

Old age as a (non-)media phenomenon

Starość jako zjawisko (nie)medialne

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Abstract

Ways of portraying old age in mass culture seem to look like a particularly interesting and important issue to ponder on. Old age is generally perceived through various stereotypes which distort the real image of senior citizens. The perception of seniors in society is largely dependent on the media coverage. Even though getting older is an issue that touches almost every human being, it is almost non-existent in press coverage and TV features. Therefore this article focuses on the issue of the portrayal of seniors in the society. (Gerontol Pol 2017; 25; 118-122)

Key words: appearance, media, senility, elderly people

Streszczenie

Sposoby obrazowania późnej dorosłości w kulturze masowej jawią się jako szczególnie interesujący i ważny obszar refleksji. Starość postrzegana jest przez liczne stereotypy, które zniekształcają obraz osób starszych. Postrzeganie seniorów przez społeczeństwo uzależnione jest w dużej mierze od przekazu medialnego. Mimo iż starość jest zagadnieniem dotyczącym ogółu społeczeństwa, to temat ten nie jest często poruszany zjawiskiem medialnym, jest wręcz nieobecny w przekazach prasowych czy telewizyjnych. Dlatego też artykuł porusza problematykę społecznie kształtowanego wizerunku osób w podeszłym wieku. (Gerontol Pol 2017; 25; 118-122)

Słowa kluczowe: wygląd, media, starość, osoby w podeszłym wieku

Introduction

Human body is an important aspect of social life [1]. The essential factor that influences social status and interpersonal relations is appearance [2], which is deemed as the main determinant that influences one's approach towards another person, and which determines social identity [3]. These days, the subject of looking at people, focusing solely on appearance, is touched upon mostly regarding the senior social group. The image of seniors, along with the progressing cultural changes, was pushed out of the public space and old age was subjected to censorship. "Language taboo of old age is probably laced with fear of becoming old, perceiving old age as something *inappropriate*, alien, embarrassing etc. In other words, old age is not considered (...) as a natural life stage (like for example youth) which we can talk and write about but rather as a life stage charged with symbolic burden" [4].

Modern mass culture promotes aspects such as youth, vitality, and attractiveness. There is continuous talk about *somatic society* which is a sphere where human body is the main point of reference [5]. It is oriented on broadly defined corporeality and physical attractiveness. It is set on defending itself against aging symptoms. Zierkiewicz notices that "It is forbidden to get old because it leads to social and professional self-destruction" [6]. Wnuk has a similar opinion: "There is no place for old people in the cult of youth era" [7]. Seniors live under constant social pressure where attractive appearance is praised and there is no consent for aging. Because of this fact, the changes in appearance which arise with age make society look at seniors through stereotypes which claim that this social group is unattractive, repulsive, and of low social significance. Old age is rarely perceived as a reflection about the beauty of autumn of life and it is often a symbol of exclusion, marginalization, and solitude.

Raging obsession with the beautiful appearance gives birth to various procedures aimed at suppressing aging

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effects or even stopping them altogether. It can be said that nowadays it is imperative for the society to hang onto vitality at all costs [8] which, in turn, powers the so called *anti-aging* industry. "Against the challenge that old age poses, seniors strive to keep positive assessment of their physical shape, both in appearance and in health. New generations, which are now at the verge of their sixties, apply changes in the shape of discreet increase in expenses, higher level of physical activity, focusing on strict diet, and maintaining good physical condition as well as more frequent search for help in the field of cosmetic and rejuvenating technologies" [9]. It is especially a domain of women who engage more often than men in *beauty work*, which is a rejuvenating strategy [10]. It is explained as the *double standard of aging* which claims that women are judged more harshly than men regarding their appearance, which entails bigger pressure from society [11].

Aim and methodology of work

Ways of picturing old age in mass culture is a subject that appears especially interesting and worth pondering on. That is why this work touches upon the issue of shaping the image of seniors by society.

Literature analysis was the method of work. Scientific publications, media coverage, and reports from social researches focusing on the image of seniors presented by the media were the research tools.

The image of the senior presented by the media

The perception of seniors by society is mostly dictated by the mass media. Despite the fact that old age is a subject that pertains to everyone in society it is not a frequent issue brought up in the mass media, it is almost non-existent in the press or in the TV coverage [12]. Sztur-Jaworska claims that "Seniors are rarely brought up in informational coverage and in mass culture" [13]. *The image of seniors in the mass media* project conducted in 2007 by the Women in Favor foundation - I, A WOMAN provides interesting data on the subject. The research claims that seniors are mentioned in the media in the context of: a) pensions, retirements and changes within that area, b) figures of seniors regarding their longevity and long-lasting marriages, c) professional activeness, experience, availability and competence of senior workers, d) specialist senior services, e) social projects directed at seniors, f) health and social seniors' care, challenges that aging poses for health care, discounts for medicine

for seniors, g) seniors' interests, especially the big role of Universities of the Third Age, h) seniors' sexual life. It is imperative to stress that less than half (48%) of the published materials was positive. Materials focusing on the age group 65+ were presented mostly in the press (57%), less often on the Internet (34%) and on the TV (9%) [14]. *Praktycy.com* agency conducted a poll among seniors in 2010. The poll was about seniors' opinion on the image of elderly people presented in the advertisements of cosmetic, pharmacological, and technological industries. According to the surveyed, the best way to reach the target audience is to use the image of a famous person, to play on emotions, to put emphasis on age, to appeal to people's sense of humor, to apply the theme of family and health. $\frac{2}{3}$ of the surveyed women and 53% of the surveyed men had positive opinion on the image of seniors presented in the mass media [15]. *A hero in a TV commercial* research project was conducted in 2012, which focused on analyzing if people cast in TV advertisements are presented according to certain simplified attributes. The researchers established that seniors are presented in the media in two ways. First, the senior as a positive person who is full of energy, satisfied with life, socially and professionally active, independent, sociable, experienced, treasured for one's knowledge, caring. Second, the senior as a negative person who is miserable, grumpy, unsatisfied with life, sad, lonely, marginalized, excluded, undeveloped, incompetent, dependent on others. According to the authors of the research, there was a decline of negative image of seniors in TV commercials since the 90's and in 2010 it reached 12% [16]. Anioł and co-workers conducted an analysis in 2013 which aim was to assess the image of seniors presented in popular Polish and foreign TV shows. The authors were seeking the answer if the image of people of the third age promoted in the media escalates the stereotypes leading to discrimination, or if it promotes appreciation and respect for seniors. They selected modern TV shows, which had been staying on air for a few years, which had a wide audience and which were shown during the prime time. Seniors were presented as guardians of order, abiding by law and social rules, self-appointed experts, giving advice, convinced of the righteousness of their beliefs. They were also presented as simple people in sad or grotesque situations, as hosts, commanding, afflicted, loving and as caring grandparents or parents. The analysis has shown that the time dedicated for showing the lives of seniors amounted to 8% in Polish TV shows and 11% in American TV shows. The image of seniors presented in the media is based on a big dose of conservatism. The way of picturing seniors in the media has consequences outside of the television, in the real world [17].

Seniors image shaping strategies in the mass media

With the progress of time and focus on the issue of demographic changes (increase of seniors in the general population) seniors started getting perceived as a group worthy of bigger media attention. The Growing number of people from the age group 65+ makes seniors the main recipients of many advertised products [18]. As a consequence, producers started seeing potential in seniors and they started casting seniors in advertisements, shows, movies and series [19]. "The subject of old age is presented in various ways and from many different points of views in the cinema. It is not a very popular subject, youth and its issues are tackled more often. (...) Old age shown on the screen is bitter and lonely, it shows fear of incompetence and fear of losing almost everything that the person once had like: strength, beauty, love, health, memory, physical fitness, mental prowess, independence, dignity, close family and friends. But it can also be cheerful, filled with love and exploration of forgotten or previously unknown areas" [20]. According to Król "Elderly people are presented in the traditional way. They are given the role of consumers and they act like recipients of insurance, medicine improving vitality, medicine lowering the cholesterol level, they are presented as experts, advisors, or as grandmothers or grandfathers" [21]. By contrast, in teenage magazines seniors are presented as "(...) stupid, senile, visually impaired, deaf, incompetent, weak, spiteful, mean, undeveloped, uninformed. They are shown as people who have no hobbies or interests and those who do not undertake any activities (...). They are presented as those that do not have any dreams or ambitions and it would seem that they do not have any feelings so they can be ridiculed and disregarded. Such convictions sustain the stereotypes about old age which claim that old age is something bad and menacing, something that one should separate from, something that one should protect oneself from" [22].

Below are exemplary strategies of shaping the image of seniors in the media, especially in commercials:

- **Old age as struggle against time in the aesthetic context** - fear of physical manifestations of old age, especially changes in appearance. It is an approach popularized by the cosmetic industry which promotes means for hampering the process of getting old or even stopping it altogether.
- **Old age as a disease** - very common message of commercials aimed at seniors. They present old age in the context of suffering from multiple diseases, chronic conditions and pains which hamper everyday functioning. They insinuate that it is imperative to take medicine or undertake therapies in order to enjoy everyday life.
- **Old age as poverty** - wrestling with hard financial situations, a lot of worries and problems, low pensions and retirement pensions, perennial bank loans, expensive health care and, especially, spending money on medicine which generates enormous expenses.
- **Old age as upcoming death** - the perspective of death is connected with negative feelings, passing, the end, suffering, it stirs up fear, thinking about organizing the funeral and expenses it entails.
- **Seniors as a problem** - the most unfair and stereotypical image of old age. Seniors are presented as afflicted, handicapped, incompetent, dependent on others, dysfunctional, socially passive. Marginalized, excluded and lonely because of low social value, they are perceived as a burden not only for their families but for the whole society as well.
- **Seniors as a laughing stock** - irreverent nature of the commercials and spots, advertisements mocking old people, especially their reduced mobility and inability to keep up with modern technology.
- **Seniors as a source of knowledge and experience** - life wisdom, knowledge, experience, playing the role of a teacher, a wise man, a role model, a person pointing in the right direction, full of compassion, help and good advice.
- **Seniors as participants of the second youth** - creative seniors undertaking plans postponed in their early years, full of ambitions and perspectives, eager to actively spend their free time [4,12,19].

As various researches suggest, we are dealing with ambivalent perception of old age [23] and "Approach towards old people shaped by commercials as well as stereotypes in advertisements influence not only people's approach towards seniors but also the thought process and actions of seniors themselves" [24]. They impose on seniors their definition of seniors' social role and social standing, they impose the ideas of which senior behavior would be socially acceptable and which would not. It is worth to remember that properly shaped media images

of seniors “(...) break a spell of nursing homes realities and encourage seniors to create communities of active retirees who use their skills, abilities and talents to undertake social or artistic activities” [20].

Summary and conclusions

Modern media do not seem to notice demographic regularities and occurring social changes. “(...) modern media prefer youth and beauty it entails as well as energy and levity. They give up on showing images of wrinkled and grey-haired men and women which may be too drastic to see for some viewers or readers” [25]. “The issue of age is still inexpressible. Even media which are free from prudence and superstitions, including marketing announcements, choke on their own hypocrisy when old age appears on the horizon” [26]. Old age is seen through various stereotypes which distort the real image of seniors. As a consequence it leads to stigmatization of seniors [27]. As Oleś claims “The image of old age, similarly to other period developments, is drowning in myths. By definition youth appears to be full of hope and joyful and old age appears to be sad and hard (...), however mature experience and mental integrity

stemming from knowledge and experience accumulated throughout the years causes old age to appear appealing” [28]. Summarizing, media images of seniors revolve around themes such as: intergenerational conflicts, family conflicts, solitude, death, sickness, mourning, attempt to account for life heading towards the end, fight for dignified treatment, strive for improvement of life quality [20].

1. Seniors appear in mass media relatively rarely. The 65+ age group is deemed socially unappealing and unattractive as opposed to the cultivated youth image.
2. Mass media avoid subjects related to death, disabilities, and senility which, in turn, influences social perception of seniors. Image of seniors presented in the media strongly influences the development of ageism.
3. The image of seniors is used mostly in commercials which target audience is precisely seniors themselves. They are mostly commercials of cosmetic, pharmaceutical, and insurance industries.

Conflict of interest

None

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