



critical media project

Topic Overview: Age

have you ever wondered...

...why teenagers and young adults are represented more often than other age groups in the media?

...why there are far fewer women over 40 as the leads of movies or TV shows?

...why media frequently portrays older men dating younger women as the norm?

key concepts

- Aging is a biological and societally-based process associated with a variety of different identities
- Different cultures and societies have different expectations associated with different ages or life-stages
- The expectations associated with certain ages (as well as how they are valued societally) has changed over time
- The labeling of different generations (“Baby Boomers”, “Generation X”, “Millennials”) is based in demographics, or statistics that are associated with population-based data, and these demographic/generational labels both create and perpetuate certain expectations associated with different age groups
- Ageism is a form of discrimination based on age

keywords

ageism, demographics, social norms

the big picture

Aging is a process that involves the accumulation of physical, psychological, and social changes over time. Some changes are positive, like the development of emotional maturity and wisdom; others are less positive, such as physical and mental deterioration. Some changes are valued differently based upon who you are-- for example, while the development of wrinkles and grey hair is often seen as “distinguished” for men, it is generally seen less positively for women. Aging as a term is associated with adulthood-- even though children technically experience the aging

process, we tend to refer to childhood and adolescence as “development”, and “aging” once a person has reached adulthood.

Age is a transient part of our identity: as we grow older, the identity associated with our age changes. Our age directly affects what we can and cannot do, how we are treated, and how we engage with others. Our ideas of how we interact with people on an everyday basis is often directly or indirectly influenced by our ages, whether or not we are even conscious of it. In some languages, the age of the speaker in relation to others determines what words it is appropriate for them to use.

Different life stages carry specific stereotypes: the rebellious, foolhardy teenager; the immature twenty-something who is overwhelmed by adult life; the overworked, middle-aged parent; the fifty-something having a “mid-life crisis”; the wise (or senile) elder. The media we consume often relies on and promotes these stereotypes and specific age archetypes that, in turn, shape how we view people of certain ages and life stages. Media representations are often based off of preconceived notions about how certain age groups behave-- or should behave.

In many cultures, stopping or slowing the aging process has been a fascination-- if not an obsession. From the Renaissance explorers in quest for the legendary Fountain of Youth to the modern day cosmetics and plastic surgery markets, looking and feeling an “ideal” age is a priority for many. Unfortunately, when certain life stages or age ranges are valued more highly over others, it can result in “ageism”, or age-based bias. Victims of ageism are treated subordinately or negatively because of their age, and this type of discrimination can happen to younger or older people. Ageism often interacts with other forms of prejudice, like racism or sexism. In Hollywood, for example, ageism is strongly linked to sexism and racism: there are far fewer roles for women after they reach a certain age, and this can be even more of an issue for women of color.

age in everyday life

Have you ever heard anyone say, “respect your elders” or “children should be seen and not heard?” Have you ever been told that asking someone their age is offensive or rude? These social scripts may seem normal or strange to you depending on your cultural background. Age-related observations or rules are often based in culturally-based perceptions that influence certain social norms.

Most societies have created laws that are age-specific, underscoring how different ages and periods of life are perceived, trusted, and valued. These laws often change based upon the country or region that you are in. You must be a certain age to drive a car, to vote, to drink, to serve in the military, to retire, or to get “senior” discounts. You are required to attend school during a set age range. Some of these ages are celebrated as milestones in our lives: the Bar/Bat Mitzvah, the Quincenara, and the Sweet Sixteen all mark different rituals pertaining to the advent of adulthood in different cultures. In the

United States and many other Western countries, 18 is considered the age of legal adulthood, where individuals can make decisions without the permission of a legal guardian.

The values and expectations associated with various ages and life stages varies across different societies and cultures, and has also changed over the course of history. In Western civilizations, children were once considered a valuable source of labor who were expected to pull their weight on the farm or in the factory. Thanks to a variety of social and cultural reforms in the mid-1800s, that expectation changed: children (and childhood) are now seen as precious entities that deserve to be protected at all costs. In another example, the category of “teenagers” developed in the United States in the 1950s, as both social mores and the role of consumer capitalism changed in the post-WWII era. While most societies now see the teen years and adolescence as a separate life stage from childhood and adulthood, this is a relatively recent development that varies across different cultures.

why it all matters... food for thought

You may have heard of the term “demographics” to describe statistics about different groups of people. Age-based demographic groups-- for example, 18 to 34, 35 to 54, 55 to 64-- are used to understand how different behaviors and characteristics change depending on age. These ideas about age are especially important in media and consumer marketplaces where stories and products are created to specifically target certain demographic categories. These demographic groups are given labels (for example, baby boomers or millennials), grouped into generations (Gen X, Y, or Z), and are associated with certain characteristics, behaviors, attitudes, tastes and income levels (for example, dependent adults, double income/no kids, young upwardly mobile professional, starting a family).

Many demographic groups are considered more important than others because of the cultural value we associate with them. For example, 18-34 year olds have long been considered the most valuable demographic for advertisers--even though they tend to have less money than other age groups-- because youth is highly prized in Western society, and advertisers want their products to be associated with “cool” consumers. The value placed on different demographics determines how much money media companies can charge for their advertising-- if they have a TV show that is watched by a lot of people in their 20s, for example, they will make more money than if they have a show that is loved by 70 year olds. This in turn shapes the types of media properties and products that get made-- for example, which TV shows are developed.

The decisions that media companies make about which stories are more “valuable” than others has wide-ranging effects. Stories about older women, for example, are not considered to be as commercially viable as stories about older men; consequently, actors over 40 who are women often have a harder time finding work. This is even more so the case for actors of color, who have a smaller number of roles available to them to begin with.

As you look through the media examples on this site, use them along with this overview as building blocks and avenues to dig deeper into how different ages are portrayed...and ask questions. When we think critically about how representations of age circulate in the media, we might start by asking:

- How are people of certain ages represented in media? How do they look? How do they talk? How do they behave?
- What kind of narratives are common for characters who are children, teenagers, young adults, middle aged, the elderly?
- What kind of news stories do you typically see about children, teenagers, young adults, middle aged, the elderly?
- How are advertisements and other media created with particular ideas (even assumptions) based on your age?
- What stereotypes do you notice for specific age demographics in media? Does this affect how you think about people of these ages in real life?
- What impact do you think these representations have on the opportunities and possibilities for individuals of certain ages in their personal and professional lives?
- Do you see certain ages more often than others in the media? What sort of an impact do you think this has?

select sources:

Viviana Zelizer - [Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children](#)

Derek Thompson - [A Brief History of Teenagers](#)