intersection of Age and Sex

Media plays a clear role in producing age and perpetuating aging beliefs (Harrington et al. 2019). Films provide “a collective story about the political, economic, and social reality of growing older in a particular time and place...and perhaps most importantly, about how to think of ourselves and our changing place in society as we grow older” (Gravagne 2012, p. 5). Ageism and sexism intersect across media platforms in that older women are still underrepresented (Lemish Muhlbauer 2012), including in animated films (Robinson et al. 2007) and the amount of dialogue allotted to them in films (Anderson & Daniels 2016). When women are present, they are less likely to be in a position of authority or power and less sexual, and their bodies are offered as points for ridicule (Lemish & Muhlbauer 2012). This is true even in animation where older women were represented more negatively than men (Robinson et al. 2007). A slight amount of progress in terms of representation may be found given that a previous study indicated that 73% of characters were male across age groups (Smith et al. 2010), and a contemporary analysis found that men outnumbered women two to one (Neville & Anastasio 2019). Nonetheless, this ongoing low representation of women, especially older women, may help perpetuate their status as unimportant (Lauzen & Dozier 2005).

The idealized older woman is commonly found in the media. She is in her 60s, white, middle-class, able-bodied, and heterosexual (DeSutter & VanBauwel 2023). Given that older women will be judged by their faces, the appearance of youthfulness is necessary to reinforce cultural norms and social expectations of beauty and youth (Chonody & Teater 2016).

An aging process that has been arrested is to be celebrated (Chonody & Teater 2016) and can propel the “silvered beauty myth.” Yet, it is an illusion since the “silvered beauty” has come to mean engagement with anti-aging products and procedures, including Botox, hair dye, and plastic surgery (Dolan 2018), thus furthering the double standard that sets unrealistic social expectations for what it means to retain beauty (Braithwaite 2002; Hatch 2005; McConatha et al. 2003, 2004). As so-called beauty work pervades Hollywood, and thus film making, aging women are both invisible and hypervisible; that is, their physical appearance goes unseen, and yet, it is all that anyone notices (Twigg 2004; Woodward 1999). Exposure to television and magazines, at least in part, contributes to women’s desire for beauty work (Slevec & Tiggemann 2010), which demonstrates the relevance of the media in personal perceptions of aging.

Current Study

The current study sought to understand how older people are represented in film and differences in portrayals by gender across a 20-year timeframe when they are the main character. The research team comprised one faculty member and two graduate assistants. The research questions framing this study were:

- What age and aging stereotypes are represented in the films? Are there differences in these portrayals in the past 20 years?
- How are older characters represented in terms of their gender? Is diversity present (i.e. race/ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation)? Have these representations changed over the past 20 years?

Method

Similar to previous studies (e.g. Onyenankeya et al. 2019; Robinson et al. 2009), we sought to understand trends in representation over time to look for change; thus, we chose a 20-year period as this would provide time for cultural shifts to make their way to the screen. To identify a film list for the past 20 years, “movies with older people as the main character” was used in Google’s search engine by the primary researcher. Google was employed for the search because we wanted to capture a wide range

of films, including those from multiple production companies, streaming services (e.g. Netflix, Prime), and films that did not earn top dollar. About 42 million results were produced, and the process of reviewing websites was concluded once a saturation of titles was achieved. That is, once most of the lists were markedly the same as what had been gathered so far.

From these seven websites, which included Internet Movie Database (IMDb) and Ranker amongst others, a total of 300 films were reviewed. Inclusion criteria were: an older adult (i.e. someone who appears to be ~60 years or older) as a main character and released between 2001 and 2021. The chronological age of the actor was chosen to capture films that included people in later life stages. Exclusion criteria were: short films, animation, documentaries, films based on the lives of famous/notable people (e.g. *Capote*, *Iron Lady*), and films that were not American/English. Short films would not permit a deeper analysis, and animation is its own genre that typically appeals to a specific audience and may use stereotypes in a different way. Moreover, animation would not likely yield very many films with older main characters. Documentaries and films based on the life of a notable person, while written and meant to showcase a particular narrative, are presumably not purely fictional; thus, they may be more prone to presenting a multifaceted portrayal compared to fictional films. Lastly, films were limited to American and English films due in part to our measurement strategy, which is based in ageism scales developed largely with American samples (described further in the text), but also because these two countries share similar ageist stereotypes culturally, and films from these two countries are widely shared between them. After eliminating films that did not meet these criteria, 114 films remained.

Given the large number of movies in this 20-year period, and the study's aim of comparing representation for a 20-year period, films from the first 5 years of this time period (i.e. 2001–2006) and the last 5 years (i.e. 2016–2021) were retained for analysis ($N = 46$). Next, the list was divided amongst the research team who then examined their film list more closely to ensure that they met study criteria. The IMDb was consulted to review the written description of the film and main actors as well as who was featured on the movie cover. An additional 16 films were excluded because they were either based on a true story (e.g. *Darkest Hour*) or were films that were not American/English (e.g. *A Song for Martin*). Of the 29 remaining films, 12 were from the first timeframe, and 17 were from the latter 5 years of the timeframe.

One additional film (*Calendar Girls*) was eliminated after watching it as the main characters were not older adults plus, we learned it was based on a true story. Thus, 28 films were included in this study (see Table 1).

Table 1. Film list

	2001-2006
1	About Schmidt (2003)
2	Secondhand Lions (2003)
3	Big Fish (2003)
4	Something's Gotta Give (2003)
5	The Notebook (2004)
6	Ladies in Lavender (2004)
7	In Her Shoes (2005)
8	An Unfinished Life (2005)
9	Local Color (2006)
10	Little Miss Sunshine (2006)
11	Venus (2006)
	2016-2021
12	Youth in Oregon (2016)
13	Finding Your Feet (2017)
14	Going In Style (2017)
15	Hampstead (2017)
16	The Wife (2017)
17	The Leisure Seeker (2017)
18	Our Souls at Night (2017)
19	Book Club (2018)
20	The Mule (2018)
21	What They Had (2018)
22	The Man Who Killed Hitler and Then the Bigfoot (2018)
23	VFW (2019)
24	The Irishman (2019)
25	The Father (2020)
26	Senior Moment (2021)
27	Queen Bees (2021)
28	Swan Song (2021)

Measurement

The primary researcher developed a framework to analyze the films' content by compiling stereotypes about older people from commonly used ageism scales, which included Aging Opinion Survey (Kafer et al. 1980), the Attitudes to Ageing Questionnaire (Laidlaw et al. 2006), Kogan's Attitudes Toward Old People Scale (Kogan 1961), Relating to Older People Evaluation (Cherry & Palmore 2008), and Polizzi's Refined Version of the Aging Semantic Differential (Polizzi 2003). In addition, articles by Roy and Ayalon (2020) and Lynott and Merola (2007) were utilized due to the nature of their work which was similar to this study's goals. Any item that held potential for observation in a film (e.g. respected) was included, and any item that would not likely be manifest (e.g. "I find it more difficult to talk about my feelings as I get older;" Laidlaw et al. 2006, p. 378) was left out. A few categories were combined due to the similar nature of their meaning (i.e. inflexible and uncooperative), and some were eliminated due to the difficulty of accurately differentiating between each of them. For example, agreeable, friendly, sweet, nice, and kind were found in various ageism scales, but the researchers were challenged to create clear demarcations between each of these. Thus, kind was retained and was coupled with empathetic. Friendly was also kept to denote those that were outgoing with others and easy to get along with.

Common developmental themes that may be associated with older adulthood, and thus the subject of the movie plot, were tracked for each character. These movie themes were: retirement, widowhood, death/dying, disease/health, and loneliness. Sociodemographic information for each main character was also recorded. Ageist content was documented for the film, which included telling jokes about age, characters who were told that they were too old for something, and/or being called "young lady/man." The amount of content throughout the film determined the rating for the film utilizing a one to three scale (1 = *a little* (i.e. one or two ageist jokes or comments); 2 = *moderate* (three or four); 3 = *mostly present* (five or more)). The objectification of women or sexist language was also noted.

To determine consistency in our use of the framework, four films (two from each time period) were randomly selected for review by the

research team. The first film (*About Schmidt*) was watched and analyzed, and then the team met to discuss our findings. Only minor variations in ratings were found, which were discussed, and further clarifications were made (e.g. What exactly is meant by a “senior moment?”). Next, *Queen Bees* was analyzed, and again, the findings were discussed with limited variability. The process was repeated for the final two films (*Venus; The Wife*). Next, each researcher was randomly assigned seven films to watch and analyze independently. Once all the analyses were completed, the team met to talk through the results. During this meeting, some inconsistencies were found in our interpretations. Further clarification of our criteria occurred, and the category of “physical features” was eliminated as we could not agree if someone “looked younger than their age” (e.g. Joan played by Glen Close in *The Wife*) nor could we have complete agreement if someone had wrinkles/gray hair (e.g. sometimes older women’s hair is an indistinct blonde-ish color; e.g., Sharon played by Candace Bergen in *Bookclub*).

Next, the primary researcher selected one film from the other two researcher’s list to watch and check on the usage of our tracking system. From there, a thematic grouping system was created whereby similar terms were paired. These groupings were dichotomized as negative or positive employing the context of the original ageism scales (e.g. Polizzi’s Refined Version of the Aging Semantic Differential, Polizzi 2003). For example, the category “Aging Loss” was defined as any of the following: can’t hear, don’t like the way they look, slow/tired, weak/clumsy, not active, or frail. If the character had any of these, then this was indicated as present in the film, and the character was rated on the degree to which they embodied those characteristics (1 = *a little*; 2 = *moderate*; 3 = *mostly present*). The scale rating was determined by the number of characteristics from that thematic grouping that was present, and the degree it was featured in the film. For example, “positive outlook on life/aging” included: privilege to grow old, cooperative with others, flexible in new situations, and optimistic/looks toward the future in a positive way. A “3” indicated that the character embodied all or nearly all these traits for the majority of the film. A “2” indicated that the character had some of these characteristics or changed over time to embody them. A “1” was indicative of one trait.

Some characteristics, both positive and negative, did not readily fit in a particular category; thus, a “general positive stereotypes” (e.g. modern, fit) and “general negative stereotypes” (e.g. cheap, decreased social status) were created. Each of these categories included a list of characteristics, which were marked for their presence but were not rated. In Appendix 1, the thematic grouping system can be found. The team went back to two of the original movies and completed the character groupings. In a final meeting, we discussed our findings and adjusted our tracking sheets based on group feedback and consensus. We then each watched one more film from someone else’s list to check our agreement on the numbering system (i.e. the 1–3 rating system).

Analysis

Content analysis was used to examine the presence of ageist and sexist depictions in the films. The primary unit of analysis for comparison was the presence of negative/positive stereotypes by time period, gender, and finally by gender and time. Following previous studies (e.g. Robinson et al. 2007) and given that hypotheses testing was not the goal, frequencies were examined to look for trends over time. The ratings for the amount of negative/positive stereotypical content (i.e. the rating scale) were averaged across timeframes and for gender to provide additional detail, but it was not used for analyses purposes. Similarly, developmental milestones were tracked to compile a summary of story arcs but not analyzed further.

The research team’s tracking sheets were then combined for all the movies by the primary researcher. Frequencies for the different types of stereotypes represented in the films and the developmental milestones were calculated. Averages were also created for any numerical data. Then, the two time periods were compared to one another to determine if representation of older people may be shifting. Lastly, gender representations in older adulthood were examined for all the films and by year. Ethical review was not required for this study.

Results

A total of 46 characters were coded for the 28 films included in this analysis. Twelve films contained ageist content (42.9%), but it was moderate as

indicated by the mean (1.58). When reviewing the frequencies for aging stereotypes, results indicated that positive representations predominated. Almost 90% of the characters were not a burden on others/contributed to society, and 76% had a positive attitude with others. The highest frequency for negative stereotypes was nostalgia (53%) followed by rigidity toward aging/life (46%). In only four films, the older person was not encountering a prototypical developmental milestone (e.g. widowhood). In other words, it was just a film with older people in it. The other 24 films included one or more developmental milestones, predominantly loneliness (41%) followed by widowhood (26%) and death/dying (15%). In terms of representation by gender, women were only about a third of the characters. Men were shown as a lone character 43% of the time compared to only 11% for women. In terms of multiple main characters, women were shown with other women in 7.1% of the films, men in 17.9%. Six films featured both male and female characters (21.4%). Nearly all the characters were heterosexual (98%) and white (94%), and the majority were middle/upper class (70%). Most films were American with American actors (or English actors with American accents). Most characters lived either in an apartment or home (72%) and 40% lived alone. Table 2 contains the full results.

When comparing the two time periods, not many changes in the frequencies for stereotypes were found. "Burdensomeness" was twice as common in current films, while a "negative attitude toward others" decreased by half. General negative stereotypes, while not frequently present in the 2001–2006 films, were nearly absent in the more recent time period. Interestingly, some positive stereotypes were also dropped from the earlier time frame. That is, "elder of the community" and "positive attitude toward others" was less frequent in the 2016–2021 films (88% vs. 57%). A comparison of overall ageist content revealed a slight increase in that 36.4% of the 2001–2006 films contained some degree of ageism compared to 47.1% in the 2016–2021 films. The average amount of overall ageist content was 1.5 for the earlier period and 1.75 for the later time frame. Gender, race, and sexual orientation were nearly unchanged across this 20-year timeframe; however, characters' socioeconomic status decreased with 81% in the middle/upper class in the earlier time period compared to 63% in the more recent films. Table 3 provides the full results for the comparison between time periods.

Table 2. Thematic analysis for all movies ($N = 28$, with 46 characters)

Characteristic	n (f)	M
<i>Gender</i>		
Female	15 (32.6%)	--
Male	31 (67.3%)	--
<i>Sexual Orientation</i>		
Gay/lesbian	1 (2.2%)	--
Heterosexual	45 (97.8%)	--
<i>Race</i>		
Asian	0 (0%)	--
African American	3 (6.5%)	--
Caucasian	43 (93.5%)	--
<i>Actor's Nationality (or accent)</i>		
English	9 (19.6%)	--
American	34 (73.9%)	--
Other	3 (6.5%)	--
<i>Film's Nationality</i>		
English	5 (17.9%)	--
American	23 (82.1%)	--
<i>Character's Relationship Status</i>		
Married	8 (17.4%)	--
Divorced	4 (8.7%)	--
Widowed	8 (17.4%)	--
Never married	3 (6.5%)	--
Unclear	8 (17.4%)	--
Transitioned in the movie (e.g. widowed to married)	15 (32.6%)	--
<i>Type of Housing</i>		
Home/apartment	31 (67.4%)	--
Facility	4 (8.7%)	--
Unclear	5 (10.9%)	--
Transitioned in the movie (e.g. home to facility)	6 (13.0%)	--

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued)

Characteristic	<i>n</i> (<i>f</i>)	<i>M</i>
<i>Living Arrangements</i>		
Partner/spouse	5 (10.9%)	--
Alone	17 (37.0%)	--
Child	2 (4.3%)	--
Sibling	4 (8.7%)	--
Facility	2 (4.3%)	--
Friend	2 (4.3%)	--
Unclear/unstated	4 (8.7%)	--
Transitioned in the movie (e.g. partner to alone)	10 (21.7%)	--
<i>Negative Stereotypes</i>		
Aging loss	15 (32.6%)	1.47
Nostalgic	25 (53.3%)	2.08
Isolation	13 (28.3%)	1.85
Learning & memory	10 (21.7%)	1.60
Death & dying	11 (23.9%)	1.55
Burdensome	10 (21.7%)	1.20
Rigidity toward aging/life	21 (45.7%)	1.95
Untidy	2 (4.4%)	2.00
Negative attitude toward others	9 (19.6%)	1.22
Passivity	0 (0%)	--
<i>General Negative Stereotypes^a</i>		
Pries into other people's business	1 (2.2%)	--
Decreased social status	4 (8.7%)	--
Behaves oddly/eccentrically	5 (10.9%)	--
Cheap	2 (4.4%)	--
Suspicious/paranoid	2 (4.4%)	--
Conservative	0 (0%)	--
Excessive demands for love/reassurance	0 (0%)	--

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued)

Characteristic	<i>n</i> (<i>f</i>)	<i>M</i>
<i>Positive Stereotypes</i>		
Positive outlook on life/aging	28 (60.9%)	2.79
Elder of community	31 (67.4%)	2.10
Contributes (not a burden)	41 (89.1%)	1.93
Positive attitude with others	35 (76.1%)	2.34
<i>General Positive Stereotypes^a</i>		
Interested in love	19 (41.3%)	--
Ordinary (not eccentric)	26 (56.5%)	--
Modern	12 (26.1%)	--
Fit	18 (39.1%)	--
Reflective	26 (56.5%)	--
Middle/upper class	32 (69.6%)	--
<i>Primary Movie Themes^a</i>		
Retirement	9 (19.6%)	--
Widowhood	12 (26.1%)	--
Death/dying	7 (15.2%)	--
Disease (health)	8 (17.4%)	--
Cognitive decline	5 (10.9%)	--
Loneliness	19 (41.3%)	--

^aTotals are greater than the number of characters tracked given that some characters had multiple themes as part of the story arc.

In terms of gender representation, six films relied on mostly stereotypical depictions of older men and women, and five movies also incorporated the objectification of women or sexist language (e.g. remarks, behavior). Four of these latter films overlapped with the group of films with ageist content (exception: *Venus*). Men made up 67% of all the characters, and down the line of characteristics, men demonstrated higher frequencies for negative stereotypes. For example, "nostalgia," "rigidity toward aging/life," and a "negative attitude toward others" were largely seen in male characters. Moreover, all the general negative stereotypes (e.g. cheap, suspicious) were male characteristics except one (i.e. pries into

Table 3. Analysis by year

Characteristic	2001–2006 (films = 11; characters = 16)	2016–2021 (films = 17, characters = 30)
<i>Gender</i>	<i>n (f)</i>	<i>n (f)</i>
Female	5 (31.3%)	10 (33.3%)
Male	11 (68.8%)	20 (66.7%)
<i>Sexual Orientation</i>	<i>n (f)</i>	<i>n (f)</i>
Gay/lesbian	0 (0%)	1 (3.3%)
Heterosexual	16 (100%)	29 (96.7%)
<i>Race</i>	<i>n (f)</i>	<i>n (f)</i>
African American	1 (6.3%)	2 (6.7%)
Caucasian	15 (93.7%)	28 (93.3%)
<i>Negative Stereotypes</i>	<i>n (f) M</i>	<i>n (f) M</i>
Aging loss	6 (37.5%) 1.33	9 (30.0%) 1.56
Nostalgic	8 (50%) 2.25	17 (56.7%) 2.00
Isolation	6 (37.5%) 2.17	7 (23.3%) 1.57
Learning & memory	3 (18.8%) 2.33	7 (23.3%) 1.29
Death & dying	5 (31.3%) 1.80	6 (20.0%) 1.33
Burdensome	2 (12.5%) 2.0	8 (26.7%) 1.00
Rigidity toward aging/life	7 (43.8%) 2.14	14 (46.7%) 1.86
Untidy	2 (12.5%) 2.00	0 (0%)
Negative attitude toward others	5 (31.3%) 1.20	4 (13.3%) 1.25
<i>General Negative Stereotypes^a</i>	<i>n (f)</i>	<i>n (f)</i>
Pries into other people's business	0 (0%)	1 (3.3%)
Decreased social status	1 (6.3%)	3 (10.0%)
Behaves oddly/eccentrically	3 (18.8%)	2 (6.7%)
Cheap	2 (12.5%)	0 (0%)
Suspicious/paranoid	2 (12.5%)	0 (0%)
<i>Positive Stereotypes</i>	<i>n (f) M</i>	<i>n (f) M</i>
Positive outlook on life/aging	19 (62.5%) 2.30	18 (60.0%) 1.94
Elder of community	14 (87.5%) 2.21	17 (56.7%) 2.00
Contributes (not a burden)	14 (87.5%) 1.93	27 (90.0%) 1.93
Positive attitude with others	15 (93.8%) 2.33	20 (66.7%) 2.35

(Continued)

Table 3. (Continued)

Characteristic	2001–2006 (films = 11; characters = 16)	2016–2021 (films = 17, characters = 30)
<i>General Positive Stereotypes^a</i>	<i>n (f)</i>	<i>n (f)</i>
Interested in love	6 (37.5%)	13 (43.3%)
Ordinary (not eccentric)	8 (50.0%)	18 (60.0%)
Modern	4 (25.0%)	8 (26.7%)
Fit	5 (31.3%)	13 (43.3%)
Reflective	10 (62.5%)	16 (53.3%)
Middle/upper class	13 (81.3%)	19 (63.3%)
<i>Primary Movie Themes^a</i>	<i>n (f)</i>	<i>n (f)</i>
Retirement	5 (31.3%)	4 (13.3%)
Widowhood	3 (18.8%)	9 (30.0%)
Death/dying	4 (25.0%)	3 (10.0%)
Disease (health)	6 (37.5%)	2 (6.7%)
Cognitive decline	0 (0%)	5 (16.7%)
Loneliness	8 (50.0%)	11 (36.7%)

^aTotals are greater than the number of characters tracked given that some characters had multiple themes as part of the character story.

other's business). For the positive stereotypes, only one was more frequent for women – “positive attitude on life/aging” at 73% (55% for men). The general positive stereotypes, on the other hand, were more frequent for women, including: “interested in love” (67% vs. 29%), “not eccentric” (87% vs. 42%), and “modern” (53% vs. 13%). Table 4 contains these results. For gendered stereotypical depictions of women, 47% were worried about their looks; 13% were warm; and 27% were bitter or complaining. For stereotypical representations of men, nearly half were portrayed as “grumpy old men,” and 32% were portrayed as a “dirty old man.” Only around 10% were presented as powerful; however, 55% of men played a character that could be seen as “a man's man” (see Table 5 for the results).

The results of how gender was represented according to when the film was released indicated that women encompassed more frequent displays of negative stereotypes in current films when compared to the early timeframe. “Rigidity” went from 0% in the 2001–2006 films to 30%

Table 4. Analysis by gender for all films

Characteristic	Female characters (films = 10) ^a	Male characters (films = 23) ^a
<i>Gender</i>	<i>n (f)</i>	<i>n (f)</i>
Female	15 (32.6%)	--
Male	--	31 (67.3%)
<i>Sexual Orientation</i>	<i>n (f)</i>	<i>n (f)</i>
Gay/lesbian	0 (0%)	1 (3.2%)
Heterosexual	15 (100%)	30 (96.8%)
<i>Race</i>	<i>n (f)</i>	<i>n (f)</i>
African American	0 (0%)	3 (9.7%)
Caucasian	15 (100%)	28 (90.3%)
<i>Negative Stereotypes</i>	<i>n (f) M</i>	<i>n (f) M</i>
Aging loss	2 (13%) 1.00	13 (41.9%) 1.54
Nostalgic	4 (26.7%) 1.25	21 (67.7%) 2.24
Isolation	2 (13.3%) 2.00	11 (35.5%) 1.82
Learning & memory	2 (13.3%) 2.00	7 (22.6%) 1.29
Death & dying	2 (13.3%) 1.00	9 (29.0%) 1.67
Burdensome	2 (13.3%) 1.00	8 (25.8%) 1.25
Rigidity toward aging/life	3 (20%) 1.67	18 (58.1%) 2.00
Untidy	0 (0%)	2 (6.5%) 2.0
Negative attitude toward others	1 (6.7%) 1.00	8 (25.8%) 1.20
<i>General Negative Stereotypes^b</i>	<i>n (f)</i>	<i>n (f)</i>
Pries into other people's business	1 (6.7%)	0 (0%)
Decreased social status	0 (0%)	4 (12.9%)
Behaves oddly/eccentrically	0 (0%)	5 (16.1%)
Cheap	0 (0%)	2 (6.5%)
Suspicious/paranoid	0 (0%)	2 (6.5%)
<i>Positive Stereotypes</i>	<i>n (f) M</i>	<i>n (f) M</i>
Positive outlook on life/aging	11 (73.3%) 2.45	17 (54.8%) 1.82
Elder of community	10 (66.7%) 2.10	21 (67.7%) 2.10
Contributes (not a burden)	13 (86.7%) 2.00	28 (90.3%) 2.68
Positive attitude with others	11 (73.3%) 2.91	24 (77.4%) 2.08

(Continued)

Table 4. (Continued)

Characteristic	Female characters (films = 10) ^a	Male characters (films = 23) ^a
<i>General Positive Stereotypes^b</i>	<i>n (f)</i>	<i>n (f)</i>
Interested in love	10 (66.7%)	9 (29.0%)
Ordinary (not eccentric)	13 (86.7%)	13 (41.9%)
Modern	8 (53.3%)	4 (12.9%)
Fit	8 (53.3%)	10 (32.3%)
Reflective	9 (60.0%)	17 (54.8%)
Middle/upper class	15 (100%)	17 (54.8%)
<i>Primary Movie Themes^b</i>	<i>n (f)</i>	<i>n (f)</i>
Retirement	1 (6.7%)	8 (25.8%)
Widowhood	5 (33.3%)	7 (22.6%)
Death/dying	1 (10.0%)	7 (22.6%)
Disease (health)	2 (13.3%)	6 (19.4%)
Cognitive decline	1 (6.7%)	4 (12.9%)
Loneliness	10 (66.7%)	9 (29.0%)

^aTotals are greater than the number of films watched as some films had multiple older main characters.

^bTotals are greater than the number of characters tracked given that some characters had multiple themes as part of the story arc.

for the 2016–2021 films. Similarly, “nostalgia” rose from 0% to 40%. For men, less frequent negative stereotypes were found in some areas. “Isolation” decreased (55% vs. 25%) as did “negative attitudes toward others” (46% vs. 15%). On the other hand, “burdensomeness” increased from 18% to 30%, and other negative stereotypes remained more consistent and more frequent for males (e.g. “aging loss,” “learning and memory”). For women, positive stereotypes remained relatively unchanged, except “elder in the community,” which decreased (80% to 60%); however, this also decreased for men (91% vs. 55%) as did “positive attitude toward others” (100% vs. 65%) and “being reflective” (73% vs. 45%). Men did show an increase in being seen as “fit” (18% vs. 40%). Regardless of the timeframe, all the women were presented as middle class or above, but for men, this decreased from 72% to 45%. All the women were white and heterosexual

Table 5. Gendered, ageist stereotypes: all movies

Female stereotypes ^b	Female characters ($n = 16$) ^a (films = 10) n (f)	Male stereotypes ^b	Male characters ($n = 31$) ^a (films = 23) n (f)
Sexless/not interested in sex	0 (0%)	Dirty old man	10 (32.3%)
Harsh	0 (0%)	Powerful	3 (9.7%)
Worried about looks	7 (46.7%)	Gray fox/sexy	1 (3.2%)
Warm	2 (13.3%)	Grumpy old man	15 (48.4%)
Bitter	1 (6.7%)	Man's man	17 (54.8%)
Complaining	3 (20.0%)		
Wicked old witch	0 (0%)		

^aTotals are greater than the number of films watched as some films had multiple older main characters.

^bTotals do not reflect singular characters as some characters represented multiple stereotypes.

across time periods. For men, racial representation did not markedly change from one time frame to the next (only 6% were people of color), but one of the recent films featured a main character who was a gay man (*Swan Song*, Pat played by Udo Kier). Table 6 provides these results in full.

Discussion

Results of this content analysis provide insight into how older people are represented and what changes have occurred over time utilizing established stereotypes. Our findings are similar to those of Markov and Yoon's (2021) analysis of television shows with regards to low representation of characters who are LGBTQ+ and/or people of color in that nearly all of our film characters were heterosexual and white. This is reflective of both the "whitening of old age that is a byproduct of the silvering of the screen" (Dolan 2018, p. 22) as well as the maintenance of heteronormative cultural values. However, our results included more characters who were not middle/upper class than previous studies

Table 6. Analysis by year and gender

Characteristic	Total 2001–2006 films (<i>n</i> = 4)	Total 2016–2021 films (<i>n</i> = 6)	Total films 2001– 2006 (<i>n</i> = 9)	Total 2016–2021 films (<i>n</i> = 14)
<i>Gender</i>	<i>n</i> (<i>f</i>)	<i>n</i> (<i>f</i>)	<i>n</i> (<i>f</i>)	<i>n</i> (<i>f</i>)
Female	5 (31.3%)	10 (33.3%)	--	--
Male	--	--	11 (68.7%)	20 (66.7%)
<i>Negative Stereotypes</i>	<i>n</i> (<i>f</i>) M	<i>n</i> (<i>f</i>) M	<i>n</i> (<i>f</i>) M	<i>n</i> (<i>f</i>) M
Aging loss	1 (20.0%) 1.00	1 (10.0%) 1.00	5 (45.5%) 1.4	8 (40.0%) 1.63
Nostalgic	0 (0%)	4 (40.0%) 1.25	8 (72.7%) 2.25	13 (65.0%) 2.31
Isolation	0 (0%)	2 (20.0%) 2.00	6 (54.5%) 2.17	5 (25.0%) 1.40
Learning & memory	1 (20.0%) 3.00	1 (10.0%) 1.00	2 (18.2%) 2.00	5 (25.0%) 1.60
Death & dying	0 (0%)	2 (10.0%) 2.00	5 (45.5%) 1.80	4 (20.0%) 1.50
Burdensome	0 (0%)	2 (20.0%) 1.00	2 (18.2%) 2.00	6 (30.0%) 1.00
Rigidity toward aging/life	0 (0%)	3 (30.0%) 1.25	7 (63.6%) 2.14	11 (55.0%) 1.91
Untidy	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (18.2%) 2.00	0 (0%)
Negative attitude toward others	0 (0%)	1 (10.0%) 1.00	5 (45.5%) 1.20	3 (15.0%) 1.33
<i>General Negative Stereotypes^a</i>	<i>n</i> (<i>f</i>)	<i>n</i> (<i>f</i>)	<i>n</i> (<i>f</i>)	<i>n</i> (<i>f</i>)
Pries into other people's business	0 (0%)	1 (10.0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Decreased social status	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (9.1%)	3 (15.0%)
Behaves oddly/eccentrically	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3 (27.3%)	2 (10.0%)
Cheap	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (18.2%)	0 (0%)
Suspicious/paranoid	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (18.2%)	0 (0%)

(Continued)

Table 6. (Continued)

Characteristic	Total 2001–2006 films (<i>n</i> = 4)	Total 2016–2021 films (<i>n</i> = 6)	Total films 2001– 2006 (<i>n</i> = 9)	Total 2016–2021 films (<i>n</i> = 14)
<i>Positive Stereotypes</i>	<i>n</i> (<i>f</i>) <i>M</i>	<i>n</i> (<i>f</i>) <i>M</i>	<i>n</i> (<i>f</i>) <i>M</i>	<i>n</i> (<i>f</i>) <i>M</i>
Positive outlook on life/ aging	4 (80.0%) 2.75	7 (70.0%) 1.6	6 (54.5%) 2.00	11 (55.0%) 1.73
Elder of community	4 (80.0%) 2.50	6 (60.0%) 1.83	10 (91.0%) 2.10	11 (55.05%) 2.09
Contributes (not a burden)	4 (80.0%) 2.25	9 (90.0%) 1.89	10 (91.0%) 1.8	18 (90.0%) 1.94
Positive attitude with others	4 (80.0%) 3.0	7 (70.0%) 2.86	11 (100%) 2.09	13 (65.0%) 2.08
<i>General Positive Stereotypes^a</i>	<i>n</i> (<i>f</i>)	<i>n</i> (<i>f</i>)	<i>n</i> (<i>f</i>)	<i>n</i> (<i>f</i>)
Interested in love	3 (60.0%)	7 (70%)	3 (27.3%)	6 (30.0%)
Ordinary (not eccentric)	4 (80.0%)	9 (90.0%)	4 (36.4%)	9 (45.0%)
Modern	2 (40.0%)	6 (60.0%)	2 (18.2%)	2 (10.0%)
Fit	3 (60.0%)	5 (50.0%)	2 (18.2%)	8 (40.0%)
Reflective	2 (40.0%)	7 (70.0%)	8 (72.7%)	9 (45.0%)
Middle/ upper class	5 (100%)	10 (100%)	8 (72.7%)	9 (45.0%)
<i>Primary Movie Themes^a</i>	<i>n</i> (<i>f</i>)	<i>n</i> (<i>f</i>)	<i>n</i> (<i>f</i>)	<i>n</i> (<i>f</i>)
Retirement	0 (0%)	1 (10.0%)	5 (45.5%)	3 (15.0%)
Widowhood	1 (20.0%)	4 (40.0%)	2 (18.2%)	5 (25.0%)
Death/ dying	1 (20.0%)	0 (0%)	4 (36.4%)	3 (15.0%)
Disease (health)	1 (20.0%)	1 (10.0%)	5 (45.5%)	1 (5.0%)
Cognitive decline	0 (0%)	1 (10.0%)	0 (0%)	4 (45.0%)
Loneliness	3 (60.0%)	7 (70.0%)	5 (45.5%)	4 (45.0%)

^aTotals are greater than the number of characters tracked given that some characters had multiple themes as part of the story arc.

(e.g. DeSutter & VanBauwel 2023; Markov & Yoon 2021), but only men were presented in this lower socioeconomic status.

Men were featured more often (e.g. Neville & Anastasio 2019; Smith et al. 2010) with only one third of the characters being women. In addition, women were also less likely to be the solo lead and were not often presented in powerful professional positions as found in other studies (Lauzen et al. 2007). Nearly all the films presented characters in a positive stereotypical light with very little negative ageist content (e.g. Robinson et al. 2007). Interestingly, men were featured in more negative stereotypical ways, which decreased from the first time period to the second, but for women, negative stereotyping increased. These findings point to the intersectionality between age and gender and how aging expectations are showcased in film (e.g. grumpy men, bitter women).

Furthermore, our findings are consistent with the successful aging model found in other analyses (e.g. Markov & Yoon 2021) in that older people were often presented as active (socially and physically) and without health concerns. A neoliberal pressure to maintain the body to “successfully” age is not only a marketing scheme, but it is also as equally disadvantageous as the death and dying narrative (Bañón & Zecchi 2020). Homogeneous depictions of aging influence fail to encapsulate the heterogeneous experience of age as well as influence how value is assigned to age (Chivers 2021). Balanced portrayals of older people can provide a counter narrative that can demonstrate the richness of aging, and perhaps some change is on the horizon. For example, in *Our Souls at Night*, while Addie (played by Jane Fonda) and Louis (played by Robert Redford) do match the successful aging model – physically fit, socially active, and without disease/decline – they are implementing unique strategies to tackle challenges that can accompany aging (i.e. widowhood and loneliness), showcasing that older adulthood includes surprises and new experiences. Similarly, *The Wife* has a narrative arc that does not rely on tropes about older people; rather, the viewer is watching the secrets of a long marriage come to light and revealing a historical context that suppressed women’s success. Nonetheless, both Joan (played by Glen Close) and Joe (played by Jonathan Pryce) are white with access to wealth, privilege, and power. Given that positive portrayals of aging can be beneficial to older people regarding their own aging (Fung et al. 2015), and perhaps these more nuanced characterizations also provide the same benefits while they center new aging narratives for other viewers.

Future research should seek to test how younger audiences react to positive portrayals of aging and older people. For example, would these representations similarly help younger people to develop a more positive outlook on their aging or even aging in general? If so, this could be a useful tool in educational settings to explore the meaning of age and aging, and in turn, address ageist beliefs.

In Cohen-Shalev's (2009) introduction to "Visions of Aging: Images of the elderly in film," he writes, "there is a glaring paucity of believable, committed, and altogether worthwhile cinematic realization of old age" (p.1). Much like any other nondominant group, the film industry will continue to produce movies that rely on anachronistic and reductionistic characters built on stereotypes because an audience presumably exists for them. However, what was once "mass appeal" may be shifting as increased access to movies is occurring through streaming applications that not only produce their own content but also host Hollywood films (Shary & McVittie 2016). Additionally, market pressure may help tip this balance. Representing older people in positive ways (but maybe not too positive) may mirror the fact that Baby Boomers are a sizable part of the population with reflective power and economic freedoms (Hatch 2005; Lemish & Muhlbauer 2012). Hence, films will need to be marketed to them in ways that will compel them to watch it, and this will likely mean more movies with older main characters. This silvering of the film industry calls into question our collective ideas about what it means to be older and how adherence to chronological age as a marker of old age is a fallacy (Dolan 2018). These narratives prevent us from seeing that "old age, just like any age, is filled with contradictions, ambiguities, and individual difference that should be nurtured and allowed full expression" (Gravagne 2012, p. 73). Future research should seek to replicate this study looking at films with older people as supporting characters to determine if positive portrayals are being propelled, at least in part, due to the age group in which the film is being marketed given that Robinson et. al (2009) found that teen movies did in fact rely on negative stereotyping 60% of the time.

Women and Men in Film: Ageism and Sexism

Ageism and sexism intersected in our films in that greater reliance on ageist jokes also had more sexist content. Previous research suggests

that ageism and sexism are positively correlated (e.g. Chonody 2016), and perhaps films with more ageist content are meant to appeal to those who also hold sexist beliefs. For example, in *VFW*, the entire film centers around four veterans who need to fight off a horde of drug-addled, zombie-like people to make it to a strip club. The film was riddled with ageist jokes and sexist comments consistent with the “man’s man” type. Sexism and the objectification of women is also found in the “dirty old man” portrayal whereby May–December relationships are normalized for older men (Dolan 2020). Maurice (played by Peter O’Toole in *Venus*) is the quintessential example of a “dirty old man” as the 74-year-old (age at release) chases the 24-year-old Jessie (played by Jodie Whitaker) like a horny teenager. For aging men, younger women reinforce their desirability, and their age becomes irrelevant to their sexual needs (Bañón & Zecchi 2020).

In fact, many of the films had “man’s man” type characters, and quite a few also had “dirty old man” features – aspects of masculinity that suggest virility and vitality have been maintained. In one of our films, Earl (played by Clint Eastwood in *The Mule*) is the prototypical “man’s man” – a 90-year-old veteran turned drug mule. Chivers’ (2011) analysis of Clint Eastwood roles, which is applicable here, indicated that he is the representation of white patriarchy – he both bucks the system by creating his own rules, but he also relies on his privilege and status to do so. This “demonstrates that he has aged with [his] masculinity fully intact,” which provides a reinforcement of a certain imaging of late-life masculinity (Chivers 2011, p. 101). Given that “normative masculinity... [is] embodied by middle-aged and younger men” (Thompson 2004, p. 1), showcasing older men who defy their age is not dissimilar to the depiction of women who have “transcended” their age. Privilege is invisible for the “man’s man” portrayal of masculinity “against the visibility of physical aging,” but his masculinity is presented as “exaggerated and compensatory” (Chivers 2011, p. 99). The film industry is responsive to trends, and the reliance on recognizable narratives is part of the business of making money; thus, the older man who is longing for his “macho past” sells (Whelehan & Gwynne 2014, p. 2). These portrayals therefore reflect aging fears related to physical prowess (Chivers 2011), and how old age is presented differently according to gender (e.g. Dolan 2018).

When deconstructing the representation of older women in film, the viewer is forced to wrestle with the question of what is the aging body and what social meaning does it have? For women who are postmenopausal, the loss of reproductive capacity puts her sexual attraction into question (Whelehan & Gwynne 2014) as her body is devalued and she becomes socially invisible (Gravagene 2012) and her social value is lost (e.g. Calasanti & Slevin 2006). A shift in the representation of sex and sexuality has been seen in the culture with the formerly asexual older woman being replaced with the “sexy-oldie” (Vares 2009). The quintessential female is the actress who has “defied” aging and is an “exemplar and embodiment of a feminized regime of successful aging” (Dolan 2020, p. 6). In our analysis, this representation was found in Vivian (played by Jane Fonda) in *Book Club* where the character represents a more traditional masculine role of lifelong “Lothario,” and while older, she does not appear so. Men have enjoyed greater latitude to occupy this space of the “gray fox,” which has long been part of the cultural lexicon. For example, Harry (played by Jack Nicholson) is a committed bachelor known for only seeking sexual relationships with young women in *Something's Gotta Give*. Due to his power and wealth, Jack is sexy even though he is not age transcendent.

While the “sexy oldie” may change some narratives, this imagery will also run the risk of reinforcing long-held beliefs that support gendered ageism. That is, the “sexy oldie” will likely be worried about her looks and maintenance of the male gaze. While all our female characters might not be categorized in this way, nearly half were worried about their looks, which has also been found in previous studies as well (e.g. Bañón & Zecchi 2020). Age denial and age shaming are the natural consequences for women when looking young is the only way to successfully age. In turn, this shapes the way that the aging process is perceived. It is something to be stopped or reversed (Tortajada et al. 2018), which, in turn, creates fear and anxiety at the possibility of “failure” (Chonody & Teater 2016). Accordingly, the mature aged female body is only useful in the media if it can stand as proof of an aging process that has been thwarted. Dolan (2018) suggests that the increased visibility of older female actors “is earned by their adherence to capitalist and patriarchal imperatives of female body management” (p. 121). If this standard cannot be met, then they are kept away from the “public eye as they are considered to be *abject* bodies that do not fit the model of successful aging” (emphasis in original;

Tortajada et al. 2018, p. 2). The youth-obsessed culture in concert with neoliberal consumerist ethos creates the performance of aging for women whereby “patriarchal strategies shift powerful women into heteronormative frameworks” (Tortajada et al. 2018, p. 2) and reinforces the unrealistic social standards for women’s physical appearance (Braithwaite 2002; Hatch 2005).

Conceivably as a greater number of female directors and producers enter film making, increased diversity of representation will follow. In 2019, only 20% of writers, producers, editors and cinematographers working on top grossing films were women (Lauzen 2019). Just a few years later, it appears that some ground has been laid with films such as *Barbie* (co-written and directed by Greta Gerwig, Margot Robbie as a producer), which was the highest producing film of 2023 (Rubin 2024), and *Anatomy of Fall* (co-written and directed by Justine Triet). Some evidence suggests that the media is becoming “more inclusive of older women and more permissive regarding a greater variety or representation of older women” (Lemish & Muhlbauer 2012, p. 176). Nonetheless, this opening of the strict boundaries for how older women are portrayed only really applies to those who are white, privileged, and heterosexual. For women of color as well as queer women, their invisibility remains (Lemish & Muhlbauer 2012), replicating the way in which intersectional identities are hidden or overlooked on a social level, including in feminist movements (e.g. Borah et al. 2023; Gieseler 2019; Hooks 2014; Jonsson 2014, 2016; Lépinard, E. 2019; Valdes 1995). Moya Bailey coined the term “misogynoir” to reflect the intersection of misogyny and anti-Black racism, which also materializes in how Black women are represented in mainstream media (Bailey & Trudy 2018). Research confirms the underrepresentation of Black women in film. For 2022 theatrical releases, only four leads (of 88) were Black women (UCLA 2024), and in the top 100-domestic grossing films of 2022, they were only 18% of women characters with a speaking role (Lauzen 2023). These data point to an important and powerful message – who is not featured is just as important as who is (Lindemann 2022).

Similarly, sexual orientation intersects with sexism. Heteropatriarchy can be defined as “the social systems in which heterosexuality and patriarchy are perceived as normal and natural” (Arvin et al. 2013, p. 13); thus heterosexual males are not only dominant in the culture but are overrepresented in cultural artifacts. In GLAAD’s (2024) analysis of 2022

theatrical and streaming releases, 28.5% had an LGBTQ+ character (55.8% male, 60% white). While the increased representation is promising, of these 292 characters, nearly 30% appeared for less than a minute, and an additional 27% were shown for less than 5 minutes; only 95 characters (33%) were in the film for more than 10 minutes (GLAAD 2024). Greater parity in gender and race was found in these characters but their overall limited screen presence speaks to their undervaluation. Given that our analysis had zero black women or women from the LGBTQ+ community as leads, films with older main characters appear to reflect these hierarchical systems of oppression and marginalization that privilege whiteness, heterosexuality, and maleness.

Limitations

The results of this analysis should be considered within the context of its limitations. First, the method utilized to identify the film list was not comprehensive for all films featuring an older main character. The authors ran across several movies while conducting this study which were not included (e.g. *Sometimes Always Never*; *Best Sellers*). In addition, very few action-type films were found on the lists that we consulted. For example, Liam Neeson's (70 years old at the time of release) 2022 film *Blacklight* or Bruce Willis's (67 years old) 2022 film *Wrong Place* did not come up on any of our searches. Perhaps these films are disregarded as a film about an older person given that the main character is the picture of virility, stamina, and vigor. In other words, despite their age, they represent youth as well as hegemonic masculinity. Inclusion of these films would likely have further shifted the results in favor of even more male representation given that they occupy most roles in the action film genre. Future research should seek to examine how older male and female characters are represented in this specific area of filmmaking to determine how age and gender intersect. Despite visiting multiple websites and compiling a list of 300 films, other search processes would likely have added to our scope. Second, the creation of the list of developmental milestones may have been expanded to include life review/reminiscence. While this can certainly occur at any life stage, it is an activity that is often associated with older adulthood. This characteristic was nonetheless captured on the thematic stereotype framework.

Conclusion

This study provides a new way to examine ageism in film through a framework based on scales of aging stereotypes, thus providing a systematic approach to content analysis. In turn, its use can offer new insights into how the reproduction of “types” can be viewed within both positive and negative stereotypes. Older main characters are presented in less negative ageist ways, but the promising shift lies in those films that are giving the audience a more balanced portrayal. That is, while successful aging discourse is front and center, some films couch this within the context of realistic, developmental struggles, such as loneliness. Nonetheless, if prevailing narratives – however benign or malevolent – remain unchallenged, the wider culture will be resistant to change, too. Greater social pressure for content that presents a more nuanced picture of older adulthood is needed, which may be realized as the population “grays.”

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Appendix 1: Thematic Movie Analysis Tracking Sheet

Movie:

Release date:

NEGATIVE STEREOTYPES/PORTRAYL

Aging Loss – if any of the characteristics below are demonstrated, mark this general category for each character and rate it from 1 to 3 (1 = a little; 2 = moderate; 3 = mostly present in the character)

Can't hear
Don't like the way they look
Slow/tired
Weak/clumsy
Not active
Frail

Nostalgic – if any of the characteristics below are demonstrated, mark this general category for each character and rate it from 1 to 3

It's a depressing time of life
Talking about the "good ole days"
Complain about the younger generation
Less content with age (include complaints about aches and pains)

Isolation – if any of the characteristics below are demonstrated, mark this general category for each character and rate it from 1 to 3

They don't interact as much
Observe life, but don't participate
Hang around the house a lot

Learning & Memory – if any of the characteristics below are demonstrated, mark this general category for each character and rate it from 1 to 3

Can't learn new things easily
Not interested in tech
Senior moment

Death & Dying - if any of the characteristics below are demonstrated, mark this general category for each character and rate it from 1 to 3

Worried about health
Fear all your friends will be dead

Burdensome - if any of the characteristics below are demonstrated, mark this general category for each character and rate it from 1 to 3

Financial dependence on adult children
Burden on society
Less financial independence

Rigidity toward Aging/Life - if any of the characteristics below are demonstrated, mark this general category for each character and rate it from 1 to 3

Set in their ways
Uncooperative
Inflexible
Intolerant
Impatient
Pessimistic

Untidy - if any of the characteristics below are demonstrated, mark this general category for each character and rate it from 1 to 3

Personal appearance
Homes are shabby
Dirty

Negative Attitude toward Others - if any of the characteristics below are demonstrated, mark this general category for each character and rate it from 1 to 3

Make people feel ill at ease
Ungrateful
Cruel

Sour
Inconsiderate
Selfish

Passivity – if any of the characteristics below are demonstrated, mark this general category for each character and rate it from 1 to 3

Uncertain
Indecisive
Dull
Passive to others

General Negative Stereotypes – track each characteristic below by individual character

Pry into other people's business
Decreased social status
Behaves oddly or Eccentric
Cheap
Suspicious or paranoid
Conservative
Excessive demands for love/reassurance

Ageist Content or Actions in the Film – if any of the characteristics below are demonstrated, mark this general category for each film and rate it from 1 to 3

Complimented with "you look good for your age" or "you don't look that old"
Told jokes about age
Others used simpler language or patronizing tone
Called "young lady" or "young man"
Told they were "too old for that"
Holding doors open due to age
Avoided because of age
Ignored due to age

Male Stereotypes – track each characteristic below by individual character

“Dirty old man”
Powerful
Gray fox/sexy
“Grumpy old man”
“man’s man”

Female Stereotypes – track each characteristic below by individual character

Sexless/not interested in sex
Harsh
Worried about looks
Warm
Bitter
Complaining
“wicked old witch”

POSITIVE STEREOTYPES/PORTRAYL

Positive Outlook on Life/Aging – if any of the characteristics below are demonstrated, mark this general category for each character and rate it from 1 to 3

Privilege to grow old
Cooperative with others
Flexible to new situations
Optimistic, looks toward the future in a positive way

Elder of Community – if any of the characteristics below are demonstrated, mark this general category for each character and rate it from 1 to 3

Wisdom
Respected
Example to young people
Makes a difference in the world, community, or someone’s life

Contributes (not a burden) – if any of the characteristics below are demonstrated, mark this general category for each character and rate it from 1 to 3

Power in business/politics/field of practice and maintains it
Self-reliant
Productive

Positive with Others – if any of the characteristics below are demonstrated, mark this general category for each character and rate it from 1 to 3

Friendly
Trustworthy
Kind or empathic
Grateful
Generous

General Positive Portrayals – track each characteristic below by individual character

Interested in love
Ordinary (not eccentric)
Modern
Fit
Reflective
Middle class or upper class

Movie Themes	
Retirement	
Widowhood	
Death/dying	
Disease (health)	
Cognitive decline	
Loneliness	

Tracking	
<i>Gender</i> Male Female Trans/nonbinary	
<i>Sexual orientation</i> Gay/lesbian Heterosexual	
<i>Race</i> African American Asian Caucasian	
<i>Physical features</i> Wrinkles Gray hair/balding	
<i>Actor</i> English American Russian Canadian German	
<i>Film</i> English American	
<i>Relationship status</i> Married Divorced Widowed Never married Unclear/unstated	<i>Transitioned in movie:</i> Married to widowed Widowed to married/partnered Partnered to divorcing/separating Never married to married/partnered

<i>Living arrangements</i> Home Apartment Facility (independent living) Facility (nursing home) Facility (unclear) Unclear/unstated	<i>Transitioned in movie:</i> Home to independent living Home to nursing home Home to jail
<i>Living with whom?</i> Partner/spouse Alone Child Grandchild In a facility Sibling Friend Unclear/unstated	<i>Transitioned in movie:</i> Alone to adult child Alone to adult child to facility (nursing home) Alone to independent living facility (alone) Alone to independent living facility (with partner/spouse) Alone to nursing home (alone) Partner to alone Other?

A film about older people **without** a developmental milestone (e.g. widowhood) as the main thrust: Yes/No

A film about older people **with** a developmental milestone (e.g. widowhood as the main thrust): Yes/No

Overall, the movie incorporated the objectification of women (e.g. remarks, behavior): Yes/No

Main character dies: Yes/No