The Aging Woman in Popular Film: Underrepresented, Unattractive, Unfriendly, and Unintelligent

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ABSTRACT

The present study examined 100 top-grossing motion pictures spanning from the 1940s through the 1980s (20 movies from each decade). Eight hundred and twenty-nine characters were rated on attractiveness, character goodness, intelligence, friendliness, socioeconomic status, romantic activity, and movie outcome. It was hypothesized that ageist and sexist stereotypes would interact such that (a) older female characters would be more unde"epresented, and (b) more negatively portrayed, than their male contemporaries. Both hypotheses were supported. Implications regarding double standards for age, and the media's propagation of beauty-related standards for females were discussed.

Popular media images are reflections of a culture's attitudes, beliefs, and standards, as well as projections of desired realities. Whether accurate descriptions of daily living, or wishful-thinking on the part of film-makers, media tells a story that is eagerly received by consumers. To the extent that consumers digest such material as truth, rather than fiction, the depictions laid forth by the media can be influential in the propagation and maintenance of stereotypes.

Two classes of stereotypes that are commonly depicted by the media are ageist and sexist stereotypes. For example, prime time television has often shown the elderly to be more stubborn, eccentric, and foolish than younger characters (Davis & Davis as cited in Bell, 1992). Given such depictions, it is not surprising that, though gerontologists have demonstrated consistent findings to the contrary, elderly Americans are still judged to be of lower competence, activity, intelligence, attractiveness, and health than their younger counterparts (Levin, 1988). Ageist stereotypes are also evident in older individuals' conspicuous absence from popular television. Indeed, only 2% of the characters depicted on television have been found to be over the age of 65, whereas people over 65 comprise 15% of the population at large (Charren & Sandler, 1983). Similar biases are found when examining depictions of women in the media. For example, a particularly common bias that exists across a wide array of media forums is the disproportionate number of male to female character portrayals. For example, Signorielli (1989) found that women comprised only 29% of all television characters and 31% of all major characters. In the arena of comic strips, males appear more frequently as both central and minor characters (Unger & Crawford, 1991). Even in news media (which is a medium arguably less subject to manipulation of storyline, etc.), women are pictured less often than are men (Archer, Iritani, Kimes, & Barrios, 1983).

When women are depicted in the media, they are typically subjected to a greater degree of physical scrutiny than men (e.g., their appearance is more likely the topic of commentary, Archer et al., 1983) and are subjected to a more rigid standard of beauty which they are expected to embody. For example, Silverstein, Perdue, Peterson, and Kelly (1986) found that for 40 of the most popular prime-time television shows, women characters were portrayed as thinner and younger than their male counterparts. Such portrayals may imply that women's primary value lies in the possession of physical beauty, while men's does not.

Because one of the central media messages concerning women is that women's primary value lies in their appearance, it seems plausible that sexist and ageist stereotypes may interact. That is, the tendency for the media to exhibit more negative depictions of people as they age may be more pronounced for aging women than for aging men.

There is little research that directly compares ageist depictions of men and women in the media. Palmore (1971) studied jokes about the elderly and found that, relative to old men, there were three times as many negative jokes about old women. Further, depictions of women over 40 were

found to be almost totally absent from advertising, where physically attractive people are routinely utilized to add appeal to a product (Unger & Crawford, 1991). Davis and Davis found that television not only portrays fewer older female characters, but depicts them as much less useful than their male counterparts (Bell, 1992). Finally, a study examining the content of television commercials found that the distribution of people over 60 in such commercials was gender disproportionate (Harris & Feinberg, 1977). Specifically, Harris and Feinberg (1977) found that for the age group 50-60, there was a 50% increase in the number of male television characters (as compared to the 20-30 age group), whereas the number of females decreased by 78%.

Markson and Taylor (1993) found a particularly striking bias in the ages of Academy Award nominees and winners for actors and actresses from 1927 through 1990. The sample was comprised of 1,169 actresses and actors who had been nominated in four acting categories: Best Actress, Best Actor, Best Supporting Actress, and Best Supporting Actor). In the 63 years of awards for Best Actress/Actor, only 27% of female award winners were over the age of 39, as compared to 67% of male winners. Across decades, the age difference between male and female winners was typically around 10 years. For example, in the 1930s, the average age of award winning actresses was 32 and for winning actors it was 40. Among Oscar winners for supporting roles, women were, on the average, seven years younger than men. The authors concluded that in the "reel" world a woman is considered "older" by the time she is 35, and subsequently her career opportunities may start to become limited. However, a man may experience continued demand on the silver screen past the age of 35, and even into his 40s.

It has been argued that movies are one of the clearest and most accessible representations of the past, present and future of our society (Haskell, 1974). In the present research, we sought to gain a clearer understanding of how women have been represented in film. Markson and Taylor (1983) have demonstrated that in Hollywood women are honored primarily when they are young and beautiful; we sought to clarify and extend these findings in a number of ways.

First, are younger women simply more likely than their older counterparts to be recognized with high honors for their acting, or is it the case that older women are also less likely to be *depicted* in film? We predicted that there would be a greater discrepancy between the number of older (i.e., over 35) male and female characters in popular film than among younger male and female characters. Segments of the population that are underrepresented in the media tend to be those that are considered less valued or desirable (e.g., Weigel, Loomis, & Soja, 1980), thus it is likely that older women are underrepresented in film.

In addition to being underrepresented in film, it is possible that, when older women *are* represented, they are depicted as possessing negative characteristics. If, indeed, one message conveyed by popular film is that women are valued primarily for youth and beauty, another way to communicate this message is to link age with negative traits for female

characters. If men are valued for characteristics other than youth, there should be little relationship between a male character's age and the positivity with which he is depicted. Specifically, we expected to find the following in observing the characters in popular film from the past 5 decades:
1) Age would be more negatively related to personality characteristics for women than for men. Specifically, older women would be associated with: (a) more unfriendliness, (b) lower intelligence, (c) less "goodness" and (d) less physical attractiveness than older men.

2) As both men and women age, they would be depicted as engaging in less romantic and sexual activity, but this decline would be more pronounced for women.

3) In general, wealth increases with age. We expected to find a positive relationship between wealth and age, but more so for men than for women, because wealth is a positive quality often associated with intelligence and competence.

4) The "just world phenomenon" (Lerner, 1980) suggests that people tend to believe that good things happen to good people, and bad things happen to bad people. If women are indeed depicted more negatively with age than are men, we expected that greater age would be related to more negative outcomes at a film's end for women than for men.

The study involved viewing a total of 100 movies, 20 from each decade spanning the 1940s through the 1980s. The movies were randomly selected from a list of the top 20 grossing movies of each year from each decade. Independent raters judged all of the significant characters in each film in terms of how they were depicted across the following dimensions: attractiveness, friendliness, goodness, intelligence, socioeconomic status, romantic activity, attractiveness, and outcome at film's end. The raters also estimated the age of each character. The relationship between age, personality characteristics, and various outcome measures was examined.

METHOD

Raters

The ratings were completed by 12 people (7 males and 5 females). Raters ranged in age from 28 to 60. Each rater was provided with both written and verbal instructions on how to carry out the ratings before viewing a film.

Movie Characters

Overall, 829 characters were rated across 100 movies. Of the total, 253 were deemed "central" characters (pivotal to the movie's storyline),

281 were deemed "secondary" characters (important to the plot, but not essential), and 295 were deemed "peripheral" characters (superficial to the movie's plot).

Procedure

Movie Selection. We chose to examine trends in gender and age across 5 decades: the 1940s to the 1980s. In order to choose movies that were representative of the decade from which they were chosen, movies were randomly selected from a list of the top 20 grossing movies of each year. For a given decade, 20 movies were randomly selected from 200 possible movies (20 of the yearly, top-grossing movies x 10 years within a decade), resulting in 1,000 films in the *initial* pool. Only theater box office sales at the time of the movie's first release counted toward its gross. So, for example, Alfred Hitchcock classics such as *Vertigo,* still play in movie theaters from time to time, but this additional revenue was not counted in determining the top grossing movies of each decade. Overall, 100 movies were selected for the study *(n* = 20 movies for each of the five decades). Two movies that were selected, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988) and *An American Tail* (1986) were rejected because the main characters were animated, and thus meaningful ratings of age could not be made. Two movies were randomly selected from those remaining on the list *(Heartbreak Ridge, 1986* and *When Harry Met Sally,* 1989) to replace them. The genres of the movies selected were classified (by film critics) as follows: 28% were comedies, 24% were dramas, 14% were action/adventure, 13% were musicals, 6% were suspense, 5% were children/family, 4% were western, and 3% were science fiction/fantasy.

Rating Procedure. In order to optimize the reliability of ratings, each movie was rated by at least three people *(M* = 3.38 raters per movie). Characters in each film were rated on the following dimensions:

1. Age. Raters estimated the age of each character. The instructions given were to estimate the age of the character being portrayed, rather than the age of the actor or actress performing. On occasion, an actor or actress may playa role that is not congruent with his or her age, such as when a thirty year-old current box-office favorite is cast in the role of a high school student.

2. Goodness. Raters assessed the character's moral virtue on a scale ranging from 0 (Extremely immoral, i.e., total sleaze) to 10 (extremely moral, i.e., saintly).

3. Socioeconomic Status. SES was rated on a scale ranging from 0 (extremely poor, lower class) to 10 (extremely rich, upper class).

4. Intelligence. The character's intelligence was assessed on a scale ranging from 0 (extremely unintelligent) to 10 (extremely intelligent).

5. Friendly. Raters assessed each character's friendliness on a scale ranging from 0 (extremely unfriendly) to 10 (extremely friendly).

6. Romantic activity. A character's real or implied romantic and/or sexual activity during the film was rated on a scale ranging from 0 (totally inactive) to 10 (extremely active). Clearly, recent films depict more explicit sexual activity than earlier films. In an attempt to balance this inequity, raters attempted to estimate how much romantic/sexual activity a character was portrayed to be involved in, rather than to consider the amount of time during the film characters actually engaged in romantic/sexual activity.

7. Physical Attractiveness. Rating of physical attractiveness were based on a 10-point scale ranging from 0 (extremely unattractive) to 10 (extremely attractive). Raters were instructed to make their ratings of a character's physical attractiveness the first time the character was shown onscreen in a reasonably clear, full-faced shot. Physical attractiveness ratings were the only ratings that were not to be changed once an initial judgment was made. The instruction not to change physical attractiveness ratings was given so that a character's behavior in the film would have a minimal impact on ratings of attractiveness.

8. Outcome. The positivity of a character's outcome at film's end was rated on a scale of 0 (extremely negative; e.g., died) to 10 (extremely positive; e.g., struck it rich and lived happily ever after). Raters based their judgments of a character's outcome on how their life changed from the beginning of the film to the end. So, for example, if a person began the film as a millionaire and ended the film equally wealthy and with no other significant life changes, that character's outcome rating was "5," or average.

The most difficult decision faced by raters was determining which characters in the film to rate. Raters were instructed to rate any characters for whom they felt they could make an informed rating on all of the dimensions. Very often, if a character appeared in the film, raters included them on their rating sheet, then found that the character was very minor. When this was the case, raters simply put a line through the aborted rating, and it was not considered in the analyses. In order for a character to be included in the analyses, all raters must have completed a rating. Thus, if one or more raters did not think they had enough information to complete a rating, that character was not considered. At film's end, raters indicated whether they thought a character's role was "central," "secondary," or "peripheral" in the film.

When two or more people rated a film together, no discussion of the characters or plot of the film was allowed until all ratings were complete. This was done so that raters would not influence each other's ratings during the film.

RESULTS

Rater Reliability Estimates

Reliabilities across raters were well above acceptable levels across all eight of the dimensions rated (all rs ranged from *.76-.98V* For age, specifically, the interrater reliability estimates for a sample of 177 characters was *r* = .98). However, because our age estimates for the actors and actresses were just that, estimates, we thought it necessary to take a subsample of our population and correlate the estimated ages with the actual ages of these actors/actresses at the time of a given film. That is, since estimated ages might be biased by cultural expectations surrounding gender and age, it was important to demonstrate that our raters were in fact accurate in their appraisals of character ages. A subsample of 52 males and 47 females (selected equally across each of the 5 decades) was chosen. Actual actor/actresses ages were obtained from the 1996 Motion Picture Almanac (a periodical published each year documenting that year's movie releases and the biographies of actors and actresses).

Estimated and actual ages were strongly (and positively) correlated *(r* = .87, *p* < .000 for males; *r* = .70, *p* < .001 for females) indicating that our raters accurately identified actor/actress ages. Further evidence to support the correspondence between estimated and actual ages was demonstrated when comparisons of mean actual and estimated ages were made. For females, no difference was found between raters' estimated ages *(M* = 29.60) and actual ages *(M* = 30.01), *t(47)* = .42, *ns.* For males, a difference did emerge between raters' estimated ages *(M* = 38.00) and actual actor ages *(M* = 41.18), *t(52)* = 4.57, *P* < .001.4

Frequency of Gender Depictions

Only central and secondary characters were included in the analysis of character depictions. As predicted, males outnumbered females for both central and secondary character portrayals. A total of 253 central characters emerged for all 100 movies, with 64% of those characters being male *(n* = 162) and 36% being female *(n* = 91). Additionally, there were fewer portrayals of characters over the age of 35 for women as compared to men. Indeed 38% of the male central characters were estimated as over 35-years old, whereas only 8% of female characters were estimated to be over 35.

The same pattern emerged for secondary character portrayals in the films. Of the 281 secondary characters rated, 201 of those characters were males (72%) and 80 were females (28%). Once again, a conspicuous absence of older women appeared in these portrayals with only 12% of the secondary female characters being over 35-years old, while 44% of male characters were over that age.

Tables I and II give the mean character ages across decades for male and female central and secondary characters. Note that women were consistently

younger than male characters across all 5 decades for both central
(M = 7.4 years younger) and secondary roles *(M* = 5.93 years younger).5

Table I. Mean Ages and *t* Statistics for Male and Female Central Character Portrayals for the 1940s Through the 1980s

Decade	Gender of Character		*t* Value	*p* Value
	Female (*n*)	Male (*n*)		
1940	29.38 (25)	39.84 (29)	4.10	.0001
1950	28.60 (22)	36.51 (30)	3.77	.0002
1960	25.65 (17)	34.28 (31)	2.29	.01
1970	31.20 (15)	35.18 (36)	.95	ns
1980	30.95 (15)	36.94 (37)	1.85	.035

Comparison of Younger to Older Male and Female Characters.

Recall our prediction that there would be a greater discrepancy
between the number of older (over 35) male and female characters than
between younger (under 35) male and female characters. A Chi-square
analysis demonstrated that our prediction was confirmed, $X2(1) = 39.53$,
$P < .0001$. That is, for characters under 35-years old, 46% of these
characters were female, whereas 55% of the characters were male.
However, when considering characters over 35-years old the discrepancy
was much larger. Only 19% of these older characters were female, as
compared to 81 % who were male.

Correlations Between Age and Various Descriptors or Males and Females

Pearson's Product-moment Correlations were conducted for males and
females separately in order to examine the relationship between age and
a variety of trait adjectives (friendliness, intelligence, attractiveness and
goodness), as well as life-situation measures (romantic activity, SES, and
outcome for the character at the end of the movie). We predicted that for
female characters, a stronger negative relationship would emerge between
age and each of the trait adjectives and life-situation measures than for
male characters. As can be seen in Table III, our predictions were confirmed
for all of these measures, with the exception of romantic activity.
The most striking differences that emerged occurred in ratings of character
physical attractiveness and character goodness. In general, ageist stereotypes
emerged for both traits as evidenced by the negative correlations between
age and attractiveness, and age and goodness, found for women and
men (although age and goodness were not correlated for men). However,
comparisons of these correlations across gender demonstrated a much
stronger tendency to negatively portray aging women as compared to aging
men.6

Table II. Mean Ages and *t* Statistics for Male and Female Secondary Character Portrayals for the 1940s Through the 1980s.

Decade	Gender of Character		*t* Value	*p* Value
	Female (*n*)	Male (*n*)		
1940	33.01 (20)	41.75 (51)	2.17	.015
1950	35.33 (10)	41.04 (46)	1.31	*ns*
1960	30.03 (12)	38.54 (38)	1.93	.03
1970	28.93 (19)	39.74 (38)	2.87	.003
1980	41.06 (19)	36.94 (38)	1.33	*ns*

DISCUSSION

Although the motion picture industry is referenced frequently as both instigator and perpetuator of stereotypes directed against women, few studies have systematically examined the content of motion pictures produced with regard to how depictions of males and females compare (see also Markson & Taylor, 1993). The current study was one such investigation. We were interested in examining male and female character portrayals in popular films spanning five decades (the 1940s through the 1980s). We predicted that Hollywood would perpetuate already existing female stereotypes in two ways: (1) by underrepresenting older women in film and (2) by consistently depicting more negative images of older women than of older men.

Table III. Zero-Order Correlation Coefficients Between Age and Other Characteristics for Male and Female Characters

	Coefficient for Males	Coefficient for Females	*z* Test
Friendliness	$r = -.08$	$r = -.26$	$z = 2.42, p < .05$
Intelligence	$r = .16$	$r = -.15$	$z = 4.14, p < .05$
Goodness	$r = .02$	$r = -.21$	$z = 3.07, p < .05$
SES	$r = .21$	$r = .05$	$z = 2.13, p < .05$
Attractiveness	$r = -.47$	$r = -.60$	$z = 2.40, p < .05$
Movie outcome	$r = -.11$	$r = -.19$	$z = 2.50, p < .05$
Romantic activity	$r = -.20$	$r = -.27$	$z = .98, ns$

We found that, compared to men, women of all ages were underrepresented. However, this was particularly the case for women over the age of 35. Eighty percent of characters over the age of 35 were male, whereas only 20% were female. The discrepancy between male and female characters under the age of 35 was much less pronounced, with 46% of these characters being women and 54% being men.) These results are consistent with the observation across media that a female who shows signs of age cannot successfully endorse (and ultimately sell) a product-be it lingerie, cosmetics, or a feature film. Even when a well-known older woman is photographed for a magazine, her image is altered such that her 60-year-old face looks more like that of a 45-year old (Wolf, 1991).

Our study also extends the work of Markson and Taylor (1993), demonstrating that one of the reasons for the severe underrepresentation of older Academy-Award-winning females is that few portrayals of older women occur in movies. That is, the current study lends empirical support to Markson and Taylor's suggestion that few older women appear in film. It is not. simply that the work of older female actresses is not honored in film, rather they are rarely seen in film.

We found ageist stereotypes, in general, to be prevalent across the films of five decades. That is, for the most part, older individuals of both genders were portrayed as less friendly, having less romantic activity, and as enjoying fewer positive outcomes than younger characters at a movie's conclusion. In light of such a finding, it is not surprising that when college students were asked to evaluate photos of the same man taken at age 25, 52, and 73, he was evaluated most negatively (in terms of intelligence, activity level, attractiveness, and competence) at the oldest age (Levin, 1988). However, older females were cast in a particularly negative light. As compared to males, older females were perceived as less friendly, less intelligent, less good, possessing less wealth, and being less attractive. Such beliefs may be linked to a cultural "what is beautiful is good" stereotype (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972). Because beauty is a more salient feature in judgements about women than about men (Unger & Crawford, 1992), perhaps as a female ages there is a greater tendency to ascribe more negative traits to her.

Of course, it is possible that Hollywood was less the culprit of such negative stereotypes about women than were our raters, given that ratings of a character's friendliness, intelligence, goodness, etc., are subjective perceptions rather than fact. Although it is possible that our raters were operating on preconceived stereotypes of older women, the high interrater reliabilities that we obtained argue otherwise. With interrater reliabilities all above .76 (with most greater than .85), we would assert that the movies provided raters with unambiguous, easily observable information concerning characters' traits. If the raters' judgments were strongly driven by their own biases, we would expect that individual differences between the raters would result in more variability across raters (particularly in light of the age differences between our raters).

It is also interesting to note the age differences that emerged between male and female leading (central) characters. With the exception of the 1970s, leading women were atleast 6 years younger than leading men (in some cases 10 years younger), once again reaffirming that as men age they are presented as remaining a vital part of society. Youthfulness (and with it attractiveness) continues to be the attribute which affords women the most opportunities.

Looking across the different decades, we found no strong pattern to suggest that age was related to more negative characteristics for women than for men for any given decade. It might be expected that the relationship between gender and ageism would decline with time, because in the past there was less awareness of the inappropriateness of perpetuating

negative stereotypes of people based on their age or gender, whereas more recently much attention has been devoted to these issues (Bell, 1992). However, this pattern was not reflected in the data, suggesting that Hollywood has not attempted to adjust it's depictions of people in order to be more sensitive to the perpetuation of negative age stereotypes.

To the extent that the depictions of people in movies reflects an accurate view of cultural standards, our findings suggest that women face an increasingly problematic dilemma. Even if a woman possesses beauty when she is young, she will ultimately be unable to maintain that beauty. This is a dilemma because traditionally women have not been encouraged to develop traits that improve with age, such as wisdom and intellectual competence (Stoddard, 1983), but have learned that physical beauty is the quality which affords them the most power and esteem in our culture. Perhaps media images of aging women help to explain why therapists have recently found a "depletion syndrome" prevalent in older women, characterized by feelings of worthlessness, no interest in things, a sense of hopelessness, and thoughts of death (Newmann, Engel, & Jensen, 1990). Because representation in the media signifies social existence, and underrepresentation signifies inexistence (Gerbner as cited in Tuchman, 1979), the media's failure to portray aging female characters reinforces an unattainable cultural standard that perpetuates women's struggle to fight aging at all cost.

Of course, it remains to be seen whether depictions of women have changed in the films of the 1990s. Evidence suggests that women are increasingly entering into formerly male-dominated professions (Unger & Crawford, 1992) and acquiring greater positions of power in society. Future research should investigate whether popular film has maintained the double standard regarding depictions of male and female characters in the current decade, or whether it has portrayed women and men more equitably.

NOTES

3. Specific interrater reliability estimates for character descriptors were as follows: $r = .79$ for goodness, $r = .76$ for friendliness, $r = .86$ for attractiveness, $r = .84$ for romantic activity, $r = .94$ for movie outcome, $r = .89$ for socioeconomic status.

4. Although a difference did emerge for estimated and actual ages for male characters, it should be noted that the actual ages were actually larger than estimated thus indicating that, if anything, actual age differences between actors and actresses may be more exaggerated than stated in the current investigation.

5. Note that the trend in younger portrayals of women as compared to men did not apply to secondary characters of the 1980s. For this decade, women were nominally older than their male counterparts.

6. Correlations between age and various descriptors for men and women were conducted across each decade to examine trends over time. No strong pattern emerged, comparatively, across different decades for either males or females. Detailed summaries of these "decade" analyses are available upon request from the first author.

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