Suzanne Peters – blog post on ageism

TOPIC – age stereotypes in the media

"Pictures Injure" – The Under- and Misrepresentation of Older Adults in the Media

Let's play a game – once you're done reading this sentence, close your eyes and quickly conjure an image of an *old man*. What did the man look like? Let's play another round – this time quickly conjure an image of an *old woman in a magazine* ad. Where was this woman in your ad? It is possible you may have pictured a man with grey hair, assistive devises, or poor posture. The ad may have portrayed the woman as lonely, dependent, or in a nursing home or similar community setting. Limited and stereotyped portrayal of older adults in the media may lead our community to hold implicit biases towards this population. Furthermore, the blatant mis- and underrepresentation is damaging to the psychosocial well-being of those who are aging, which, unless you are Benjamin Button, is every single one of us.

Statistics on representation of older adults in media are shocking. An AARP study[1] recently found that in a random sample of 1,116 images drawn from over 2.7 million images from a variety of domains:

- 46% of the U.S. adult population is 50 or older, but only 15% of images containing adults include people this age
- The images that do include people this age are often homogenous –featuring an overrepresentation of grey hair, capturing older adults as dependent or disconnected, and often at home rather than out in the public (33% of images show people older than 50 at home, whereas only 10% of people under 50 are shown at home)
- Despite spending $84B on tech products by 2030 and the increase in technology ads, just 5% of images of people over 50 show them with technology
- Images do not capture people over 50 at work – One third of the U.S. labor force is over 50 but only 13% of images show a mid-life or older adult in a work setting, compared to the 55% of images of people under 50 shown in a work setting

The implications of these patterns are that they perpetuate ageism - the prejudice or discrimination on the grounds of a person's age. The term was coined by Robert Butler in 1969, who is the founding director of the National Institute on aging in the United States of America. He identified three aspects of ageism, the most pertinent to this case being community attitudes and beliefs to aging that perpetuate stereotypes about older adults[2]. The AARP study is not alone in identifying this destructive phenomenon – a literature review by Loos et. al.[3] summarized the under- and misrepresentation of older adults in the media, studying what they coined "visual ageism." Key takeaways from this review were:

- Older adults are usually given minor or peripheral roles in the media
- Images of older adults do not accurately reflect the characteristics of the actual population
- Older-old population was even less represented than younger-old population, especially in advertising for food, health, and recreation services products

- Increasing trend towards showing positive attributes of younger-old people from 1950-1990: we may still be in a shift towards promoting healthy lifestyle choices in order to age "well"
- Encountering such stereotypes in the media can negatively impact the self-esteem, health status physical wellbeing, and cognitive performance of older people

As research shows, "pictures can injure[3]" the psychosocial wellbeing of older-adults due to continuously perpetuated stereotypes in the community. This affects people of all ages, allowing implicit bias to manifest in media consumers. When this skewed representation is the majority of exposure a young person has to older adults, it leads to the erosion of respect, compassion, and empathy for older adults. More accurate exposure through media may encourage youth to volunteer with older adults or pursue a career working with older adults. Furthermore, they can be more effective while doing so because there is no barrier of preconceived notions, and people can begin to focus on the person in front of them and their specific needs rather than what they assume from the media they have consumed.

Ageism in the media can also damage and distort middle-aged adults' self-image and mental health, especially for women. Products and procedures such as anti-wrinkle creams and Botox are often marketed to reduce the appearance of aging. Ultimately aging is inevitable and the trend to look young is damaging to society. Endorsing a celebration of healthy aging within the media by promoting products with SPF or fitness routines to stay active would help shift stereotypes away from the notion that the effects of aging should be hidden. On an individual level, it would be helpful to stop using phrases like "You're __ years old? You don't look a day past __!" and other common "compliments" that actually rely on the assumption that aging is "bad" or unwanted. Furthermore, hold other's accountable when you hear the phrase being used and use it as an example to explain the detrimental effects of ageism and our society promotion of youth as beauty.

Ultimately, the media is a giant beast and it is hard to make major changes within something so mighty. Because "media" is a compilation of many different sources, it may be hard to direct change towards one certain entity. Rather, change begins with the equal and accurate representation of older adults in the media. Realizing that older adults are included in this discriminatory practice is the first step towards an upward trend in positive, accurate representation. As individuals, we should always be aware of the bias we pick up from the media we consume and how these biases show up in our community and how they affect others. We should inspire others' toward change with our own content; posting pictures of older adults in your life as part of your normal feed (with their permission) is a great way to increase their representation in society. Ageism in the media is abundant and affects all groups of people. We must raise awareness of the distorted practice and do our part to portray a more inclusive and representative society.

References:

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3. Loos E, Ivan L. Visual ageism in the media. In: L Ayalon, C Tesch-Römer, eds. *Contemporary Perspectives on Ageism*. 2018: 163- 176.