Repositório ISCTE-IUL

Title Page

Title: Images of Old Age in YouTube: Destabilising Stereotypes

Authors' names: Maricel Oró-Piqueras and Sibila Marques

Maricel Oró-Piqueras. Universitat de Lleida. Pl. Víctor Siurana, 1. 25003 Lleida (Spain). Email address: maricel.oro@dal.udl.cat

Sibila Marques. Centre for Psychological Research and Social Intervention (CIS), ISCTE-IUL, Av. das Forças Armadas, 1649-026, Lisbon, Portugal. Email address: sibila.marques@iscte.pt

Abstract

This article presents an analysis of the most viewed YouTube videos under the labels "old age", "older age" and "senior citizens". As powerful sources that transmit cultural information which either perpetuates or undermines cultural stereotypes at a worldwide level, channels of information such as YouTube offer a valuable glimpse at those images of ageing and old age which are shared and consumed by nowadays viewers. This study offers a semiotic analysis based on the representations of older people as well as the contexts in which they appear taking into account previous studies which focused on the representation of older people in media. The results reveal a broadly positive representation of older people, with the majority of the videos portraying a counter-stereotypic image of this age group. This overall trend represent an interesting and destabilizing path that strengthens the efforts against ageism and age discrimination in our societies.

Introduction

With the popularisation of mobile phones and tablets which allow the consulting of internet at any moment, channels of information such as YouTube have become powerful sources that transmit cultural information which either perpetuates or undermines cultural stereotypes. When considering images of older adults, popular media, that is, television, newspapers and magazines, have been identified as "important resources for individuals to learn about the world in general, and cultural discourses within certain domains more specifically" (Williams, Ylänne and Wadleigh, 2007, p. 2). Due to the impact of advertising campaigns both in television and written press, advertising has been the focus of analysis to discern stereotypical cultural images, both positive and negative, related to old age and ageing. In their respective studies, Williams, Ylänne and Wadleigh (2007) and Lee, Carpenter and Meyers (2007) argue that the advertising campaigns they analyse, based on the margarine Olivio, in the first case, and on various television advertisements, in the second case, provide positive images of ageing always attached to health care and financial management. As Lee et al. argues, "[m]issing are portrayals that reflect the wide range of experience people have with aging" (2007, p. 29).

This study will focus on the representations of older adults in YouTube videos. As opposed to advertising campaigns, in YouTube videos images are not selected by advertisers with the final aim of making a product popular, but it is the same viewers all over the world who select the clips they like and share them through the multiple web 2.0 resources; that is, mobile phones, tablets and computers. Sara E. Lillie (2007) defines YouTube as one of those "[m]ass media channels [that] allow a source of one or few to quickly reach an audience of many, by spreading information, creating knowledge, and changing attitudes" (p. 267). For Lillie (2007), YouTube is a "hybrid communication channel" (p. 267) since it is mass media but it also stimulates social interaction. In this respect, Shifman (2011) defines YouTube as a form of "participatory culture" in which "old consumers or audiences have gradually become producers and distributors of new content" (p. 189). Kelly, Fealy and Watson (2011)

acknowledge YouTube as the "most popular video-sharing website and the most visited one" (p. 1805). For Kelly, Fealy and Watson (2011), "identity is socially constructed through public discourses" (p. 1805) and in their article "The image of you: Constructing Nursing Identities in YouTube", they consider YouTube as a valuable and very rich source from which to discern positive and negative stereotypes related to nursing. The parameters chosen for the present study consisted of the most viewed six video clips with a duration of less than four minutes recorded on the 14th March 2015 under the search terms "old people", "older people" and "senior people" with real older people in them (that is, those clips with only references to older people or old age or younger people acting as old people were discarded). These terms are frequently used to address common people. Some studies suggest that specific terms such as "senior people" would be perceived in a more positive manner than "old people" or "older people" (Weiters & Dewitte, 2005). In this study, we were interested in using these terms to verify whether there would significant differences in the YouTube videos captured by these terms.

This study does not have the aim of discerning why viewers choose the videos under the labels "old age", "older people" and "senior citizen" that have been captured and will be analysed; its main objective is to identify the cultural images and stereotypes related to old age and older people that are recurrently consumed and shared by YouTube viewers. The videos under analysis will be the six most viewed videos for "old people", "older people" and "senior citizens". The first four videos for "old people" and "older people" are the same; hence, we will present the results for these two terms together. On the contrary, the videos under the label "senior citizens" do no coincide with any of the videos for "old people" and "older people".

"Old people" and "Older people"

The two most viewed YouTube video clips under the labels "old people" and "older people" are entitled "Mayo Clinic atrium piano, charming older couple" and "The Zimmers, My

Generation". The first one was uploaded six years ago and it has 10,666.825 views; the second one was uploaded seven years ago and it has 5,845.969 views. Both clips portray older adults within musical contexts. In "Mayo Clinic atrium piano", two caucasian older persons, a male and a female, are playing the piano very skilfully. The tune they play is very lively and even jokey. They are not only standing up but also do a small performance consisting of shifting places in the piano. The clip finishes with a big clap and ovation from the occasional passer-bys who witness the performance. In the case of "The Zimmers, My Generation", a group of British citizens perform a version of the song "My Generation", released as a single in 1965. The Zimmers are a band that resulted from a BBC 2 programme entitled "Power to the People: The Great Granny Chart Invasion" broadcast in May 2007. After "a three-part series of mischievous documentaries" (2007), as BBC 2 defines the programme in their webpage, the Zimmers continued working together and recorded an album. In the clip, images of the lead singer recording the song are combined with images of the other members of the band, either singing, dancing, planning, crossing Abbey Road while shooting the logo of the band and first album by parodying the Beatles or destroying their guitars. In both clips, the older people implied are presented as active and energetic as well as skilful. In the case of "The Zimmers"'s clip there is a clear reivindication behind their appropriation and parodying of music associated with youth culture such as the hit of "The Who" and logo set in Abbey road that the Beatles used. At the end of the day, The Zimmers are those young people who sang, followed and admired these two bands in the sixties and seventies. In this sense, old age is not presented as a separate life phase but as a continuum from youth, to middle age to old age in which abilities acquired from youth, such as playing a musical instrument and singing, have continued and improved over a lifetime. Moreover, these two clips question the assumption that creativity declines in old age and support Anne Wyatt-Brown's (1991) thesis who supports that creativity either continues or may take even take new routes in later life.

In the next two most viewed clips from YouTube channel under the labels "old people" and "older people" are entitled "Never honk at old people", uploaded eight years ago and with 5,363.323 views, and "What Old People do for Fun", uploaded nine years ago and with 4,812.053 views, the older protagonists are also caucasian and they are set within a realistic context. In "Never honk at old people", a young man with an expensive convertible honks at an older lady as she is standing in a zebra crossing. As the lady crosses at a slow pace, she hits the car with her bag and makes the airbag from the driver seat go off. In the case of "What do Old People do for Fun", an older couple in a car play a trick on a younger person driving on the opposite side of the road. Whereas the older man is driving, the woman takes a fake stirring wheel and pretends to be turning the car towards the younger driver who is circulating on the opposite side of the road. As a consequence, the younger driver turns the wheel with a sudden move, the car loses control for a few seconds and ends up on the other side of the road. In both clips, the scene is presented in a kind of beaucolic atmosphere. In "Never honk at old people" an apparently sweet fragile old woman is waiting to cross the road in what seems to be a residential area, whereas in "What do Old People do for Fun", the couple is driving quietly along a road with trees and the main soundtrack of Mrs Robinson's film is playing at the background. In both cases, what seem to be the beginning of scenes with little action going on due to association of older people to "warmth but incompetence" (Cuddy, Norton & Fiske 2005, p. 268) result in shocking ones due to the fact that the reactions and behaviour of the older persons in the scenes are not expected. In both cases, they show themselves as decisive and cunning and as competent in taking care of themselves.

The two next YouTube clips under the label "old people" are entitle "82 year old tryin pop rocks", uploaded five years ago and with 3,689.350 views; and "Old Man Falls on Escalator original", uploaded seven years ago and with 3,528473 views. In the first videoclip, the camera focuses on an older woman who is asked to try pop rocks for the first time in her

life. The camera records the sensations this older woman has while having the pop rocks. Whereas the woman is sitting on her sofa with a blanket on top of her, which may be read as a symbol of fragility by some viewers, the reaction of the woman breaks with this image as she starts laughing and saying "it is wonderful". Thus, she is presented as quite a daring character rather than a close-minded and easily frightened one. On the other hand, "Old Man Falls on Escalator original" reinforces the image of older people as fragile and incompetent described by Cuddy, Norton and Fiske (2005). The clip shows a camera recording the escalators of a commercial center, probably a security camera. An older man carrying a bag loses his equilibrium and lets his body fall down the escalators. Instead of trying to stand up again, the man just follows the movement of the escalators until he finally manages to sit down. This video clip is in line with Margaret Cruickshank's (2002) definition of old age as unsuccessful ageing as opposed to "sucessful ageing" and which she defines as "thought less intelligent, judged solely by appearance, encouraged to intimate the dominant group, figures of fun, scapegoated" (p. 4). In other words, when an older person shows signs fragility, even though it may be a fragility shared by anyone at any age since a child or a younger person can also lose their equilibrium and fall down, it is seen as a negative trait directly related to old age understood as decline.

Under the label "older people", the videos that follow are "85 year old best friends, this will make your day", uploaded two years ago and with 3,076.877 views, and "What old people think about Gay Sex", uploaded one year ago and with 1,138.956 views. In the first video, a journalist interviews two American men in their mid-eighties who had been best friends for a long time. In the clip, the journalist asks them about contemporary forms of communication such as facebook and emailing, and about popular culture and music. Despite the fact that they are not familiar neither with facebook nor with the popular culture references the journalist mentions, they answer his questions with humour and wit. When considering the stereotypes described by Cuddy, Norton and Fiske (2005) as well as the stereotypes analysed

by Mary Lee Hummert (1990), the two eighty-year-old protagonists of these video clips are presented as Cuddy's (2005) "warmth and incompetent" older men and Hummert's (1990) "perfect grandparents" (p. 182). According to Hummert's (1990) study, "Multiple Stereotypes of Elderly and Young Adults: A Comparison of Structure and Evaluation", a very low percentage of the young informants in their study (only a 9 %) attributed the stereotype "perfect grandparent" to the age range 60-64 or earlier. In this respect, the two grandparents portray a positive image of old age since the image the journalist is offering is not associated to negative stereotypes; however, it is still a restrictive one implied by the humorous implications derived from the journalist's questions which relate the two old men in the video clip with Cuddy's (2005) "warmth but incompetent". "What old people think about Gay Sex" presents a number of older persons, of different ages, gender and race, giving their opinion about gay sex, and sex in general. The video clip also has humorous overtones however, on the one hand, it presents old age and sex as compatible; actually, it is implied that sex is part of anyone all their life. On the other hand, the video openly deals with a topic which has been considered taboo, in an entertaining and suggestive way. Ann P. Svilan (1981) and Rebecca L. Jones (2002) conducted research on opinions and habits in relation to sex of informants in their seventies and eighties and compared them to two well-rooted popular beliefs; namely, pleasant sexuality is the terrain of the young and beautiful and the cultural construct that sexuality in old age is repulsive. Their studies showed that, as they had already sensed, not only were their informants sexual beings in the sense that they felt sexual desire, but the pursuit and continuation of intimate relationships actually improved the general well-being of their informants.

"Senior Citizens"

The YouTube video clips recorded under the search term "senior citizens" present both positive and negative portrayals of old age. The first video clip recorded, entitled "Seniors vs

Seniors", uploaded a year ago and with 2.016.737 visualisations portray a contest between "seniors", that is, older people, and "seniors", that is, high school seniors. The participants of both groups are asked to pursue three different tests – recognising a famous character, taking an original 'selfie' and dancing. The contest ends with the message "Everyone wins. Seniors are the best". This video clip has the clear aim of breaking with negative and restrictive stereotypes in relation to both young and old people. Through the three tests they have to pursue, the protagonists of both teams are asked about popular culture, technology and physical ability and creativity.

The next two video clips under the label "senior citizens" are not so positive in terms of stereotyping. "Pitbull. International Love Parody. Senior Citizen Love ft. Chris Brown" was the second most viewed video with 1.603.480 visualisation and uploaded two years ago. The clip corresponds to one of Pitbull's songs. It is recorded in an old people's home in which older characters of different race and gender are presented in exaggerated clown-like sexual attitudes. The clip may be read as a controversial one since, on the one hand, it presents older people as sexually active and, in this respect, it challenges one of the most powerful taboos related to old age. On the other hand, the blunt language of the lyrics as well as the parodying attitude of the older people who appear in the clip clearly relate it to Cruickshank's (2002) definition of old age as "figures of fun and scapegoated" (p. 4). The third most viewed video under the label "senior citizen" is entitled "My new haircut. Senior citizen edition", it has 1.370.950 visualisations and it was uploaded seven years ago. In this case, the older person in the video is an older man who represents a number of negative stereotypes in him. He is rude, repulsive and fragile. He keeps on using offensive language and has a sexist discourse. In this respect, the video clip relies on negative stereotypes which are meant to be funny but which are clearly very restrictive and ageist. The image of the old person present in this clip coincides with one of Haim Hazan's (1994) deep rooted stereotypes in Western culture described in his *Old Age. Constructions and Deconstructions* and which he defines as "conservative, inflexible

and resistant to change" (p. 30). The other stereotypes Hazan (1994) lists are: senile, an image of powerlessness and dependence, obsessed with the past and depressed, unhappy and with a sense of failure.

The fourth most viewed YouTube video clip under "senior citizens" is entitled "Senior citizen opens fire on robbers of internet café", it was uploaded two years ago and has 419.629 visualisation. The video clip is a short piece of news in which an older man, an American citizen of sixty-three, shoots at two younger men who get into an internet café with a gun and terrorise the people there in order to get their valuables. In the piece of news, the old man is presented as a hero since the reporter explains that he admitted he was afraid but decided to act in order to prevent someone to be hurt. In this case, the old man is presented as a brave and competent person who, despite his fear, the tension as well as the chaos of the situation, is able to keep a clear man and protect the costumers in the café from being attached.

The two last top video clips in terms of visualisations tagged "senior citizens" are "Sexy at 75", with 404.471 visualisations, and "Senior citizens dancing to 'Turn Down for What '" with 357.308 visualisation. Both of them were uploaded three years ago. In "Sexy at 75" we find a woman of seventy-five knitting on a sofa and answering to the questions a voice in off asks her, someone who calls her "old" when she explains she is seventy-five. At that specific moment, the female protagonist of the clip stands up and shows her cleavage at the audience saying "who do you call old?". "Senior citizens dancing" is a compilation of images of different older people at the techno song 'Turn Down for What'. In both videos, we are presented with older citizens who seem quite active and who are physically agile; even some creativity can be discerned from the knitting activity of the older woman in the first video and from the way the different old people dance. Still, the humorous undertones of both videos point out to the fact that the reactions of the older people in these clips are not the expected ones. They are not presented according to the traditional negative characteristics that Hazan (1994) identifies; on the contrary, both clips break with the identification of old age with

senility, powerlessness and unhappiness. However, their older appearances do not match with their behaviour and, thus, they are seen as funny and, probably, not appropriate.

In the YouTube video clips analysed under the labels "old people", "older people" and "senior citizens", the protagonists were Caucasian men and women in their mid-seventies onwards with visible traits of old age, such as white hair and wrinkled skin, and a healthy appearance. "What old people think about Gay Sex" it is the only clip in which African-American older citizens give their opinion on sex. In their studies, both Lee, Carpenter and Meyers (2007) and Williams, Ylänne and Wadleigh (2007) point out to the fact that the advertisements they analyse in their studies are still focused on Caucasian older men and women, whereas other races are left out from the picture.

Conclusions

The analysis of the most viewed videos in YouTube related with old age and ageing revealed an interesting and unexpected pattern. Multiple evidences suggest a prevalent ageist and negative vision of older people, commonly shared by several actors across different societal backgrounds (Marques, 2015). Recent evidences also show a predominantly negative image of older people in internet sites, such as Facebook (Levy, 2014). However, this does not seem to be the case in the present study. Of the fourteen videos analysed, eight portray older people in a conterstereotypic manner, showing older people as competent, innovative and sexually active. One of the videos ("Senior vs Seniors") has, in fact, the specific aim to desconstruct ageist stereotypes making an explicit positive comparison between older and younger characters and showing that competence prevails regardless of age. These promising results for the fight against ageism seem to be in line with the results of other studies showing and increased positive tendency of images of ageing portrayed in other types of media such as television (Prieler et al., 2015). Either way, it is important to verify that three of the more visualised videos ("Old Man Falls on Escalator original", "My new haircut. Senior citizen edition" and

"Pitbull. International Love Parody. Senior Citizen Love ft. Chris Brown") still portray older people in a very negative, even insulting manner, thus showing the ageist representation still existing in our contemporary societies. Surprisingly, two of these videos were connected with the "Senior citizens" label, indicating that, at least in YouTube there is not a clear tendency to see this label in a more positive manner than "older people" or "old people".

We believe the results of this paper have important and meaningful implications in our ageing societies. Given the number of visualisations and its possible impact, the results presented in this paper represent a very innovative and significant contribution to discern the ways in which older people are perceived in the present moment. The selection of clips analysed are informative of the pictures of ageing exposed to millions of people all over the world and it also reveals the enormous potential for change that the YouTube channel may have if used in the right way in an increasingly digital, social-networking era.

Works Cited

Cuddy, A.J.C., Norton, M.I. & Fiske, S.T. (2005). This Old Stereotype: The Pervasiveness and Persistence of the Elderly Stereotype. *Journal of Social Issues*, *61*, 2, 267-285. DOI: 10.1111/j.1540-4560.2005.00405.x

Cruikshank, M. (2002). *Learning to be Old. Gender, Culture and Aging*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.

Hazan, H. (1994). *Old Age. Constructions and Deconstructions*. Cambridge: University Press.

Hummert, M.L. (1990). Multiple Stereotypes of Elderly and Young Adults: A Comparison of Structure and Evaluations. *Psychology of Aging*, *5*, 2, 182-193. DOI: 10.1037/0882-7974.5.2.182

Jones, R. L. (2002). 'That's very rude, I shouldn't be telling you that': Older Women talking about sex. *Narrative Inquiry*, *12*, 1, 121-143. DOI: 10.1075/ni.12.1.18jon

Kelly, J., Fealy, G.M. & Watson, R. (2012). The image of you: constructing nursing identities in YouTube". *Journal of Advanced Nursing, 68*, 8,1804-181. DOI: 10.1111/j.1365-2648.2011.05872.x

Lee, M.M., Carpenter B. & Meyers, L.S. (2007). Representations of older adults in television advertisements. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 21, 23-30. DOI:10.1016/j.jaging.2006.04.001

Levy, B. R., Chung, P. H., Bedford, T., & Navrazhina, K. (2014). Facebook as a site for negative age stereotypes. *The Gerontologist, 54,* 2, 172-176. DOI: 10.1093/geront/gns194

Lillie, S. E. (2008). Diffusion of Innovation in the Age of YouTube. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine, 34*, 3, 267. DOI: 10.1016/j.amepre.2007.11.009

Marques, S., Swift, H.J, Vauclair, C.M., Lima, L.M., Bratt, C. & Abrams, D. (2015). Being old and ill'across different countries: Social status, age identification and older people's subjective health. *Psychology & health, 30*, 6, 699-714. DOI: 10.1080/08870446.2014.938742

Prieler, M., Kohlbacher, F., Hagiwara, S. & Arima, A. (2015). The representation of older people in television advertisements and social change: the case of Japan. *Ageing and Society, 35*, 4, 865-887. DOI: 10.1017/S0144686X1400004X

"The Zimmers" *BBC2*. Wednesday, 2 May 2007. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/power_to_the_people/6615695.stm.

Sviland, A.P. (1981). Sexuality and Intimacy in Later Life. In Kastenbaum, R. (ed.), *Old Age in the New Scene* (pp. 15-25). New York: Springer.

Weiters, B. & Dewitte, S. (2006). Evaluation of age-related labels by senior citizens. *Psychology and Marketing,* 23, 783-798. DOI: 10.1002/mar.20129

Williams, A., Ylänne,V. & Wadleigh, P. M. (2007). Selling the 'Elixir of Life': Images of the elderly in an Olivio advertising campaign. *Journal of Aging Studies, 21*, 1-27. DOI: 10.1016/j.jaging.2006.09.001