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Fostering collective impact in arts-based interventions and cultural programmes for creative well-being of older adults

By DOHEE LEE*, INKERI AULA* & MASOOD MASOODIAN*

Abstract

Despite growing interest in research into how the arts impact older adults' health and well-being, there are many related complexities that are yet to be fully understood. This is partly due to the fact that documentation and analysis of arts-based interventions and cultural programmes for older adults in the public service domain are relatively new and uncommon. Furthermore, the effective implementation and the delivery of such interventions to ageing people generally involve many stakeholders, often with divergent interests and priorities. This article presents an interview-based study that explores the diverse experiences of professionals from different sectors who have been involved in delivery of arts-based interventions and cultural programmes for older adults in South Korea and Finland. The study maps out similarities and differences in the approaches taken and the challenges faced in such interventions, using the five themes of the narrative interviews that have been conducted. The study findings highlight the need for supporting collective efforts among the diverse stakeholders to provide effective arts-based interventions and cultural programmes for ageing people. We argue that such efforts will ultimately

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become catalysts for synergetic actions that address the interconnected and encompassing challenges of an ageing society.

Keywords: arts-based interventions, cultural programmes, interdisciplinary collaboration, practice framework, older adults, ageing people.

Introduction

There has been a growing interest in recent years in seeking better provision of services and support mechanisms for older adults in many rapidly ageing societies around the world (Lee et al. 2023; WHO 2015). Similarly, following a significant increase in research into the impact of the arts on health and well-being, both the arts and health sectors have become more interested in the benefits of different arts-based interventions and cultural programmes for older adults (e.g. Cox et al. 2010; Noice et al. 2014).

Despite these developments, the documentation and analysis of arts-based interventions and cultural programmes for older adults in the public service domain are however, relatively new and generally uncommon. Yet, it is also more increasingly acknowledged that such interventions and programmes involve many complexities that need to be better understood, if the aim of the public sector to improve their efficacy and sustainability is to succeed. This is due to the fact that currently it is not clearly known what factors contribute to making arts-based initiatives more effective, or how such initiatives can be sustained long-term in different communities and across cultures.

To address this knowledge gap, we have conducted an empirical study of arts-based interventions and cultural programmes for ageing people. This cross-cultural interview-based study presented here investigates diverse personal experiences of professionals from different sectors who have been involved as stakeholders in arts-based interventions and cultural programmes for older adults in South Korea and Finland. The study examined these two countries because, despite their cultural differences, their rapidly ageing populations pose similar challenges to their policy-makers and fiscal institutions, because of increasing economic constraints placed on their decreasing workforce (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare 2023; OECD 2018). By choosing two countries with similar levels of industrialisation, and presumably different cultures – European

and Asian – and approaches to ageing, we aimed to not only focus on the similarities between them in the ways they target their ageing populations using arts-based interventions and cultural programmes, but also to identify any significant differences they may have on account of their distinct cultural characteristics. Therefore, the goal of this study was to provide a shared understanding of the necessary organisational skills and capacities needed for maintaining effective arts-based interventions and cultural programmes, and to allow making comparisons across the cultural contexts of the two selected countries in their approaches to resolving existing challenges in providing these public services to older adults.

Arts, Health, and Well-Being of Ageing People

Ageism, or discrimination based on age, against older adults is sadly so widespread in our modern world that it affects many different aspects of the lives of ageing people (Comincioli et al. 2022), including the provisions for their healthcare and general well-being. One of the ways of combatting ageism is to consider the impact of creativity as an effective life-long human ability, rather than always focussing only on physical or mental capacity that naturally decreases with ageing. Targeting late-life creativity through arts-based interventions and cultural programmes is indeed a viable and effective means of improving the health and well-being of ageing people (Archibald & Kitson 2020).

The effective implementation and delivery of arts-based interventions and cultural programmes to ageing people are, however, complex processes involving many stakeholders from different sectors – often with divergent interests and priorities. In this article, we briefly review some of the relevant concepts that need to be understood and addressed when bringing together different stakeholders, with their conflicting interests and concerns, in these types of interventions and programmes for older adults.

Client Orientation

Older adults have been increasingly involved in the field of ageing studies as users and co-researchers, by engaging in planning their own

healthcare and other related services (Lee & Masoodian 2023). Bindels et al. (2014) stress that "aging research finds itself in a new situation, with a top-down trend towards consumerism, increased user involvement required by funding agencies and a bottom-up surge of social movements comprised of older people who desire increased control over the decisions which affect their lives" (p. 2). This has given rise to a *client-oriented approach*, which is not only becoming one of the core features of the modern healthcare and social services for ageing people, but also an essential part of older adults' social and cultural rights (Kallio et al. 2022).

In Finland, the national AILI Network[1] for arts-based care for older people has recently developed a system called "Creativity, Art and Cultural Profiling" (Siponkoski 2021), following the client-oriented approach to offering better services by integrating the documentation and assessment of arts-based work with older adult clients. This approach promotes the incorporation of creativity, cultural activities, and arts-based care through a more comprehensive involvement of all the stakeholders concerned, including the older adults and the arts and care professionals (Siponkoski 2021). In addition, the approach aims to create systematic support to better enable older adults to benefit from their cultural rights in their everyday lives by facilitating and standardising information exchange within arts, culture, healthcare, and social welfare sectors (Siponkoski 2021).

The client-oriented approach has also been investigated through several qualitative research conducted with the Finnish health and social care services. As a result of these studies Kallio et al. (2022) have, for instance, identified "a human approach," "the client's rights," and "the perceptions of the client as a responsible party" as the key features of the client-oriented care and services for older adults. According to them, these features enable achieving equality between older adult clients and professionals, while pursuing the clients' best interests, and supporting them in responsible decision-making and service engagement (Kallio et al. 2022).

In comparison, the demand for client-oriented care – also called person-centred care – is increasing in South Korea, due to many older adults these days living in residential care facilities (Chin & Lee 2023).

[1] For more information, see Cutler et al. (2021), especially pp. 11–13 and 20–22.

The main concern, however, is that existing methods and tools of implementing person-centred care used in South Korea are only direct translations of methods and tools used elsewhere, and as such new methods and tools are needed to be developed that more accurately reflect the reality of care facilities provided in South Korea (Chin & Lee 2023). Despite this, there have been numerous evidence-based investigations that examine the effectiveness of client-oriented approaches in different care sectors for older adults in South Korea, including occupational therapy, daycare services, care for people with mild cognitive impairment or dementia, and the like (e.g. Baek & Jung 2016; Chin et al. 2021; Park & Kwon 2019).

The client-oriented approach together with *"person-centred planning"* – which is rooted in the philosophy of partnership and equality – can ultimately provide an important starting point for building a co-productive relationship by empowering hitherto excluded people (Coulson 2007). Therefore, when developing arts-based interventions and cultural programmes for older adults' that target their creative well-being, the approaches taken should be applied – from planning to evaluation – in a holistic way by integrating the collective efforts of the professionals involved from different sectors and the clients themselves – that is, older adults – on the basis of a constructive and substantial partnership.

Collective Effort Towards Collective Impact

Collaborative practice and teamwork are key competencies for working effectively in an interprofessional setting (Suter et al. 2009). In the fields of the arts and health in particular, interdisciplinary work can, however, be rather challenging due to a wide range of disciplines and agencies being involved (Jensen 2019). For this reason, interest in finding new methods for developing and translating related research knowledge into practice has increased in recent years, with the aim of supporting a wide range of stakeholders – including decision-makers, practitioners, and healthcare clients – in learning and altering their attitudes and behaviours (Boydell et al. 2016).

In this regard, effective coordination is clearly an important element of successful collaboration involving stakeholders from different sectors. Fortier and Coulter (2021) highlight that a multifaceted approach to public health services requires understanding the dynamics of

cross-sectoral collaboration, with the capacity to design and coordinate services between the arts, health, social care, and community organisations. Such mutual understanding leads to successful collaboration and relationships while negotiating different mindsets, institutional goals, capacities, and resources (Fortier & Coulter 2021). Banks et al. (2017) point out that the idea of *"co-production"* or *"co-creation"* emerges when many different contributors work together in a coordinated process, and the resulting impact emerges as a *"collective impact"* or *"co-impact."* According to Banks et al. (2017), the concept of collective impact is used in relation to "the context of multiple organizations working together strategically to achieve social change, where interventions are co-designed to tackle 'wicked' (intractable) issues" (p. 543). As such, co-impact is "an umbrella term referring to the generation of change as a result of individuals, groups, organizations working together" (Banks et al. 2017, p. 542).

Based on the aforementioned, we would argue that understanding the dynamics of collective efforts and impact could be the key to addressing global collective challenges, such as those relating to ageing populations. Indeed, various communities and organisations are already adopting a different mindset to bring about large-scale systemic change through collective impact (Turner et al. 2012). Therefore, collective impact would seem like a useful concept to adopt for developing a coordinated approach for effective arts-based interventions and cultural programmes targeting the health and well-being of older adults.

Empirical Study

To investigate the diverse perspectives and experiences of different cross-sector professionals involved in arts-based interventions and cultural programmes for older adults, we have conducted an empirical study in Finland and South Korea between 2019 and 2022. The objective of this comparative study has been to better understand how the notion of client-oriented approach and collective effort is implemented in these types of interventions and programmes in two different cultural settings, as well as other factors that affect the coordination of such interventions.

Method of Study

In this study, we used a form of open interview method which seeks to ascertain personal narratives of the interviewees' experiences (Lee et al. 2023). As narratives are always part of the existing social, cultural, and political settings, in the analysis of this type of interviews it is crucial to consider the context of the "narrative constitution of selves, identities, and social realities" (Hyvärinen 2008, p. 447). Therefore, the use of narratives in this study has focussed on their function as a means of sharing and disseminating *narrative knowledge* in the form of stories and direct accounts of personal experiences (Gabriel 2015). Sharing narratives and experiences about mundane everyday problems or greater global challenges through stories can in fact become a basis for *communities of practice* (Gabriel 2015) and provide diverse complementary perspectives for resolving common concerns. While the concept of narrative knowledge has emerged from organisational studies, it should not be restricted to "folk wisdom" and mitigated as a "surrogate for scientific knowledge," but rather, it should be considered as an important form of tacit knowledge shared among professionals and managers as well, including those working in scientific fields (Gabriel 2015, p. 287; Jetoo et al. 2023). In addition, our study has also relied on the *retrospective* dimension (Freeman 2015) as a valuable feature of narrative interviews, since it allows seeing past events as "episodes that are part of some larger whole" (Freeman 2015, p. 27).

Interviews of Practitioners and Professionals

In this study, seven art practitioners and seven professional staff members from several institutions, cultural foundations, and non-profit organisations were interviewed in Finland and in South Korea. The participants had experience of working on arts-based interventions and cultural programmes with older adults in different settings. Table 1 provides a summary of the study participants' backgrounds and experiences. Due to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic restrictions in place during 2020–21, most of the interviews were conducted online using video conferencing tools, with a few of them taking place face-to-face or through email. All the interviews were conducted individually and took 60–90 minutes each.

Table 1. A summary of the interviewed participants' backgrounds and experiences

Participant ID	Job title or position	Profession	Description of the profession and institution
South Korea			
KP1	Theatre producer, instructor	Practitioner	Works in a community theatre belonging to a local cultural cooperative association in Seoul. They aim to regenerate an "Old Future" in the middle of a modern city, contributing to a strong sense of community and community pride among local long-term residents.
KP2	Theatre producer, instructor	Practitioner	Founder of a cultural association based in the northeast of South Korea. This area is relatively underprivileged in cultural engagement. They provide various artistic activities for the residents, taking on social responsibility for community-based arts education.
KP3	Art educator, director	Practitioner and institutional official	Director of a cultural community centre in the southeast of South Korea. The centre provides various arts and social service programmes for older adults in areas with large ageing populations.
KP4	A team leader	Institutional official	Works in a provincial art and cultural foundation based in the northeast of South Korea. These public foundations in each province provide various cultural and artistic events for the residents. This foundation promotes enjoying art on a daily basis and aims to provide residents with a full sense of cultural experience.
KP5	Project manager	Institutional official	Same as above for KP4.

(Continued)

Table 1. *(Continued)*

Participant ID	Job title or position	Profession	Description of the profession and institution
KP6	Project manager	Institutional official	Works in a local district art and cultural foundation based in the northwest of Seoul. These public foundations in each district provide different cultural and artistic contents for the residents. This foundation aims to become a local community hub with a central role in establishing arts and culture networks, especially for older adults, by cooperating with several local organisations in the same district working for community empowerment.
KP7	Project manager	Institutional official	Works in a local district art and cultural foundation based in Incheon, South Korea. This foundation aims to make art and culture a part of the daily lives of the residents, by breaking down boundaries and barriers of art and culture.
Finland			
FP1	Art educator, artist	Practitioner	Has a wide range of teaching experience, spending over 20 years, especially with older adults. Offers artistic experiences using diverse art techniques in care homes, community colleges and many different places for older people.
FP2	Art instructor, artist	Practitioner	Makes and uses art as a means to meet new people and improve self-identity. Guides a group of people to make art together at a local community centre, shares knowledge and philosophy of art with them, and encourages their art-making process through peer support.

(Continued)

Table 1. *(Continued)*

Participant ID	Job title or position	Profession	Description of the profession and institution
FP3	Theatre producer, instructor	Practitioner	Works as a practitioner in a social association focussed on memory issues based in western Finland. Focusses on the practice of socially engaged art, organising new group activities in the community, and promoting older adults' health and well-being through artistic experience.
FP4	Community artist, art instructor	Practitioner and institutional official	Works as a permanent community artist for a private art and culture foundation, offering community-based artistic activities for older adults in a rural environment near a small town on the southwest coast of Finland.
FP5	Director	Practitioner and institutional official	Works for a non-profit organisation located in the western part of Finland, aiming to increase the societal value of cultural experiences, and emphasising arts, culture, and creativity as an essential part of human rights, and the importance of cultural services for well-being.
FP6	Project coordinator	Institutional official	Works for a community cooperative in an eastern district of Helsinki. They aim to maintain old neighbourhoods and support local people in the region. They offer a place for organising cultural events, and different courses to help all the residents to mingle together and network.
FP7	Cultural instructor	Institutional official	Works for a city-based residence for older adults in Helsinki, aiming to support self-sufficiency and active life in old age. Working closely with a community care facility next door to the residence, they offer comprehensive services by collaborating with nursing staff, physiotherapists, occupational health therapists, and cultural instructors.

An information sheet explaining the purpose of the study was sent to the participants prior to the interviews. Participation in the interview was completely voluntary and based on informed consent. The study was reviewed by the research ethics committee of Aalto University. The first author conducted the interviews either in English or Korean, depending on whether the interviewees were in Finland or South Korea. All the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the first author. Transcripts were pseudonymised to protect the participants' identities and any confidential information shared during the interviews.

Table 2 provides a summary of the five thematic categories of interview questions, focussing on: **1) motivation and planning**, **2) methods and strategies**, **3) value for older adults**, **4) evaluation and reflection**, and **5) sustainability and networking**. When necessary, the interviewer used examples to prompt the interviewees to elaborate on their experiences by focussing on the *retrospective dimension*. Most of the conversations in the interviews centred on personal experience from organising or facilitating arts-based interventions or cultural programmes for older adults. As discussed earlier, the use of a narrative inquiry method in this study was based on the function of narratives as a means of *sharing knowledge* and

Table 2. Different categories of questions used in the interviews, together with example prompts

Theme categories	Example keyword prompts
1: Motivation and planning	Goal; aim; mission; planning process; promoting programmes; funding resources
2: Methods and strategies	Working strategies; role of practitioners and institutional officials
3: Value for older adults	Value and importance; health benefit (mental and physical); late-life creativity; social impact
4: Evaluation and reflection	Evaluation methods; assessment; measurement; feedback; monitoring and consulting; opportunities and key success factors; challenges and complications
5: Sustainability and networking	Sustainability of programmes; employment; training and seminars; workshops; core elements for collaborative relationships and partnership; ways of communication

personal experiences. Therefore, the objective of the interviews was broader than just hearing about their personal experiences, but rather, the aim was to also find out about their working strategies in a comparative and cross-cultural context.

Data Analysis

The purpose of our interviews was to allow the interviewees to narrate their everyday lives, in their relative entirety, or some interesting parts of them (Nohl 2010). This approach is often used as an analytical framework for understanding a wide spectrum of human activities (DeVereaux & Griffin 2016). Keeping this potential in mind, the first author analysed the transcribed data and notes from the interviews using a content analysis method and iterative thematic analysis process.

Content analysis is a widely used method for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context, which can provide knowledge, new insights, representation of facts, and practical guide to action (Elo & Kyngäs 2008; see also Krippendorff 1980). Content analysis of verbal communication, therefore, produces a broad, but condensed, description of the phenomenon being investigated, and leads to identifying a set of concepts or categories that describe such a phenomenon (Elo & Kyngäs 2008). In this study, the content analysis was carried out inductively by comparing and overlapping the transcripts across all the interviewees' statements under the five theme categories of the interview questions (see Table 2). This allowed generalising the results based on specific instances observed in the study data, and combining them to create general statements (Elo & Kyngäs 2008, see also Chinn & Kramer 1999). The commonly emerging keywords were categorised under the five primary themes of the interview questions without considering the cultural or societal context of the specific country – Finland or South Korea – to allow mapping out similarities across all interview data. After this coding, unique cultural differences between the two countries resulting from their different political and social welfare systems, national characteristics, administrative operations, and so on were identified.

Study Findings

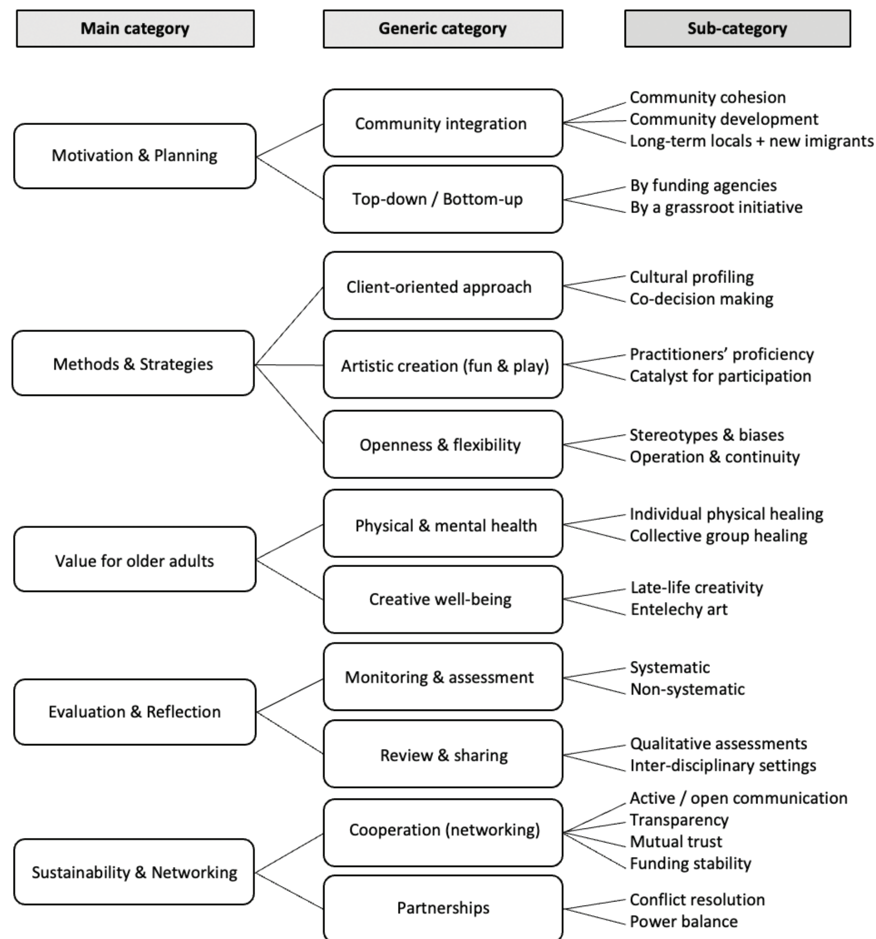
Figure 1 provides an overview summary of the main thematic categories, generic categories, and sub-categories resulting from the content analysis process described above. Here we present the main findings of our study using the five main thematic categories of our interview questions and data analysis. The study provides many valuable insights into how arts-based interventions and cultural programmes are designed, managed, and evaluated in the two countries investigated.

Theme 1: Motivation and Planning

The interviewees shared various different motivations and reasons for initiating arts-based interventions and cultural programmes for older adults. In both countries, the main motivation behind most of these programmes was derived mainly from perpetual societal concerns about the loss – or at least disruption – of community values and older adults' decreasing social engagement. Individual art practitioners and professional staff in organisations considered a range of social issues as threats to better community development. Issues such as the economic and cultural marginalisation of ageing people, and the lack of community cohesion and supportive environments for older people throughout their life-course were perceived as leading to alienation and isolation, particularly in the case of long-term residents of local communities. Therefore, arts-based interventions and cultural programmes were organised to provide equal access to opportunities and build mutual respect between all community residents – both long-term locals and new migrants – and to increase their social engagement within the artistic environment. These interventions and programmes focussed primarily on positive perspectives of artistic engagements, such as having fun time together, or providing occasions for healing while playing for instance with colours and materials. Overall, community integration was one of the primary motivations in both countries for arts-based interventions and cultural programmes.

In one example from Finland, the reason given for offering a community space and organising social and arts events for the local long-term residents was to help everyone mingle and build social networks together as a way of supporting them during a regional development process, in

Figure 1. An overview summary of the outcome of the thematic analysis process.



which social infrastructures such as libraries and community care facilities were relocated to a newly developed area, away from their old neighbourhood, thus leaving the local long-term residents with a weakened

sense of belonging and a feeling that they were alienated and isolated. Talking about this issue, FP6 said:[2] *"Most of the community facilities (e.g. library, youth center, etc.) are moved to the newly developing area, so some of the long-term residents came up with the idea of creating a common place to support old neighbors' social activities. We promoted different events together; for example, distributing program posters around the neighborhood when people take a walk with their dog. Our collective efforts enabled us to continue with our social engagement and make our community active together."*

In comparison, in South Korea the arts-based cultural programmes – especially community-based ones – were needed for immigrants or people who had newly moved to a region due to family reasons or new jobs. In these cases, new people were struggling with integrating into local networks, while the local residents who were born and raised in the region had already established strong relationships amongst themselves. Therefore, arts-based cultural programmes were organised to support community integration in fun and creative ways. In reference to this issue, KP2 explained what this entails in practice when considering a particular locality: *"As this area is a military border zone, most of the residents are made up of the military personnel and their families, foreign immigrants, older people over the age of 60, and housewives. Therefore, the program was planned considering the unique characteristics of the region, and it aimed to create a new community where the dominate natives and marginalized groups of people who are from the outside of the village would actively interact. Our program provided a new opportunity for people to get to know each other and develop community spirit in this area by sharing their concerns and loneliness through artistic ways – a combination of storytelling and drama activities."*

In terms of planning and launching new arts-based interventions and cultural programmes, the two approaches commonly taken are: 1) *top-down* or 2) *bottom-up*. The top-down approach is normally taken when the programmes are funded and developed by, for instance, institutions, municipalities, or foundations. In such cases, at the beginning of the year the major funding agencies announce the annual missions or goals of their programmes, which often stem from emerging social issues. The

[2] The participants' quotes included in this article are transcribed and/or translated into English as closely as possible to what was mentioned. They are not to be considered verbatim.

sub-organisations then either call for artists or art practitioners to apply, or use existing databases to look for local art practitioners who are capable of developing suitable programmes towards their organisational missions. Once the planning phase is completed, in some cases a trial session is carried out with a small group of local older adults. The programmes then gradually expand into larger groups or geographical areas. In some cases, however, the programmes only target a specific community.

A representative example of the top-down approach in South Korea is described by KP7: *"As an art and cultural foundation under a local autonomous entity, we don't call practitioners through an official business announcement but design and plan programs on our own, figuring out needs of the residents or following social agendas. Therefore, we initially sketch a program format (e.g. topic, number of participants, location, class content, frequency, etc.) internally, and then recruit practitioners fitting the purpose. We ask the chosen practitioners for detailed content based on our initial working framework and finalize together, through several rounds of feedback, and including some external consultants."* As this example shows, even in cases of top-down approach, local needs are often identified first.

The bottom-up approach, on the other hand, is usually based on a grassroot initiative, when a programme is started by a civil association or a non-profit organisation. In such cases, a coordinator may gather initial ideas from a community group or the local residents and assist them with the development of the needed programme. Alternatively, a host or an art practitioner may work with a group of participants and collectively plan the programme, taking into account issues such as the participation fee, scheduling, among others. Yet in other cases, individual practitioners or organisations who have already had a long-term relationship with a broad group of partners and networks, may approach funding agencies and pitch their ideas to gain funding and start their own programmes.

One practitioner in Finland, FP3, illustrated a typical way of planning programmes in the Finnish context based on a bottom-up approach: *"As we are funded by a governmental agency, we have a basic protocol and follow certain steps to meet their operational requirements. However, as we mainly pursue a 'bottom-up' approach, we try to identify the wishes of our group of participants thoroughly and design the practices on the basis of communal agreement. This way of planning helps us to sustain our practices in the immediate future, especially when funding ends. Because it's flexible and adaptable to motivate internal*

and external partners (e.g. community college, volunteers, and municipality) to support the program for a longer term." This example shows the importance of community-based bottom-up approach for sustaining the achievements of short-term projects over longer terms.

Theme 2: Methods and Strategies

Based on our study participants' experiences and learnings, we identified three key methodological approaches or strategies in working for, or with, older adults: 1) *client-oriented approach*, 2) *artistic creation focussed on fun and play*, and 3) *openness and flexibility*. These approaches are also related to the roles of art practitioners in terms of their competencies.

Client-Oriented Approach

In a client-oriented approach, the quality of provided services is improved by involving the older adults as active co-producers of those services, rather than merely their customers. Our study participants described how this approach is taken in practice and how it leads to better results in their experience.

One successful client-oriented approach mentioned was through the so-called *cultural profiling.* This concept, which has been used by the aforementioned AILI Network in Finland, refers to an in-depth profiling process that leads to intimate interactions between the practitioners and their older adult participants. The underlying idea is that the art practitioners and institutional officials should identify the regional context in which their target group of older adults is located, and the type of art-based interventions they would need in their specific socio-cultural situation. According to our study participants, following this process has led to the success of the interventions and programmes they have offered, and has affected not only how well the practitioners interact with the older adults to moderate appropriate topics and materials that better reflect their interests, but has also helped the older adults to identify their changing values and goals as they age.

One practitioner in South Korea, KP1, gave a good example of client-oriented approach through cultural profiling in their programme: "*The local long-term residents who lived through the 1970s-1980s suffered from floods in*

1984 and have shared experiences of winning a class-action lawsuit against the government's urbanization policies. Therefore, they have a strong sense of community and community pride, and this unintentionally creates a gap between them and the newly settled younger generation in the village. Drama activities that we provided allowed people to express their feelings and identity using their life-stories. Although many old residents had previously felt alienated from the village and its community programs, which seemed to them implicitly catered to younger generations, experiencing an enjoyable, self-affirming, cross-generational interaction through the storytelling program eased these anxieties." Identification of the cultural profile of the community in this case required the knowledge of the local older people's past experiences and their local history.

Another example of such an approach in Finland, given by a community artist, FP4, shows how understanding the life-history of social context and the relevant interests of the older adults aids in finding effective strategies for working with them: *"I interviewed 13 baby boom generation older women and explored their 'loneliness' by investigating the hidden stories of these older women, not only their well-known roles (e.g., as caregivers for their families). As the participants have lived for most of their lives in a rural environment near a small town, I organized an arts-based project that combined life-stories and textile-making to integrate two of the participants' common interests. The project primarily focused on how they not only work hard as homemakers and farmers but also contribute to community politics and advancement through artistic practices."*

Related examples given by the study participants demonstrated that this type of cultural profiling can be done before the programmes start and continued during their operation. Our participants stressed that the most important element of the cultural profiling process for them has been to limit the involvement of the art practitioners and officials to only inspiring the older adults in deciding all the programme details on their own. In doing so, providing a supportive and safe atmosphere has been crucial for encouraging free conversation among their programme participants. Through this process, the practitioners have been able to effectively elicit the participants' expectations and desires, as well assisting their decision-making process in subtle ways. As such, cultural profiling is seen as the primary tool in a client-oriented approach, which has ultimately allowed the participants to take ownership of their programmes,

has promoted their continuous and active participation, and has boosted their self-esteem.

Artistic Creation Focussed on Fun and Play

Many of our study participants noted that their engagement techniques with older adults were generally based on mutual consent. The practitioners in both countries firmly underlined the power of play-based and fun-focussed creative activities. Such techniques were closely linked to practitioners' proficiency when interacting with older adults. This proficiency was assessed in terms of how they moderate proper activities that reflect their own interests and the type of material they choose to support older adults' effective engagement. In addition, the idea of "play" and "playfulness" was considered as being vital for the success of arts-based interventions and cultural programmes for older adults, especially since a common catalyst for older adults' participation is often to find new challenges and gain new experiences in their lives.

For instance, in South Korea, art educator KP3 emphasised the role of practitioners in terms of developing playful art-based interventions that stem from older participants' own existing fun activities: *"We developed storytelling and puppetry activities using a traditional card game that older people commonly enjoy in real life with their friends. As the image of each card contains aesthetic and philosophical elements such as love, money, and hope, we intended to make it easier for older people to elicit their life experiences and stories through familiar images as reference material."* This example demonstrates how creative activities could be transferred to new fields of art using a familiar form of leisure or social activity such as a card game.

Creativity in these programmes is, of course, not limited to traditional fields of art. In Finland, for example, the community artist FP4 pointed out that small simple material – even household waste – can be a valuable ingredient for encouraging playful creativity that can involve a deeper sense of meaning: *"Once they had done the first arts-based project, they learned how to speak out their mind and express their feelings and thought in creative ways. They felt capable of doing something more, and we decided that in the next project we could go for something that could target nationwide problems. We collected household waste (e.g. plastic packaging) and made garments out of them for a performance to raise awareness of the environmental crisis."*

Our study participants noted that based on their own experiences the play-based and fun-focussed approach encourages older adults to try new things and to have more fun when they take part in creative activities for the first time. While the goals of arts-based interventions and cultural programmes for older adults can vary, depending on the socio-cultural context of each country and community, their underlying aim often remains the same: *"to allow older adults to claim one of their rights as human beings by enjoying arts and culture."* This means that all older adults are entitled to benefit from arts-based interventions and cultural programmes, through recognition of their artistic efforts and achievements – however small they might be – and be provided access to a variety of stimulating fun activities.

Openness and Flexibility

According to our study participants, openness and flexibility are crucial for practitioners when interacting with older adults, as means of combating pervasive stereotypes and biases towards ageing people. While openness is considered as an attitude that practitioners must adopt in treating older adults without any preconceptions, flexibility is necessary for dealing with the inevitable variables that exist when working with older adults. Commonly observed variables among older adults included, in particular, seasonal effects on their overall health, and the level of their enthusiasm for sharing their experiences and stories. These factors seemed to have a significant effect on the operation and continuity of arts-based interventions and cultural programmes. For example, the practitioners mentioned often having to modify their plans and changing the pace of their programmes by monitoring daily mental and physical state of their older adult participants. In addition, the practitioners recalled consciously trying to share opportunities for participation by making sure that all the participants speak equally, while keeping the programme on schedule.

For instance, the cultural instructor FP7 in Finland highlighted the idea of openness and flexibility based on her experience: *"A key strategy for working with older adults is being brave and not too careful. Don't assume or pre-judge anything before interacting with them. Once you're engaged with them, you can see age doesn't matter. However, reading the participants' daily condition and situation is very crucial. Depending on their mood and condition,*

practitioners should be ready to change their planned tasks flexibly. Such flexibility is determined by how to catch subtle signs of a changing situation and how to manage such a situation successfully, taking different approaches." In this example, the instructor's professional competence in maintaining such a strategical approach is clearly invaluable.

Similarly, in South Korea, the project manager KP7 referred to openness and flexibility in working with ageing people: *"The trickiest part of running our programme with older adults was that there were a lot of variables. Firstly, they wanted to talk about their stories too much, even interrupting the proceeding of daily practice. So, time management was really important, in making rules for fair participation. Secondly, long-term programs might drag participants down and make them easily exhausted at some points. So, short-term and play-based interventions were more effective at raising their interests. More importantly, having a better understanding of generational factors in planning programs for older adults must be considered from various angles."* This shows that openness and flexibility is important for combating preconceptions about ageing and for responding to older adults' needs.

Theme 3: Value for Older Adults

In our study a wide range of artistic interventions resulted in valuable outcomes for older adults, not only in terms of their physical and mental health but also in their creative well-being. From the perspective of physical health, engaging in arts-based interventions is seen as supporting the healing process. For instance, the art educator FP1 in Finland described: *"One of my students who had a stroke before has been greatly assisted in recovering her physical health by art-making. It helped to connect all parts of her body – brain, vision, hand movements – when she saw details in pictures and tried to draw them by hand simultaneously."*

Furthermore, arts-based interventions for older adults are also seen as important for reducing their negative feelings and improve their moods through creative interactions within collective group healing processes. According to our study participants, art-making practices have helped, for example, older people deal with their grief after losing close friends by changing their moods through working with colours and imaginative activities, or making new social connections with others facing the same grief.

In addition to identifying the diverse impacts of arts-based interventions and cultural programmes on health and well-being, our study also focussed on investigating late-life creativity and how artistic engagements catalyse the potentials of creativity in later stages of life. In this regard, our study showed that having new experiences and opportunities through such interventions and programmes encouraged older adults to open new doors, explore their possibilities and go beyond existing constraints. Artistic engagements inspired discovery of creative talents and ultimately promoted the older adult participant' self-esteem, confidence, efficacy, and overall wellness through learning new ways of self-expression. Our interviewee FP5 in Finland called this *"entelechy art,"* in referring to redefining one's own competences in older age through creativity.

Interestingly, the idea of *entelechy art* was identified in the South Korean context as well. In general, older people in South Korea have endured severe ordeals such as wars and economic crises. Throughout their lives, the current generation of older adults have worked hard, in order to nurture their children and look after their families. Participating in arts and culture has in the past been almost unthinkable for these older adults. Their physical suffering and repetitive work throughout their lives have, however, impacted their physical bodies, forming aesthetically skilled bodies which can be seen as creative and artistic. In other words, their aesthetic development has been shaped by, and derived from, their own life experiences. This observation was made by KP3 in South Korea: *"Once they [older adult participants] started to be engaged, we could see how talented they are with embodied craft experiences. For example, when making a doll's head by cutting a large cube of sponge, they created beautiful and sophisticated sculptures, as they had been slicing things like persimmons and pumpkins in their lifelong jobs. At that point, they realized 'the years' they had been through with their body was 'art' in itself, and so started to participate in all programs with greater confidence. I saw that late-life creativity can ultimately be revealed through aesthetic experience cultivated throughout life."*

In addition to the qualitative interviews themselves, in this study we also reviewed empirical findings in the final reports of a few programmes in Finland and South Korea, provided to us by our study participants. For example, the arts-based programme in which FP3 was involved in Finland focussed on community engagement and social well-being of older adults. In this programme, 83% of the study participants (N 92) answered

"YES" to the programme improving their well-being as a whole, 60% to it having a positive effect on their health, 86% to becoming more socially active and 88% to feeling less lonely after the programme.

Similarly, a programme in which KP6 was involved in South Korea offered storytelling-based drama activities for older adults. In a survey of this programme, 40% of the older adult participants reported that they felt more capable of expressing themselves after learning how to use arts to draw out their stories, 30% felt good about their achievements and how they were recognised by their families, 60% decided to take up new activities to further experience working with other arts, and 70% wanted to share the programme with others. All these and other surveys show, at least in a subjective sense, the positive value of art-based interventions and cultural programmes for older adults.

Theme 4: Evaluation and Reflection

The study found that evaluation processes had not yet been developed systematically in order to classify qualitative findings from arts-based interventions and cultural programmes, and there were differences between the two countries in this regard. While funding agencies in Finland did not generally require any specifically formalised evaluation criteria, most agencies in South Korea used systematic monitoring and multi-step assessment processes.

The study also identified the need to conduct qualitative assessment of the interventions and programmes by their participants. Our interviewees pointed out that the most commonly used evaluation methods included printed questionnaires and small interviews with the participants, in addition to making observations and field notes. The more traditional methods of assessments, such as the use of smiley-face surveys, are now considered outdated – not to mention ageist – for meeting the complex needs of older adults and assessing their responses.

It is interesting to note that in comparison to Finland, some feedback questionnaires used in South Korea had more specific criteria for evaluating their programmes. These criteria focussed not only on the primary aims and overall plans of a programme, and whether they had been adequately accomplished, but also on other factors such as the convenience and accessibility of the programme venue. As most funding agencies offer

programmes through local cultural centres and community venues, asking about the participants' experiences and satisfaction with programme venues is considered a major factor in their evaluation.

In terms of multi-step assessment processes, the interviewees mentioned that consultation and on-site assessments were often combined in a systematic manner. Programme monitoring by advisory committees and external professionals, and consultation with them enabled thorough assessment. However, there were also inevitable criticisms about such assessment processes that were imposed by programme management. This led to practitioners being pressured to produce quantitative outcomes rather than qualitative ones.

Practitioners in both countries also reported that they had fewer opportunities to review their efforts and achievements with other practitioners in interdisciplinary settings due to a lack of standardised evaluation criteria. This issue was observed more often in cases where a practitioner worked independently as a freelancer or was hired on a short-term basis. In other words, when the evaluation was conducted only among the practitioners and participants on a case-by-case basis, it prevented a more comprehensive assessment of the results, which could be useful in establishing formally standardised evaluation guidelines for different contexts.

Theme 5: Sustainability and Networking

The study found that the sustainability of arts-based interventions and cultural programmes relied on establishing means of networking between different stakeholders. According to our study participants in both countries, genuine cooperation among the stakeholders requires active and open communication, transparency, and mutual trust. As such, the stakeholders are expected increasingly to cooperate inter-sectionally to resolve conflicts and power imbalances in order to build genuine partnerships.

Clear differences were, however, observed when comparing cultural contexts of the two countries. In Finland, teachers and art education practitioners are highly trusted professionals. This feeling of trust enables them to work effectively, with a great sense of responsibility and pride, as well as being autonomous and independent. This is highlighted, for example, by FP1: *"I have a very collaborative relationship with colleagues who*

organize and manage all the programs at my workplace. When we work together, they only handle administrative procedures while I'm totally free to plan my courses as I like. I believe a harmonious relationship can be built between independence and dependence."

In South Korea, on the other hand, a different perspective on cooperation was identified – relating to a traditional competitive cultural environment with power imbalances. In this context, while active and open communication has notable positive impacts, it is often hindered by hierarchical communication issues and inefficient bureaucracy, which in turn limits flexibility and responsiveness in programme operations. Moreover, the different social leverages and divergent views between practitioners and agencies – or sub-agencies and main funding agencies – can lead to complex interactions and relationships. In turn, practitioners and sub-agencies can become frustrated when they cannot push their creative ideas beyond structural drivers and hierarchical boundaries.

Insecure programme funding is another critical issue that threatens the development of sustainable arts-based interventions and cultural programmes. In both countries, we found that funding stability is an important factor affecting practitioners' working conditions. It follows that for effective results to be reached, the funding for these programmes should not be dictated by political agendas that sometimes shift budget allocation priorities. In reference to this issue in South Korea, KP6 commented: *"As our funding organization operates on taxation, it is very difficult for us to sustain the programs and manage the budget following changing political direction every 2–4 years. This challenge also affects our programs' linear and long-term progress and completion."* Despite this, the majority of the interviewees wished to sustain their programmes and continue working with their groups even after their funding period ends. In some cases, the programmes can be continued, for example, through cooperation with local community colleges, municipalities, or volunteers.

Discussion

The study reported here investigated diverse personal experiences of practitioners and professionals working with older adults in arts-based interventions and cultural programmes in South Korea and Finland. Similarities and differences in existing working methods and challenges in the

two countries have been identified within the five themes of the narrative interviews of the study.

According to our study participants, arts-based interventions and cultural programmes can promote a better sense of belonging amongst older adults and increase their social engagement. Such interventions and programmes can also strengthen and foster community integration when designed to accommodate the interwoven contexts of both individuals and local socio-economic situations. Moreover, they can provide older adults with means of better understanding themselves through creative practices, and ways of working with their unconscious mind by exploring their body movements. Based on these findings, our study sheds a new light on the power of artistic and creative activities in affecting not only older adults' physical and mental health but also their social well-being. In this regard, the study highlights the need for redefining and repurposing "late-life creativity" into a new paradigm that aims to combat the prevalent deficit-oriented views of ageing.

Our study has also shown that art practitioners need to adopt a client-oriented approach which would enable them to take into account societal and cultural backgrounds of their participants, so as to provide them with more effective art-based interventions and cultural programmes. In this sense, we argue that planning tailored support for each locality can motivate and guarantee the successful operation of such interventions and programmes, and can influence the formulation of better ecologies of community support regarding care policies and services for older adults in ageing societies. This, in turn, means reaffirming the idea of collective effort towards collective impact, as discussed in this article. We would also emphasise that cultivating a shared vision and nurturing collective action are critical to the successful use of the arts for health and well-being (Daykin 2019).

In addition, our study has focussed on identifying practical approaches to fostering collective impact through collaborative relationship among diverse stakeholders, with the aim of co-creating successful arts-based interventions and cultural programmes. According to Baek et al. (2015), "[i]n design for social innovation, a collaborative community is defined as a group of people who are actively and voluntarily engaged in the collaborative production of solutions to a wide range of their own social problems, and in doing so, create a positive impact on society as a whole"

(p. 62). In the same vein, we propose the need for establishing a working framework for creating better provisions and supports for arts-based interventions and cultural programmes. Such a framework should be based on the main factors needed for, and effective approaches to, cooperating with older adults. Towards this goal, our study has identified five different areas – ranging from motivation and planning to sustainability and networking – which must be taken into account in developing this type of framework. If created effectively, the framework would provide structural support for co-creating arts-based interventions and cultural programmes by closely aligning them with related policies and services. This structural guiding practice will also ultimately influence the sustainability of such arts-based interventions and cultural programmes and their assessment.

Conclusion

The study presented here has highlighted the complexity of implementing and sustaining effective arts-based interventions and cultural programmes in interdisciplinary and cross-cultural contexts, and has shown the need for supporting collective efforts among diverse stakeholders involved in such interventions and programmes.

The study has also shown the need for ensuring legitimate qualitative evaluation of arts-based interventions and cultural programmes. Our study participants have highlighted that meaningful evaluation methods and criteria should be negotiated and collaboratively defined by all the stakeholders involved in provision of care services for older people at the early stages of programme planning. It is also necessary to build mutual trust in order to exchange ideas and learn from one another in an interdisciplinary and power-balanced environment, as well as across different arts-based interventions and cultural programmes.

We would, therefore, argue that it is important to consider the role and contributions of the older adult participants, practitioners, various organisations and community officials, as well as other stakeholders when co-designing and co-operating such interventions and programmes. This includes discussing planned processes, shared goals, different roles, creative mindsets, methods, and working approaches with older adults themselves. Ultimately, collaborative

partnerships among different stakeholders in art-based interventions and cultural programmes can become catalysts to synergetic actions that address the interconnected and encompassing problems of an ageing society.

We recognise that our research study is limited in terms of considering all the other divergent cultural contexts that exist beyond the scope of this study. For instance, different countries clearly have their own starting points, contexts, and capacities to deal with health systems under uncertain conditions and with imperfect knowledge (WHO 2013). We would, however, expect that the empirical findings of this study are somewhat similar to working patterns and experiences across different countries and cultures. As noted earlier, we would again highlight the importance of exchanging learnings between different stakeholders in different cultural contexts.

Our future aim is to utilise the findings presented in this article to help us develop theoretical models that aim to identify the necessary factors and approaches that should be considered in designing and implementing art-based interventions and cultural programmes for older adults in an interdisciplinary environment that distributes responsibilities and encourages collaborative decision-making processes across different stakeholders.

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Ethics statement

The study reported in this article has been reviewed by the Research Ethics Committee of Aalto University (reference D/206/03.04/2020). The study participants were provided with sufficient information on the purpose of the study in advance. Their participation in this study was entirely voluntary and based on informed consent.

Declaration of conflicting interest

The authors do not have any conflict of interest to declare.

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Adventures in ageing: the gender-ageing nexus and older North American women's engagement with communities of care through lifestyle migration

By Matthew Hayes & Kristi A. Allain

Abstract

Drawing from ethnographic research and interviews with older North American women who migrated alone to retire in Ecuador, this article grows the body of literature on gender and ageing, examining how these women position themselves within a gender-ageing nexus, contradicting certain gender norms in their attempt to obtain later-life self-fulfilment. Particularly, we examine how this group positions the third age as a time of individual adventure and self-actualisation, challenging normative gender ideals about femininity and care but meeting (many) social expectations to "age well." We argue that the lifestyles of these women demonstrate new experiments with gendered ageing, facilitated by global inequalities but challenging some normative ideals around femininity and old(er) age.

Keywords: dating, friendship, gender, migration, successful ageing.

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In contemporary culture, there are marked contradictions emerging around socially normative ways of being an *older* woman. The meanings associated with new cultural ideals of ageing – focused on the development of the self, busyness, adventure and living in the "here and now" (Katz 2005; Shimoni 2018) – sit uncomfortably alongside ideals of appropriate femininity, especially those oriented towards family responsibility and the care of others (e.g. Fileborn et al. 2015; Lankes 2022). New cultural ideals of the third age, or "young-old age" (Neugarten 1974) – forwarded by those who came of age in the 1960s, when baby boomers began entering mid-life and beyond – advise the old to devote their attention to extending their youthful vitality through consumptive habits (Gilleard & Higgs 2013) and to avoid age-related decline (Allain & Marshall 2017). These new cultural ideals of ageing impact sex and relationships (Katz & Marshall 2005), normative gender ideals (Calasanti 2007), leisure activities (Hitchings et al. 2018) and romance and dating (Cooney & Dunne 2001). In this context, it is instructive to consider how shifting cultures of ageing reorganise gendered relations of care.

Using older, white women who migrated upon retirement from Canada and the United States to Cuenca, Ecuador, as a case study, we examine the meanings that some later-life heterosexual women bring to their social relationships within the context of successful ageing. This group of older women offered narrative accounts of their sociability that presented contradictions between normative ideals of gender and age in their lives. In this article, we examine how these research participants drew on new ideals of successful ageing, rejecting some of the normative ideals of gender, as they justified their moves and negotiated their social relationships with friends, family and (potential) romantic partners. We refer to the somewhat contradictory life space that research participants reflected upon, spoke about, and negotiated as the gender-ageing nexus. Exploring the gender-ageing nexus through this particular case study enables us to grapple with gender through the life course and consider ageing as a gendered (and not merely embodied) process, affecting different bodies differently. The concept of a gender-ageing nexus developed here provides a new way of thinking about the life course, taking into account the transition that is occurring in the gender orders of Canada and the United States, notably through the integration of women into the capitalist paid

labour force over the last 50 years. Conceptually, the gender-ageing nexus offers a life course perspective to theories of gender, which may help to capture how women's experiences moved from paid labour to new cultural ideals of self-fulfilment in retirement that eschew normative ideals of gendered care.

In this paper, we first describe the gender-ageing nexus of older women in relation to the contradictory ways that new notions of "successful ageing" – that is, ageing without becoming old (Katz & Laliberte-Rudman 2005) – affect gender expressions in later life. We situate the gender-ageing nexus within the scholarship on gendered care and then contextualise ageing and the historical development of the "third age." This article then discusses the methods used in the study before proceeding to two empirical sections. The first focuses on the tensions between women's projects of self-fulfilment in ageing – which align with cultures of active and successful ageing – and the gendered relations of care in heteronormative families from which participants sought to distance themselves. Participants developed projects of successful ageing in relation to biographies marked by a disproportionate responsibility for care work during earlier phases of their lives. The second empirical section explores this tension in relation to the realignment of social relations of care in communities of women to which the participants belonged. These communities of women looked out for one another in a way that enhanced the members' ability to pursue individualistic forms of ageing, shaped by social activity. We conclude with reflections on the context of these experiments in gendered ageing, and on the importance of a sociological analysis of the gender-ageing nexus.

Shifting Gendered Ideologies of Care

In this work, we develop the concept of a gender-ageing nexus to explore and understand narrative expressions of the tension generated in contemporary life when shifting ideologies of ageing interact with shifting ideologies of gender expression. Our key argument is that ideologies of ageing and later life are recasting practices and narratives of femininity, care, commitment and community in the third age, producing new dynamics of the ageing process that are visible and tangible in the lives of research

participants. We apply a life course analysis to the sociology of gender and build on existing scholarship on ageing, which often overlooks gendered patterns in a shifting age order. Our case study exhibiting the tension between age order and gender order – a tension held together by ideals of appropriate ageing and femininity – is a transnational one, which makes evident the gender-ageing tension. We submit, however, that empirical studies of ageing women (and of other ageing people) in other contexts may exhibit similarly tangible and verifiable signs of a tension between contemporary ideologies of ageing and dominant gender norms (e.g. see Allain 2024). Conducting this work in environments that are attentive to overlapping fields of inequality, marked not only by gender, but also race, ability, sexuality and socio-economic status, will be especially important in assessing the robustness of this approach.

In this section, we attend to the two moving parts of a gender-ageing nexus and demonstrate how the concept builds on existing scholarship. First, we draw attention to work in the sociology of ageing, which emphasises a shifting age order marked by new practices of ageing, especially "active" and "successful" ageing. As we note, some scholarly literature focusing on these practices has observed the importance of travel and adventure to successful ageing and self-fulfilment in the third age. Yet, the gendered patterns within these practices and narratives are often overlooked. These gendered patterns are also changing as a result of material and ideological changes in the life course of women. Our participants became adults in the 1960s and 1970s and exhibit ideas of successful ageing that conflict with dominant, heteronormative gender patterns, especially with respect to care for men and families. This section highlights the changing gender order occurring within older adults' ideologies of care, which provides ripe empirical terrain for theorising about transformations in the gender-ageing nexus. It then discusses the literature on later-life dating and friendship in order to firm up our conceptualisation of the gender-ageing nexus as a fundamental, contemporary tension between ideologies of ageing and gendered ideologies of care, each of which is profoundly intertwined with the economic, cultural and social changes that have marked the period since the 2008 financial crisis. With this in hand, subsequent sections will explore the actualisation of this nexus in the lives of Canadian and US-American lifestyle migrants in Ecuador. Gender and ageing are important

coordinates in existing scholarship on lifestyle migration (see especially Bender & Schweppe 2022; Croucher 2014; Gambold 2013; Lafferty & Maher 2021; Lundström 2014), though the topic remains under-theorised in relation to shifting age and gender orders, important to the dynamics of retirement and lifestyle migration to the Global South. The empirical work presented below provides a life course perspective on gender that demonstrates how older adult women in the so-called "baby boomer" generation are recasting the tension between ideologies of adventure and self-fulfilment on the one hand and gendered practices of care on the other.

As Gilleard and Higgs (2013) point out, the baby boomers have challenged ideals about the self and produced in their third age a new consumer lifestyle that emphasises youthfulness and activity as signs of successful ageing. Breaking with the past, this consumer lifestyle focuses on identity and "authentic" living (i.e. following one's inner desires, rather than living up to externally imposed expectations and constraints). These new identities have generally not disrupted entrenched gender inequalities (or inequalities based on race, class, ability and sexuality).[1] However, they have generated new common-sense ideas about ageing, encouraging individuals to defy old age and maintain youthful cultural practices into midlife and beyond (Gilleard & Higgs 2013). Katz (1995) has argued that these practices have resulted in the reconstruction of "elderhood … as a marketable lifestyle that connects to commodified values of youth" (p. 68). These new ways of being old are premised on being busy (Katz 2005), staying sexy (Marshall 2014) and investing in the present (Shimoni 2023). From the vantage point of a sociology of ageing, older adults experience "successful ageing" to the extent that they are able to demonstrate signs or patterns of ageing that reflect the lifestyles actively marketed to them by an expanding age industry, keen to profit from the demographically important baby-boomer generation. But as Higgs and Gilleard (2021) also point out, this culturally specific form of ageing is shaped by a "third age" of leisure and life projects beyond the paid labour market, existing in relation to a fourth age of physical and mental decline and death.

[1] For example, the gender wage gap has persisted despite white women's mass entry into the paid labour market (Peetz & Murray 2017), as the changing division of labour in the family home resulted in a "second shift" for many women in the baby boomer generation (Hochschild, 2003).

Thus, self-projects of living for today (Shimoni 2023) are also emotionally charged with a sense of fleetingness, and perhaps at times with a tinge of existential angst. Existing scholarship, therefore, has privileged the role of intense emotions and experiences as particularly significant to actualising contemporary ideals of ageing (Boyes 2013; Hardy et al. 2018; Hayes 2021).

The new pattern of ageing described above also developed in a political and economic context in which national policies sought to intervene in the age order, recasting ideologies of ageing in response to previous forms that (from the vantage point of baby boomers in North America) presented the ageing process as a burden (Rudman 2006). The emergence of successful ageing strategies aligned with the turn to neoliberalism amongst Western governments, as the state offloaded responsibility for ageing societies onto individuals, who subsequently became responsible for their own ageing and for avoiding illness – a process premised on the rationalisation of health (see Foucault 2008). Whilst elements of these ageing strategies resonate with findings from our study, we suggest that the attainment of active ageing ideals also clashes with normative gender ideals for many older women, which focus on care for family and commitment to long-term heterosexual relationships (see Fileborn et al. 2015).

Attention to the antinomies between gender order and age order – or what we refer to as a gender-ageing nexus – helps clarify emerging forms of femininity in the third age, and therefore dialogues with a growing body of literature on the pursuit of neoliberal ideals emphasising self-fulfilment in later life (see Shimoni 2018). It also moves beyond self-fulfilment and suggests that some older women reimagine care communities beyond the heterosexual family. Canadian and US-American women of the baby boomer generation began to age into their retirement years in the 2010s, on the heels of the 2008 financial crisis and following a life course marked by significant transformations in the gender order, most notably through the large-scale incorporation of middle-class, white women into the paid labour market. Thus, the demographic from which our participants were drawn has challenged established gender ideologies throughout the life course, both in the workplace and with respect to care work.

Nevertheless, data on the gender pay gap have noted that women have not achieved pay equality with men, and their careers are often taken less seriously than men's (OECD 2023; Statistics Canada 2022, 2024) – asymmetries that have diminished women's access to pension savings and incomes, therefore making it more difficult for them to remain independent as they age (OECD 2021). Moreover, despite large numbers of middle-class, white women entering the paid labour market beginning in the 1970s, expectations around women's care work appear not to have substantially changed (Fraser 2016; Hochschild 1989, 2003). As Hochschild (2003, pp. 213-223) has pointed out, labour markets did not adjust to the needs of women with care responsibilities in the home. Nor did men's gender expectations change enough to pick up the slack of care work in heterosexual households. Household care work continues to reflect patterns reminiscent of earlier gendered ideals of the division of labour, even as women have taken on added responsibilities in the labour market. This has often led to women providing greater household care than they receive.

However, whilst normative femininity may sanction this unequal burden of care work as particularly meaningful for women, individual women throughout the life course have also contested it (e.g. Hochschild 1989; Lankes 2022). Here, normative femininity rubs up against a shifting age order that prioritises independence and getting as much out of life as possible. This tension brings into focus a changing orientation to care, which is central to the gender-ageing nexus. As previous research suggests (see Bulcroft & Bulcroft 1991; Calasanti & Kiecolt 2007; Fileborn et al. 2015; Roseneil & Budgeon 2004), later-life heterosexual women have re-evaluated heteronormative relationships that often require expenditures of care on men or other family members. Instead, this literature notes that women have seemed to privilege the self and later-life adventure whilst rejecting family care work. Whilst this literature has remarked on the reorganisation of care in later life, it has not fully theorised the transformation of a gender order in relation to ageing, or applied a life-course perspective to gender ideologies. Our research participants created new communities of care in relation to dominant cultural ideals of ageing. In the process, they challenged dominant gender ideologies and produced new gendered patterns of ageing.

Methods

Our research is based on ethnography and semi-structured qualitative interviews (n = 18) with single women in the North American migrant communities of Cuenca, Ecuador. The interviews are part of a larger data set of North American migrants that include many couples and single men (see Hayes 2018). Initial interviews were conducted in 2011–2013 (n = 14) by the first author (a man in his 30s at the time of the interviews), with supplemental interviews conducted in 2015 (n = 1) and 2019 by three research assistants (women in their 20s) under the first author's supervision (n = 3). Interviews lasted between 45 min and 2 h and focused on motivations for relocating to Ecuador and impressions of the host community. Supplemental fieldwork consisted of nine field visits between 2011 and 2020, totalling over 43 weeks spent on location. The larger research project also included interviews with Ecuadorians who provided services for North Americans (n = 12), and some of this data also helped triangulate findings.

Although the initial focus of this work was on motivations for relocating to Ecuador, issues associated with gender and ageing arose organically during the interviews and in ethnographic observation. This was especially true for older single women describing their reasons for migration, which the first author had not initially expected when designing the research programme. Based on these conversations, the first author attempted to focus part of his recruitment on older single women, recruiting at social events and through snowball and convenience sampling. Research participants seemed keen to share their migration stories. Furthermore, beginning in 2012, the North American migrant community and Ecuadorian research participants in Cuenca began speaking quite a bit about an "adventurous" group of single women who had moved there. This helped shape recruitment and questions for participants.

Sociology of ageing did not initially inform the research process of the first author, whose main concerns as an early career scholar were the events of 2008 and their transformation of middle-class experiences and life possibilities in Canada and the US. Thus, whilst retirement was of interest, ageing *per se* was not. Cultures of ageing and a life course perspective became more central under the influence of the second author's research and teaching and other thoughtful critique of previous work (see Koh 2021).

The age differences between interviewers and participants also influenced some of the findings. For instance, cultural mores around gender and age ("never ask an older woman her age") impeded interviewers from recording the ages of some of the female participants. The age range of participants who disclosed their age ($n = 11$) was 54–70 years at the time of interview. Those not recorded ($n = 7$) were of a similar age; they were "young-old," or in the third age. The participants were all from Canada or the United States.

The research team followed the procedures described by Nowell et al. (2017). In this regard, they aimed for "trustworthy thematic analysis" (p. 4) by (1) ensuring that team members were familiar with the data; (2) producing initial codes; (3) drawing from codes to produce more general themes; (4) revisiting the themes; (5) defining the themes and aligning them with other triangulated data; and (6) documenting the findings. To do this work, the research team coded the interview transcripts using *NVivo*. The research team's thematic analysis of codes highlighted participants' reflections on adventure, intimacy and community. We have highlighted these themes here because they demonstrate the presence of a gender-ageing nexus that is undertheorized in gerontology and sociology. This nexus works through sometimes contradictory transformations of the gender order and the age order as they develop over the life course and through material and cultural transformations of society.

Antinomies of Adventurous Ageing and Gendered Care

The apparent adventure of living and migrating alone as a woman had special significance to the North American community in Cuenca – perhaps precisely because it marked a break with normative femininity and associated family care work. This emphasis on adventure and self-fulfilment demonstrates how ageing ideals are reshaping relations of care and draws attention to a new constellation of experiences at the gender-ageing nexus. Aligned with the definitions of adventure described by Boyes (2013) and by Simmel's (1997) iconic work in the field, adventure is understood as an experience different from those of everyday life. The possibility of new experiences enabled participants to experiment with new patterns of ageing associated with the pursuit of pleasure and success. These patterns reference a more individualistic and secular culture of ageing, one in

which "living for today" takes precedence over established norms that privilege social obligations towards family and partners. Of course, these expectations also belong to a heteronormative, patriarchal social order, against which older women are also reacting. In the process of abandoning patterns of ageing associated with patriarchy, older women appear to be embracing new patterns of active ageing that privilege sometimes expensive lifestyles.

One of the key adjectives North American lifestyle migrants in Cuenca used to describe women who migrated alone to Ecuador was "adventurous," also labelling them as brave and independent – a gendered pattern of adjectives that was never associated with men who migrated alone. For instance, Melanie, a 55-year-old former health administrator from Wisconsin, said, "I think the kind of single women that come here are more adventurous, and they are risk-takers too. And they are very brave. And they're willing to try new things, meet new people, have new adventures, travel. We don't sit at home at all." The community of single women had helped her through the grieving process when her husband died the previous year, illustrating how these women provided important networks of support and mutual aid, despite knowing each other for a relatively short amount of time – research participants often described "finding" a community of like-minded people amongst the cohort of active, social migrants. These networks provided elements of care and community that supplemented the pursuit of more active retirements. As Melanie explained, "We'll go to concerts. We'll go to movies. We'll go to festivals together. We'll help each other out shopping or, you know, we try to help out a lot of the newer people."

The pursuit of adventure and excitement expressed in the narratives of single women's post-retirement migration to Ecuador dialogue with key tenets of active ageing, especially the emphasis on activities, which in these cases included nights out and cultural events that often cost money to attend. As Laura, a retired teacher in her mid-50s, put it, "I can go socializing every day if I want to." She listed many events in which the North American retirement migrants participated: poker, charity work and volunteering, potlucks, biking, day trips to the mountains or to hot springs, and "Gringo Nights," which occurred several times a week at different eating or drinking establishments. This enabled her and others to perceive their ageing processes as successful and less constrained

(especially economically) than they would have been at home, where many participants said they would have had to continue to work in the paid labour market. The participants, who were relatively privileged in global social space, described elated feelings of success and self-fulfilment experienced against the backdrop of global economic structures. The lower cost of living enabled single North American women on limited incomes – sometimes less than a $1000 per month of pension income – to maintain busy social lives involving many acts of consumption, such as eating or drinking out, going on weekend trips or day excursions, or hosting parties for one another. They also benefitted from transnational mobility rights shared unequally with many of the workers who laboured for them. Global economic inequalities shaped these experiments in gendered ageing, facilitating consumptive lifestyles (Hayes 2018).

These experiments with ageing were also premised on freedom from heterosexual social relations of care, which were central to many participants' narratives of adventure. For example, Diana, 60, who best articulated a new philosophy of adventurous ageing as a single woman, also wanted something different from her retirement than her husband, separating from him and moving away from her family (including young grandchildren) to pursue her own interests in Ecuador. A group of like-minded single women in Cuenca quickly pulled her into their group upon her arrival. She commented that she felt she had a limited amount of time of good health remaining, and she was looking for "a little adventure" before moving to the "other side of the grass." Like Gambold's (2013) focus on "fear of the known," this desire for adventure stemmed from comparing her own ageing process with that of family members, and from intimate knowledge of her own mother's fourth age of decline and death, during which she actively provided care. She explained that her family members "all die of strokes, and we all die young." Therefore, she felt an urge to "take risks," feeling that this was the last decade of her life in which she would be able to take them. She exclaimed, "Coming down here … was the most risk-taking thing I've ever done in my life."

Diana defined risk-taking in relation to gender, as a break from normative expectations about women's ageing that would have bound her to a male partner and a caretaking role. For her, risk meant "moving out of [her] comfort zone" and doing something that made her feel anxious. But she understood fear as something to push past in order to experience

"personal growth." Moving to a lower-income, Latin American city was one such experience, one that was enhanced by "doing it alone."

Other migrants touched on similar themes, emphasising an imaginary of the third age as a time of activity before eventual decline and death. For these participants, life was to be lived to the fullest, whilst there was still time to do so. Krista, 64, was a former nurse and homemaker who took care of her husband throughout 15 years of Alzheimer's-related decline. She had been widowed 8 years prior to our interview. Her husband's illness "really put a stop, really, to our life, as we knew it," she said. Prior to that, they had enjoyed an active life with travel. Faced with rising insurance costs and limited savings, she moved to Ecuador because, as she put it, she had always wanted to live in another country. "My family, obviously, is raised and gone and have their own families. So I figured, 'no time like the present'."

Like Diana, Krista's decision meant abandoning responsibilities towards family, who were left behind. Whilst Diana did not experience this as an issue – rather, it enabled renewal and mutual understanding – Krista's decision led to significant tension with her children, especially her son, who had relocated his family and changed jobs so he could live closer to her when she was still in North America. But her move made sense to her in part because of the cost savings and in part because she was able to make so many friends during her brief exploratory visit. Whilst acknowledging that cost of living played a factor in her decision to move to Cuenca, she admitted a big part of it was "because I wanted a bit of adventure in my life."

Krista's role as caregiver to a dependent husband was a major influence on her decision to move on her own to Ecuador. His illness and an acute episode involving her own health "just taught me … enjoy every single day … because you don't know what's going to happen." Her relocation to Ecuador appeared to live in the shadow of the fourth age (Higgs & Gilleard 2020). She knew that if she had another major health scare – like the one she had experienced a few years prior – her children would force her to return home, where she would become dependent. Krista was already very familiar with the fourth age, and it had shaped her sense of independence. She stated, "I'm very independent, and I've had to be. [My husband] was totally disabled, probably 3 years before he died. So I've pretty much been it, for about the last 11 or 12 years. And, so I'm really, really

independent, I don't want to have to move in with my kids." "Fear of the known" (Gambold 2013) forms of ageing and decline seem to haunt parts of her interview transcript. Krista's search for adventure in Ecuador came at a cost in terms of her proximity to her children and grandchildren, with whom she described herself as extremely close. But the cost did not seem too great either. She said that after their move to a subdivision 10 min away from her own in Arizona (prior to her relocation to Cuenca), she did not see them a whole lot more than she did when they lived in a different city in the US Midwest. "There would be times where 2 or 3 weeks would go by and I wouldn't see them," she said, rationalising her decision and intimating that she did not agree that she had abandoned her family.

Ageing and Care Beyond Heteronormative Families

As research participants looked to align their ageing process with neoliberal pressures to age successfully, they not only sought out travel and relocation to Cuenca, but they often appeared to realign their expectations about romantic relationships to maximise their ability to be adventurous and independent. This section looks at how research participants renegotiated expectations about intimacy and care, exploring the tension between normative gender ideals associated with heteronormative relationships with men and the possibilities of greater independence through emerging and alternative forms of solidarity. These latter represent a new nexus within the constellation of gender and ageing norms – one that supported participants' more individualistic ageing ideals.

Older North American women in Cuenca often narrated their experience as a break from established normative ideals of gendered ageing, rejecting or abandoning heteronormative romantic relationships. Diana, for example, explained that the experience of migration in later life was particularly meaningful to her because she was doing it alone. Being independent was an important part of many participants' identities and shaped the type of community they sought out. One of the commonalities amongst research participants was a personal shift in focus from romantic or sexual relationships with men to friendships with other women, a finding coincident with existing literature on dating in later life (Connidis et al. 2017; Watson & Stelle 2011). Thus, despite the large number of single

later-life men and women in the community, most participants described a lack of interest in finding a partner and instead narrated alternative projects of caring for one another as a way to avoid loneliness and find meaning in later life.

Similar tensions between intimacy and independence have been noted in previous studies of older, heterosexual women's dating experiences. As Watson and Stelle (2011) found in their research, many older women understood dating as an important part of their lives, allowing them to move beyond social positions as widows or grandmothers. But they found tensions between how the participants expressed desire for a partner and their declarations of being content on their own. Similarly, Calasanti and Kiecolt (2007) noted that older heterosexual women value intimacy and partnerships with men whilst at the same time prizing attributes associated with independence. We submit that this tension exhibits the renegotiation of social relations of care along the gender-ageing nexus.

This tension meant that, as in previous studies, participants often remained attached to normative ideals of heteronormative intimacy. However, some participants began to shift expectations around intimacy when it failed to materialise. Paula found that one of her disappointments about migration was the lack of "appropriate" men. As she put it, "That's missing for me, in Cuenca … there aren't enough single men." Paula expressed interest in having a partner and was concerned that she might not find one in Cuenca, stating, "If nothing's here in 3 years, I'll probably be gone." Ana Jane, a retired designer from Texas, also thought dating was important. She had just turned 60 and said that she would "totally" like to meet someone new in this phase of her life "because I love guys." At the same time, Ana Jane noted that there were few good dating options, a theme that ran through most other interviews. Daniela, a retired administrator in her 60s, said of the North Americans in Cuenca, "The men are old farts. They basically seem to be total losers." This type of sentiment was shared broadly amongst participants.

Andrea, 67, a single woman originally from Chicago, said she did not understand why so many single women like herself came to Ecuador. She remarked, "If it was to meet their next husband, I'm not sure they're going to have a lot of luck here." North American women sometimes narrated this critique of men in terms of the differences between men's and women's ageing bodies. Flipping the script of men's desires for young and attractive women

(McWilliams & Barrett 2014), Allie, a librarian from Florida, said, "There's all these guys with these guts and it's like *really*?" Mirroring fatphobic and neoliberal attitudes about care of the body, which necessitate that one be thin and "fit" to demonstrate good health (White et al. 1995), Allie commented that women took better care of themselves than did men, an attitude expressed in several interviews and related to dissatisfaction with the ageing body.

Women participants were also highly critical of the way North American men in Cuenca dated, especially when they dated Ecuadorian women. Perhaps signalling the kinds of care relationships they were looking to leave behind, they commented that older men could purchase care through the dating market. Laura noted that a North American man had "the choice" of finding a younger Ecuadorian woman "who's gonna wait on him hand and foot."[2] North American men could also gain in an Ecuadorian partner an interpreter in a foreign culture, reducing the inconvenience of not knowing how to speak Spanish. "So, most of them will go for the Ecuadorian, that's what I've noticed," she said.

This perceived imbalance left some participants, like Ana Jane and Paula, feeling that their options were extremely limited – especially because they expressed reticence about dating Ecuadorians. But for others, like Andrea, it only confirmed a need to move on from searching for a partner altogether. Martina, a 69-year-old from Texas, summed up the attitude of several women towards dating and later-life care work, asserting, "For men, whenever they get old, the best thing they can do is get married." In contrast, she claimed:

> The best thing a woman can do, when they get old, is have other women friends…. If you get married again, you have to take care of some old guy [*laughs*]. If you have other women friends, you can just have fun!

Her comments echo the findings of McWilliams and Barrett (2014), who noted that older women privileged friendships that allowed them to break with gender norms associated with care by opting out of romantic relationships, whilst men looked to have their care needs met *through* their romantic relationships.

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[2] These narratives misrecognized the shifting gender order of Ecuador, where women's liberation and queer and trans rights movements have challenged the patriarchal gender regime, fought for abortion rights, and challenged femicide and sexual harassment. On women's movements in Ecuador, (see Santillana and Aguinaga 2012). On queer and trans liberation, (see Viteri et al. 2021).

The critique of men's ageing was also part of the way women like Christine (who was widowed) articulated their own sense of themselves as single and independent – and thus illustrated how ageing ideals lead to a realignment of gender expectations. According to Christine, women did not move to Ecuador looking for relationships with younger men whose affections they could buy.[3] As she put it, "I think we [women] tend to come here, not only knowing we're on our own, but wanting to be." Though some women desired a heteronormative partner, most participants expressed indifference towards relationships. But this did not mean they were totally on their own as they constructed new lives and new identities as older women. Instead, participants focused on other social projects, namely, friendships with other women. This was very important, operating as an alternative social network where they could provide a caring community for one another whilst supporting a project of self-actualised ageing. This desire to maintain caring connections whilst living up to active ageing ideals in a lower-cost country appears to be the pivot point that links the modern, self-focused form of women's ageing with its family-focused and place-specific precursor.

For Daniela, a retired administrator, friendship took the form of platonic, joyful relationships with other women. "There is an incredible support group here, among the 'expats'. I mean, I sat in [my hometown] … for 4 years, basically," she said, recalling how her social world in the US had atrophied as she aged – a reflection on gendered patterns of ageing and perhaps a description of a changing class position. In contrast, a dense schedule of events put on by various charities and clubs anchored the network of single North American women in Cuenca in the 2010s, as they participated in philanthropy, played cards, travelled, cooked, shared writing and listened to live music. As Diana, who was also elated about her experience with her community of friends, put it, "Most of the women I know here [Cuenca], who are my age, have really vibrant, vibrant social lives. We travel together. We eat together. We socialize together." Although this community included men and couples, single women appeared to look out for one another. Their friendships with each other were a focal point of their identities and sense of belonging. Together, they formed a

[3] Other participants did mention dating younger Ecuadorian men. In other circumstances, women sometimes do purchase sex for money (see Herold et al. 2001).

community of "expats."[4] Participants regularly remarked on how many more friends they had in Cuenca, almost always referring to other North American migrants. "I have more friends here than I did in 23 years in California," Laura said. This rich social life of what Stephen Katz (2005) calls "busy bodies" (p. 121) is a place-based form of ageing in which "new enclaves of lifestyle and retirement … foster new identities and ways *to be* older in body, mind and spirit" (emphasis in original, p. 14). Increasingly, cohorts of older North Americans are producing this form of ageing in communities throughout the Global South, in addition to the "sun belt" locations of the 20th century, producing material contexts that are significant both to cultures of active ageing generally, and to single women's ageing experiences in particular.

Whilst much of the literature on older adult social identities focuses on acts of public consumption (see Gilleard & Higgs 2011) – which were important for the single women in this study – scholars have paid less attention to new ways of being older in a community of care, which were in evidence here. Participants frequently discussed how they took care of one another. As Paula put it, "There are a lot of single women, here, and we rely on each other, you know, because there's no men." This extended to caring for each other through ageing and even death. Despite their good health, participants seemed haunted by what Higgs and Gilleard (2020) call the "social imaginary of the fourth age." Participants acknowledged that they were getting older, and that they would need to plan for a time when they would need more care. They were often attuned to the care needs of older members of their community, who were frail or dependent on caregivers. Frequently, they not only made plans to look after one another but also relied on the low-cost care work of Ecuadorian women – labour that was indispensable to participants' imaginaries of the fourth age, and which seemed to provide an alternative, offshore social safety net (cf. Bender et al. 2018). Ecuadorians who provided service to North Americans often discussed this care work, not only describing the projects of active ageing and adventure as inspirational, but also finding their

[4] It is important to note the epistemological work done by the term "expat" to distinguish the privileged transnationalism of our research participants from Latin American migrants who move to the United States or Canada (and are often prevented from doing so). As Hayes (2018: 14–20) points out, this terminology participates in stratifying transnational social fields.

loneliness and precariousness in the fourth-age disturbing. Participants who were still in late midlife or early old age would keep track of one another, apparently to reduce vulnerability. Daniela, for instance, supported informal women's groups "to ensure that there's someone that's looking after them." She said, "I play cards every week with a group of women. And they call me once a week to tell me where we're going to play cards. And if I don't answer, they get mad." Some of the participants found these networks a hassle or critiqued them for being cliquey, but they were an effective way of providing mutual aid in a context so far away from family. In a few cases, these groups even took the place of family altogether. Women helped organise (sometimes with men) information groups about death, dying and medical emergencies, so that in the event something might happen, friends could inform doctors and authorities about a person's end of life care or burial wishes.

These communities of care granted participants greater social security and more opportunity to lead lives marked by social outings, travel and friendships. But this did not mean that they had entirely collectivised their way of life. Rather, loose networks of mutual aid supported more individualistic lifestyles and identities. As Diana put it, "I have had some women who've been interested in sharing a house or an apartment." She responded, "Not interested." Having left a relationship in Canada to move to Ecuador on her own, she wanted to cultivate a new relationship with herself and her own needs, stating, "I'm living alone … I love it." She expanded, "I'm happy with my own company. I'm happy with going out to dinner by myself with a book." Louise, 67, a retired social worker from Hawaii, had a similar perspective. She also enjoyed her life in Cuenca and had developed an active social life there with plenty of time for herself. She explained, "I like being alone, I like coming home and my house isn't messed up, it's just like I left it." Research participants reported that the communities of care they produced enabled them to live lifestyles adjacent to successful ageing ideals, including the individual self-satisfaction most often associated with contemporary men's ageing ideals (e.g. bucket list adventurism). This reorganisation of social relations of care was partly the product of participants' commitments to a new style of ageing that challenges gender ideologies associated with older women. It also demonstrates, therefore, how the gender order in the third age is undergoing important changes because of shifting ageing ideals.

Conclusion

In this article, we have explored what we refer to as the gender-ageing nexus. This nexus exists in all our lives, as social forces remake various elements of the gender order and the age order over our life course. For women of the baby boomer generation entering the third age, this nexus involves a tension between ideologies of ageing and gender, especially for those who had participated in shifting gender orders throughout their life course. In some ways, this experimentation with new forms of ageing amongst single women should come as no surprise, even if it may also be overlooked by sociologists of gender.

Our case study of single, older women who retired to Ecuador in the early 2010s demonstrates one way that women are experimenting with the gender-ageing nexus, formulating new social relations of care that support ideologies of active and successful ageing. Despite drawing attention to active ageing as an ideology, we are particularly aware of the pleasure, joy and meaning our research participants derived from these innovations in the life course, particularly in relation to established patterns of ageing centred on care for families and partners, which were not always available or preferred. Though our case focuses on a group of relatively privileged, white North American lifestyle migrants, we submit that this particular group of women articulate aspirations and tensions that are similar to other groups of older women. Other communities of Canadian and US-American older adults form similar types of cohort communities who engage in social activities together and may exhibit a similar type of gender-ageing nexus, one that develops cultures of care and intimacy beyond heteronormative families (see Roseneil & Budgeon 2004). Moreover, men also experience tension between ageing and gender ideals (Allain 2024). Research examining the unique ways that the gender-ageing nexus overlaps with other social positions will further enhance our understanding of gender and age in later life. We hope that new work in this field will investigate the ways that this nexus is changed by race, ability, sexuality and social class.

Our findings suggest that the particular form of gendered ageing discussed in our case owes something to the ability of Canadian and US-American adults to relocate savings earned at high latitudes of the global division of labour towards spaces with lower costs of labour power

(Hayes 2014). This no doubt also helps inform the normative dispositions of lifestyle migrants such as our participants, whose economic conditions often afforded few privileges in their home countries. It is, furthermore, perhaps too soon to tell if the pandemic and its impact on older adults will have a disproportionate impact on the social structures of ageing in the 2020s and beyond, curtailing similar types of experiments that connect communities of care with self-actualisation through adventure in third age. If active ageing was a neoliberal response aimed at giving individuals a sense of control over the ageing process (control that was mostly ideological), the persistence of COVID-19 may yet rehabilitate discourses of frailty and vulnerability that reshape the experiences of older adults, especially women, who appear to be at higher risk of long-term sequelae from repeated COVID-19 infections (Stewart et al. 2021). However, these risks may only further oblige older, single women to further innovate social relations of care beyond heteronormative intimacy and family.

The notion of a gender-ageing nexus attends to life course elements of the gender order, which are currently undergoing important transformations that have nonetheless remained marginal in the sociology of gender and of ageing (see Spector-Mersel 2006). Here, we have drawn attention to the gender dynamics of an emergent form of active ageing, which premises success in the ageing process on an ability to remain active – not just physically, but also socially, through participation in social events and consumption activity (such as going out or travelling). Research participants realigned gender expectations in the third age with these ideals of active and successful ageing, albeit not always in ways that dispelled the stress and tension of conflicting ideologies. Migration to a lower-cost country provided more women with the material basis to experience meaningful adventures whilst avoiding more vulnerable paths of ageing in social isolation, which have perhaps encouraged ageing heterosexual women's reliance on family members and partners in the past.

Participants demonstrated what we refer to as a new nexus within the constellations of ageing and gender. This nexus draws our attention towards the ways that gender is being remade through the life course, around new social forces that enable older, single women to realise meaningful forms of self-actualisation as they age – forms of self-actualisation associated until now with men. For our participants, communities of care beyond heteronormative families and partners became important sources

of intimacy and friendship that served as support systems for more individualistic forms of ageing. As the gender-ageing nexus continues to change in response to new social forces in the 2020s, the innovations outlined earlier signal how heterosexual gender ideologies may change in the future and recast gender relations more broadly.

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Declaration of contribution of authors

Hayes contributed 60% of the work for this piece, whilst Allain contributed 40%.

Statement of conflict of interest

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Ageism and sexism in films with older people as the lead

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Abstract

Examination of ageism and sexism in films can reveal aspects of cultural norms and values. Utilizing content analysis, representations of older people who were the lead in a film were analyzed from a 20-year time frame. Forty-six characters from 28 US and UK films were evaluated employing a screening tool based on five ageism scales. Results indicated that positive stereotypes were found more often, particularly for female leads. Portrayals largely represented a model of "successful aging;" that is, active and without significant health issues. Consistent with past research, women were underrepresented, and people of color and members of the LGBTQ+ community were nearly absent, substantiating continued marginalization in film. This study also adds to the substantiative literature by demonstrating that while films perpetuate the neoliberal pressure to maintain middle-age health standards, some shifts toward a more balanced portrayal of older adulthood are occurring. As many countries experience an aging of the population, pressure

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from the "silver economy" may challenge ageist presentations in film, including the double standard of aging.

Keywords: ageism, cinema, content analysis, film, intersectionality, sexism.

Introduction

Stereotypical representations of older adults in the media help perpetuate ageist cultural norms since many aging presentations are ones of failure and decline (e.g. Lemish & Muhlbauer 2012). Even though nearly 17% of the United States (US) population is over the age of 65, older people are mainly excluded from popular culture (Whelehan & Gwynne 2014) with underrepresentation across media platforms and marginalization when included (e.g. Sharry & McVittie 2016). An increase in films centered on age and aging may suggest a marked shift in interest in older people (Dolan 2018), but a critical eye might note that age-related changes are still pathologized (Chivers 2011). Therefore, older people, despite their increase in the population, will retain their minority status as they are seen as an out-group with negative associated characteristics (Chonody & Teater 2016). However, as baby boomers enter their later life stages, the "power of the grey economy" may force greater representation of older actors in film (e.g. Dolan 2018, 2020; Sharry & McVittie 2016; Whelehan & Gwynne 2014).

Similarly, women are often disempowered and/or represented in stereotypical ways in the media, including film (e.g. Sharry & McVittie 2016). Femininity and masculinity, as well as the demarcation between them, are created by gender performativities that reinforce social norms about what it means to be a woman or man (Dolan 2018). From the Marvel Universe (Olufidipe & Echezabal 2021) to Nollywood (Onyenankeya et al. 2019), women are diminished in their roles, and this marginalization intersects with age. The intersectionality between age and gender is the contemporary, 21st century frontier and battleground that stifles female empowerment – the "double bind" (Montell 2019). This dual-wield bulwark to female empowerment is nothing new, as women have historically had the impossible onus of responsibility of childcare intertwined with

subservient work in the paid labor force (e.g. Fitzpatrick 1999). Further, this intersectionality for the aging female results in the "double standard of aging" whereby women lose social value due to the importance that is placed on physical attractiveness, which is inherently associated with youth (e.g. Calasanti & Slevin 2006; Sontag 1972). For example, "ageless-ness" and "transcendence of age" are common advertising themes for anti-aging skin products (e.g. Ellison 2014), which dismisses the aging face in favor of ones that can overcome it. Therefore, social value can only be retained through youthfulness for the aging woman, and the main-tenance of the male gaze demonstrates her success. On the other hand, studies also substantiate the way that older women are cast in a nega-tive light by describing their bodies as repulsive (e.g. Ylänne 2015). The post-menopausal female body lacks reproductive usefulness and is not viewed as sexually desirable. Hence, aging female bodies are outright dismissed or objectified to create two kinds of gendered representation.

The iterative relationship between the media and the culture at large has led to some shifts in representation in certain sectors. These changes are aimed at addressing ageism, sexism, and lack of diversity, which give pause to the dominant discourse. For example, a Dove (2024) advertise-ment campaign ("Real Beauty") ran a series of printed ads aimed at body positivity and inclusivity and featured black and brown people to take a stand against distorted and narrow media images of women. Similarly, the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP 2018) produced provocative documentary-type campaigns that challenged people to examine the notion that "you look good for your age" is actually a compli-ment, and by asking millennials to demonstrate "what is old?" and then introducing them to older people who were not in decline (AARP 2016). Both videos directly confront antiquated ageist stereotypes and embed-ded ageist language.

Through critical analysis of the media, dominant cultural beliefs and associated behaviors can be revealed (Lemish & Muhlbauer 2012), and age is a useful "lens to clarify our understanding of our cultural world and its media products" (Shary & McVittie 2016, p. 7). The study of age representation in films is a relatively young discipline given the absence of older people in much of popular culture (Shary & McVittie 2016). Nev-ertheless, large bodies of work in this area have thoroughly examined

various aspects of age and aging in the cinema, including historically and by gender, ability, and cognition (e.g. Chivers 2011; Cohen-Shavlev 2009; deFalco 2010; Dolan 2018; Harrington et al. 2014; Medina 2018; Shary & McVittie 2016). The current study sought to add to this body of work by examining what changes in age and gender representation, if any, may be occurring in films. To do so, elements of ageism and sexism were examined in films that featured an older person as the main character and then compared at two points in a 20-year time frame.

Ageism and Sexism in the Media

Aging Portrayals

The Hollywood agenda seeks mass appeal, and as a result, older characters are not only underestimated, but are deprecated and omitted (Shary & McVittie 2016). In fact, underrepresentation of older people is consistent across media platforms, including film, and supports a youth-oriented culture that simply ignores older people (Signorielli 2004). Whether news, fiction, advertising, or feature stories, older people are less visible (Edström 2018). The exact impact of media representation is challenging to study, but the message is that those who are important and have status are the people who are featured (Vernon et al. 1990). On the other hand, when older people do appear in print or electronic formats, they are often portrayed in negative ways (e.g. death and decline) and/or marginalized within their role (e.g. Shary & McVittie 2016; Vasil & Wass 1993). On television shows, for example, they are less likely to be a leader, hold less occupational power, are less sexually active, and engage in fewer leisure activities (Lauzen et al. 2007), or they are portrayed by an idealized set of stereotypes – young-old, Caucasian, middle-class, heterosexual, and able-bodied (Markov & Yoon 2021). Some changes on television and in films may be occurring with slightly more representation, but their characterizations remain largely the same (Dolan 2018; Markov & Yoon 2021; Ng 2023). Gravagne (2012) asks the question – Do these types of films "function as a tool of oppression – exaggerating the significance of loss, papering over strengths, abilities, and talents that

someone might still be developing, blocking access to dreams that could still be realized, roles that still could be filled, and relationships that still might blossom?" (p. 71).

Films, like other media, provide a narrow and biased representation of social reality (e.g. Cohen-Shalev 2009), and Hollywood continues to placate the tastes of the dominant group – young and male (Dolan 2020). Older characters are to "fade into irrelevance, inactivity, or absurdity" (Shary & McVittie 2016, p. 3), and this was evidenced in a large study that examined portrayals from 25,000 movie scripts from 88 different countries over a 90-year period (Ng et al. 2023). The presence of keywords and the context were compiled for synonyms for "older adult" and rated on a scale from very negative (e.g. denouncing) to very positive (e.g. eminent). Overall positive representations of older adults were not found with the least negative found in East Asia and South Asia with words like "venerable" and "respectful." The most negative representations occurred in Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa and were associated with death (Ng et al. 2023). The latter may be reflective of modernization and advances in technology that have impacted the social standing of older people in these regions leaving their skills and knowledge seen as obsolete (Manor 2019).

Similarly, in American teen movies older people were marginalized in their role and depicted stereotypically (Robinson et al. 2009), which is noteworthy given that these movies are geared toward an age group that may have little interaction with older people and thus may be more susceptible to acceptance of these negative representations. In addition, when older people are represented in negative ways, aging anxiety is increased (Whelehan & Gwynne 2014) and internalized ageism can be reinforced. In contrast, Disney films seem to take the lead in terms of both positive portrayals and representation of older people, which could help to shape aging narratives for younger audiences (Robinson et al. 2007).

Nonetheless, both positive and negative depictions of older people are likely ageist in nature given their reductionistic quality (Rozanova et al. 2006), and the "successful aging" narrative is often employed as a positive aging portrayal (Dolan 2013, 2018; Rozanaova et al. 2006). Yet, some successful aging stories are overly positive and act to disempower those who cannot maintain what are often middle-aged health and wealth standards.

This model of success can be detrimental to the self-esteem of older people in that they imply "failure" when one can no longer run a marathon or maintain youthful beauty standards (Chonody & Teater 2016; Teater & Chonody 2017). Interestingly, positive portrayals of older people that are "too positive" may backfire, at least for older people. In a series of studies, Fung et al. (2015) found that exposure to a positive representation of an older person led to less negative beliefs about their own aging and greater physiological calming, but when the portrayals were too positive, downstream memory performance was lowered. These results suggest that achieving more realistic portrayals of older adulthood could contribute to a shift in thinking about this life stage.

The Intersection of Age and Sex

Media plays a clear role in producing age and perpetuating aging beliefs (Harrington et al. 2019). Films provide "a collective story about the political, economic, and social reality of growing older in a particular time and place…and perhaps most importantly, about how to think of ourselves and our changing place in society as we grow older" (Gravagne 2012, p. 5). Ageism and sexism intersect across media platforms in that older women are still underrepresented (Lemish Muhlbauer 2012), including in animated films (Robinson et al. 2007) and the amount of dialogue allotted to them in films (Anderson & Daniels 2016). When women are present, they are less likely to be in a position of authority or power and less sexual, and their bodies are offered as points for ridicule (Lemish & Muhlbauer 2012). This is true even in animation where older women were represented more negatively than men (Robinson et al. 2007). A slight amount of progress in terms of representation may be found given that a previous study indicated that 73% of characters were male across age groups (Smith et al. 2010), and a contemporary analysis found that men outnumbered women two to one (Neville & Anastasio 2019). Nonetheless, this ongoing low representation of women, especially older women, may help perpetuate their status as unimportant (Lauzen & Dozier 2005).

The idealized older woman is commonly found in the media. She is in her 60s, white, middle-class, able-bodied, and heterosexual (DeSutter & VanBauwel 2023). Given that older women will be judged by their faces, the appearance of youthfulness is necessary to reinforce cultural norms and social expectations of beauty and youth (Chonody & Teater 2016).

An aging process that has been arrested is to be celebrated (Chonody & Teater 2016) and can propel the "silvered beauty myth." Yet, it is an illusion since the "silvered beauty" has come to mean engagement with anti-aging products and procedures, including Botox, hair dye, and plastic surgery (Dolan 2018), thus furthering the double standard that sets unrealistic social expectations for what it means to retain beauty (Braithwaite 2002; Hatch 2005; McConatha et al. 2003, 2004). As so-called beauty work pervades Hollywood, and thus film making, aging women are both invisible and hypervisible; that is, their physical appearance goes unseen, and yet, it is all that anyone notices (Twigg 2004; Woodward 1999). Exposure to television and magazines, at least in part, contributes to women's desire for beauty work (Slevec & Tiggemann 2010), which demonstrates the relevance of the media in personal perceptions of aging.

Current Study

The current study sought to understand how older people are represented in film and differences in portrayals by gender across a 20-year timeframe when they are the main character. The research team comprised one faculty member and two graduate assistants. The research questions framing this study were:

- What age and aging stereotypes are represented in the films? Are there differences in these portrayals in the past 20 years?
- How are older characters represented in terms of their gender? Is diversity present (i.e. race/ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation)? Have these representations changed over the past 20 years?

Method

Similar to previous studies (e.g. Onyenankeya et al. 2019; Robinson et al. 2009), we sought to understand trends in representation over time to look for change; thus, we chose a 20-year period as this would provide time for cultural shifts to make their way to the screen. To identify a film list for the past 20 years, "movies with older people as the main character" was used in Google's search engine by the primary researcher. Google was employed for the search because we wanted to capture a wide range

of films, including those from multiple production companies, streaming services (e.g. Netflix, Prime), and films that did not earn top dollar. About 42 million results were produced, and the process of reviewing websites was concluded once a saturation of titles was achieved. That is, once most of the lists were markedly the same as what had been gathered so far.

From these seven websites, which included Internet Movie Database (IMDb) and Ranker amongst others, a total of 300 films were reviewed. Inclusion criteria were: an older adult (i.e. someone who appears to be ~60 years or older) as a main character and released between 2001 and 2021. The chronological age of the actor was chosen to capture films that included people in later life stages. Exclusion criteria were: short films, animation, documentaries, films based on the lives of famous/notable people (e.g. *Capote*, *Iron Lady*), and films that were not American/English. Short films would not permit a deeper analysis, and animation is its own genre that typically appeals to a specific audience and may use stereotypes in a different way. Moreover, animation would not likely yield very many films with older main characters. Documentaries and films based on the life of a notable person, while written and meant to showcase a particular narrative, are presumably not purely fictional; thus, they may be more prone to presenting a multifaceted portrayal compared to fictional films. Lastly, films were limited to American and English films due in part to our measurement strategy, which is based in ageism scales developed largely with American samples (described further in the text), but also because these two countries share similar ageist stereotypes culturally, and films from these two countries are widely shared between them. After eliminating films that did not meet these criteria, 114 films remained.

Given the large number of movies in this 20-year period, and the study's aim of comparing representation for a 20-year period, films from the first 5 years of this time period (i.e. 2001–2006) and the last 5 years (i.e. 2016–2021) were retained for analysis (N = 46). Next, the list was divided amongst the research team who then examined their film list more closely to ensure that they met study criteria. The IMDb was consulted to review the written description of the film and main actors as well as who was featured on the movie cover. An additional 16 films were excluded because they were either based on a true story (e.g. *Darkest Hour*) or were films that were not American/English (e.g. *A Song for Martin*). Of the 29 remaining films, 12 were from the first timeframe, and 17 were from the latter 5 years of the timeframe.

One additional film (*Calendar Girls*) was eliminated after watching it as the main characters were not older adults plus, we learned it was based on a true story. Thus, 28 films were included in this study (see Table 1).

Table 1. Film list

	2001–2006
1	About Schmidt (2003)
2	Secondhand Lions (2003)
3	Big Fish (2003)
4	Something's Gotta Give (2003)
5	The Notebook (2004)
6	Ladies in Lavender (2004)
7	In Her Shoes (2005)
8	An Unfinished Life (2005)
9	Local Color (2006)
10	Little Miss Sunshine (2006)
11	Venus (2006)
	2016–2021
12	Youth in Oregon (2016)
13	Finding Your Feet (2017)
14	Going In Style (2017)
15	Hampstead (2017)
16	The Wife (2017)
17	The Leisure Seeker (2017)
18	Our Souls at Night (2017)
19	Book Club (2018)
20	The Mule (2018)
21	What They Had (2018)
22	The Man Who Killed Hitler and Then the Bigfoot (2018)
23	VFW (2019)
24	The Irishman (2019)
25	The Father (2020)
26	Senior Moment (2021)
27	Queen Bees (2021)
28	Swan Song (2021)

Measurement

The primary researcher developed a framework to analyze the films' content by compiling stereotypes about older people from commonly used ageism scales, which included Aging Opinion Survey (Kafer et al. 1980), the Attitudes to Ageing Questionnaire (Laidlaw et al. 2006), Kogan's Attitudes Toward Old People Scale (Kogan 1961), Relating to Older People Evaluation (Cherry & Palmore 2008), and Polizzi's Refined Version of the Aging Semantic Differential (Polizzi 2003). In addition, articles by Roy and Ayalon (2020) and Lynott and Merola (2007) were utilized due to the nature of their work which was similar to this study's goals. Any item that held potential for observation in a film (e.g. respected) was included, and any item that would not likely be manifest (e.g. "I find it more difficult to talk about my feelings as I get older;" Laidlaw et al. 2006, p. 378) was left out. A few categories were combined due to the similar nature of their meaning (i.e. inflexible and uncooperative), and some were eliminated due to the difficulty of accurately differentiating between each of them. For example, agreeable, friendly, sweet, nice, and kind were found in various ageism scales, but the researchers were challenged to create clear demarcations between each of these. Thus, kind was retained and was coupled with empathetic. Friendly was also kept to denote those that were outgoing with others and easy to get along with.

Common developmental themes that may be associated with older adulthood, and thus the subject of the movie plot, were tracked for each character. These movie themes were: retirement, widowhood, death/dying, disease/health, and loneliness. Sociodemographic information for each main character was also recorded. Ageist content was documented for the film, which included telling jokes about age, characters who were told that they were too old for something, and/or being called "young lady/man." The amount of content throughout the film determined the rating for the film utilizing a one to three scale (1 = *a little* (i.e. one or two ageist jokes or comments); 2 = *moderate* (three or four); 3 = *mostly present* (five or more)). The objectification of women or sexist language was also noted.

To determine consistency in our use of the framework, four films (two from each time period) were randomly selected for review by the

research team. The first film (*About Schmidt*) was watched and analyzed, and then the team met to discuss our findings. Only minor variations in ratings were found, which were discussed, and further clarifications were made (e.g. What exactly is meant by a "senior moment?"). Next, *Queen Bees* was analyzed, and again, the findings were discussed with limited variability. The process was repeated for the final two films (*Venus*; *The Wife*). Next, each researcher was randomly assigned seven films to watch and analyze independently. Once all the analyses were completed, the team met to talk through the results. During this meeting, some inconsistencies were found in our interpretations. Further clarification of our criteria occurred, and the category of "physical features" was eliminated as we could not agree if someone "looked younger than their age" (e.g. Joan played by Glen Close in *The Wife*) nor could we have complete agreement if someone had wrinkles/ gray hair (e.g. sometimes older women's hair is an indistinct blonde-ish color; e.g., Sharon played by Candace Bergen in *Bookclub)*.

Next, the primary researcher selected one film from the other two researcher's list to watch and check on the usage of our tracking system. From there, a thematic grouping system was created whereby similar terms were paired. These groupings were dichotomized as negative or positive employing the context of the original ageism scales (e.g. Polizzi's Refined Version of the Aging Semantic Differential, Polizzi 2003). For example, the category "Aging Loss" was defined as any of the following: can't hear, don't like the way they look, slow/tired, weak/clumsy, not active, or frail. If the character had any of these, then this was indicated as present in the film, and the character was rated on the degree to which they embodied those characteristics (1 = *a little*; 2 = *moderate*; 3 = *mostly present*). The scale rating was determined by the number of characteristics from that thematic grouping that was present, and the degree it was featured in the film. For example, "positive outlook on life/aging" included: privilege to grow old, cooperative with others, flexible in new situations, and optimistic/looks toward the future in a positive way. A "3" indicated that the character embodied all or nearly all these traits for the majority of the film. A "2" indicated that the character had some of these characteristics or changed over time to embody them. A "1" was indicative of one trait.

Some characteristics, both positive and negative, did not readily fit in a particular category; thus, a "general positive stereotypes" (e.g. modern, fit) and "general negative stereotypes" (e.g. cheap, decreased social status) were created. Each of these categories included a list of characteristics, which were marked for their presence but were not rated. In Appendix 1, the thematic grouping system can be found. The team went back to two of the original movies and completed the character groupings. In a final meeting, we discussed our findings and adjusted our tracking sheets based on group feedback and consensus. We then each watched one more film from someone else's list to check our agreement on the numbering system (i.e. the 1–3 rating system).

Analysis

Content analysis was used to examine the presence of ageist and sexist depictions in the films. The primary unit of analysis for comparison was the presence of negative/positive stereotypes by time period, gender, and finally by gender and time. Following previous studies (e.g. Robinson et al. 2007) and given that hypotheses testing was not the goal, frequencies were examined to look for trends over time. The ratings for the amount of negative/positive stereotypical content (i.e. the rating scale) were averaged across timeframes and for gender to provide additional detail, but it was not used for analyses purposes. Similarly, developmental milestones were tracked to compile a summary of story arcs but not analyzed further.

The research team's tracking sheets were then combined for all the movies by the primary researcher. Frequencies for the different types of stereotypes represented in the films and the developmental milestones were calculated. Averages were also created for any numerical data. Then, the two time periods were compared to one another to determine if representation of older people may be shifting. Lastly, gender representations in older adulthood were examined for all the films and by year. Ethical review was not required for this study.

Results

A total of 46 characters were coded for the 28 films included in this analysis. Twelve films contained ageist content (42.9%), but it was moderate as

indicated by the mean (1.58). When reviewing the frequencies for aging stereotypes, results indicated that positive representations predominated. Almost 90% of the characters were not a burden on others/contributed to society, and 76% had a positive attitude with others. The highest frequency for negative stereotypes was nostalgia (53%) followed by rigidity toward aging/life (46%). In only four films, the older person was not encountering a prototypical developmental milestone (e.g. widowhood). In other words, it was just a film with older people in it. The other 24 films included one or more developmental milestones, predominantly loneliness (41%) followed by widowhood (26%) and death/dying (15%). In terms of representation by gender, women were only about a third of the characters. Men were shown as a lone character 43% of the time compared to only 11% for women. In terms of multiple main characters, women were shown with other women in 7.1% of the films, men in 17.9%. Six films featured both male and female characters (21.4%). Nearly all the characters were heterosexual (98%) and white (94%), and the majority were middle/upper class (70%). Most films were American with American actors (or English actors with American accents). Most characters lived either in an apartment or home (72%) and 40% lived alone. Table 2 contains the full results.

When comparing the two time periods, not many changes in the frequencies for stereotypes were found. “Burdensomeness” was twice as common in current films, while a “negative attitude toward others” decreased by half. General negative stereotypes, while not frequently present in the 2001–2006 films, were nearly absent in the more recent time period. Interestingly, some positive stereotypes were also dropped from the earlier time frame. That is, “elder of the community” and “positive attitude toward others” was less frequent in the 2016–2021 films (88% vs. 57%). A comparison of overall ageist content revealed a slight increase in that 36.4% of the 2001–2006 films contained some degree of ageism compared to 47.1% in the 2016–2021 films. The average amount of overall ageist content was 1.5 for the earlier period and 1.75 for the later time frame. Gender, race, and sexual orientation were nearly unchanged across this 20-year timeframe; however, characters’ socioeconomic status decreased with 81% in the middle/upper class in the earlier time period compared to 63% in the more recent films. Table 3 provides the full results for the comparison between time periods.

Table 2. Thematic analysis for all movies (N = 28, with 46 characters)

Characteristic	n (f)	M
Gender		
Female	15 (32.6%)	--
Male	31 (67.3%)	--
Sexual Orientation		
Gay/lesbian	1 (2.2%)	--
Heterosexual	45 (97.8%)	--
Race		
Asian	0 (0%)	--
African American	3 (6.5%)	--
Caucasian	43 (93.5%)	--
Actor's Nationality (or accent)		
English	9 (19.6%)	--
American	34 (73.9%)	--
Other	3 (6.5%)	--
Film's Nationality		
English	5 (17.9%)	--
American	23 (82.1%)	--
Character's Relationship Status		
Married	8 (17.4%)	--
Divorced	4 (8.7%)	--
Widowed	8 (17.4%)	--
Never married	3 (6.5%)	--
Unclear	8 (17.4%)	--
Transitioned in the movie (e.g. widowed to married)	15 (32.6%)	--
Type of Housing		
Home/apartment	31 (67.4%)	--
Facility	4 (8.7%)	--
Unclear	5 (10.9%)	--
Transitioned in the movie (e.g. home to facility)	6 (13.0%)	--

(*Continued*)

Table 2. (*Continued*)

Characteristic	*n* (*f*)	*M*
Living Arrangements		
Partner/spouse	5 (10.9%)	--
Alone	17 (37.0%)	--
Child	2 (4.3%)	--
Sibling	4 (8.7%)	--
Facility	2 (4.3%)	--
Friend	2 (4.3%)	--
Unclear/unstated	4 (8.7%)	--
Transitioned in the movie (e.g. partner to alone)	10 (21.7%)	--
Negative Stereotypes		
Aging loss	15 (32.6%)	1.47
Nostalgic	25 (53.3%)	2.08
Isolation	13 (28.3%)	1.85
Learning & memory	10 (21.7%)	1.60
Death & dying	11 (23.9%)	1.55
Burdensome	10 (21.7%)	1.20
Rigidity toward aging/life	21 (45.7%)	1.95
Untidy	2 (4.4%)	2.00
Negative attitude toward others	9 (19.6%)	1.22
Passivity	0 (0%)	--
General Negative Stereotypes[a]		
Pries into other people's business	1 (2.2%)	--
Decreased social status	4 (8.7%)	--
Behaves oddly/eccentrically	5 (10.9%)	--
Cheap	2 (4.4%)	--
Suspicious/paranoid	2 (4.4%)	--
Conservative	0 (0%)	--
Excessive demands for love/reassurance	0 (0%)	--

(*Continued*)

Table 2. (*Continued*)

Characteristic	*n* (*f*)	*M*
Positive Stereotypes		
Positive outlook on life/aging	28 (60.9%)	2.79
Elder of community	31 (67.4%)	2.10
Contributes (not a burden)	41 (89.1%)	1.93
Positive attitude with others	35 (76.1%)	2.34
General Positive Stereotypes[a]		
Interested in love	19 (41.3%)	--
Ordinary (not eccentric)	26 (56.5%)	--
Modern	12 (26.1%)	--
Fit	18 (39.1%)	--
Reflective	26 (56.5%)	--
Middle/upper class	32 (69.6%)	--
Primary Movie Themes[a]		
Retirement	9 (19.6%)	--
Widowhood	12 (26.1%)	--
Death/dying	7 (15.2%)	--
Disease (health)	8 (17.4%)	--
Cognitive decline	5 (10.9%)	--
Loneliness	19 (41.3%)	--

[a]Totals are greater than the number of characters tracked given that some characters had multiple themes as part of the story arc.

In terms of gender representation, six films relied on mostly stereotypical depictions of older men and women, and five movies also incorporated the objectification of women or sexist language (e.g. remarks, behavior). Four of these latter films overlapped with the group of films with ageist content (exception: *Venus*). Men made up 67% of all the characters, and down the line of characteristics, men demonstrated higher frequencies for negative stereotypes. For example, “nostalgia,” “rigidity toward aging/life,” and a “negative attitude toward others” were largely seen in male characters. Moreover, all the general negative stereotypes (e.g. cheap, suspicious) were male characteristics except one (i.e. pries into

Table 3. Analysis by year

Characteristic	2001–2006 (films = 11; characters = 16)	2016–2021 (films = 17, characters = 30)
Gender	*n* (*f*)	*n* (*f*)
Female	5 (31.3%)	10 (33.3%)
Male	11 (68.8%)	20 (66.7%)
Sexual Orientation	*n* (*f*)	*n* (*f*)
Gay/lesbian	0 (0%)	1 (3.3%)
Heterosexual	16 (100%)	29 (96.7%)
Race	*n* (*f*)	*n* (*f*)
African American	1 (6.3%)	2 (6.7%)
Caucasian	15 (93.7%)	28 (93.3%)
Negative Stereotypes	*n* (*f*) *M*	*n* (*f*) *M*
Aging loss	6 (37.5%) 1.33	9 (30.0%) 1.56
Nostalgic	8 (50%) 2.25	17 (56.7%) 2.00
Isolation	6 (37.5%) 2.17	7 (23.3%) 1.57
Learning & memory	3 (18.8%) 2.33	7 (23.3%) 1.29
Death & dying	5 (31.3%) 1.80	6 (20.0%) 1.33
Burdensome	2 (12.5%) 2.0	8 (26.7%) 1.00
Rigidity toward aging/life	7 (43.8%) 2.14	14 (46.7%) 1.86
Untidy	2 (12.5%) 2.00	0 (0%)
Negative attitude toward others	5 (31.3%) 1.20	4 (13.3%) 1.25
General Negative Stereotypes[a]	*n* (*f*)	*n* (*f*)
Pries into other people's business	0 (0%)	1 (3.3%)
Decreased social status	1 (6.3%)	3 (10.0%)
Behaves oddly/eccentrically	3 (18.8%)	2 (6.7%)
Cheap	2 (12.5%)	0 (0%)
Suspicious/paranoid	2 (12.5%)	0 (0%)
Positive Stereotypes	*n* (*f*) *M*	*n* (*f*) *M*
Positive outlook on life/aging	19 (62.5%) 2.30	18 (60.0%) 1.94
Elder of community	14 (87.5%) 2.21	17 (56.7%) 2.00
Contributes (not a burden)	14 (87.5%) 1.93	27 (90.0%) 1.93
Positive attitude with others	15 (93.8%) 2.33	20 (66.7%) 2.35

(*Continued*)

Table 3. (*Continued*)

Characteristic	2001–2006 (films = 11; characters = 16)	2016–2021 (films = 17, characters = 30)
General Positive Stereotypes[a]	*n* (*f*)	*n* (*f*)
Interested in love	6 (37.5%)	13 (43.3%)
Ordinary (not eccentric)	8 (50.0%)	18 (60.0%)
Modern	4 (25.0%)	8 (26.7%)
Fit	5 (31.3%)	13 (43.3%)
Reflective	10 (62.5%)	16 (53.3%)
Middle/upper class	13 (81.3%)	19 (63.3%)
Primary Movie Themes[a]	*n* (*f*)	*n* (*f*)
Retirement	5 (31.3%)	4 (13.3%)
Widowhood	3 (18.8%)	9 (30.0%)
Death/dying	4 (25.0%)	3 (10.0%)
Disease (health)	6 (37.5%)	2 (6.7%)
Cognitive decline	0 (0%)	5 (16.7%)
Loneliness	8 (50.0%)	11 (36.7%)

[a]Totals are greater than the number of characters tracked given that some characters had multiple themes as part of the character story.

other's business). For the positive stereotypes, only one was more frequent for women – "positive attitude on life/aging" at 73% (55% for men). The general positive stereotypes, on the other hand, were more frequent for women, including: "interested in love" (67% vs. 29%), "not eccentric" (87% vs. 42%), and "modern" (53% vs. 13%). Table 4 contains these results. For gendered stereotypical depictions of women, 47% were worried about their looks; 13% were warm; and 27% were bitter or complaining. For stereotypical representations of men, nearly half were portrayed as "grumpy old men," and 32% were portrayed as a "dirty old man." Only around 10% were presented as powerful; however, 55% of men played a character that could be seen as "a man's man" (see Table 5 for the results).

The results of how gender was represented according to when the film was released indicated that women encompassed more frequent displays of negative stereotypes in current films when compared to the early timeframe. "Rigidity" went from 0% in the 2001–2006 films to 30%

Table 4. Analysis by gender for all films

Characteristic	Female characters (films = 10)[a]	Male characters (films = 23)[a]
Gender	*n* (*f*)	*n* (*f*)
Female	15 (32.6%)	--
Male	--	31 (67.3%)
Sexual Orientation	*n* (*f*)	*n* (*f*)
Gay/lesbian	0 (0%)	1 (3.2%)
Heterosexual	15 (100%)	30 (96.8%)
Race	*n* (*f*)	*n* (*f*)
African American	0 (0%)	3 (9.7%)
Caucasian	15 (100%)	28 (90.3%)
Negative Stereotypes	*n* (*f*) *M*	*n* (*f*) *M*
Aging loss	2 (13%) 1.00	13 (41.9%) 1.54
Nostalgic	4 (26.7%) 1.25	21 (67.7%) 2.24
Isolation	2 (13.3%) 2.00	11 (35.5%) 1.82
Learning & memory	2 (13.3%) 2.00	7 (22.6%) 1.29
Death & dying	2 (13.3%) 1.00	9 (29.0%) 1.67
Burdensome	2 (13.3%) 1.00	8 (25.8%) 1.25
Rigidity toward aging/life	3 (20%) 1.67	18 (58.1%) 2.00
Untidy	0 (0%)	2 (6.5%) 2.0
Negative attitude toward others	1 (6.7%) 1.00	8 (25.8%) 1.20
General Negative Stereotypes[b]	*n* (*f*)	*n* (*f*)
Pries into other people's business	1 (6.7%)	0 (0%)
Decreased social status	0 (0%)	4 (12.9%)
Behaves oddly/eccentrically	0 (0%)	5 (16.1%)
Cheap	0 (0%)	2 (6.5%)
Suspicious/paranoid	0 (0%)	2 (6.5%)
Positive Stereotypes	*n* (*f*) *M*	*n* (*f*) *M*
Positive outlook on life/aging	11 (73.3%) 2.45	17 (54.8%) 1.82
Elder of community	10 (66.7%) 2.10	21 (67.7%) 2.10
Contributes (not a burden)	13 (86.7%) 2.00	28 (90.3%) 2.68
Positive attitude with others	11 (73.3%) 2.91	24 (77.4%) 2.08

(*Continued*)

Table 4. (*Continued*)

Characteristic	Female characters (films = 10)[a]	Male characters (films = 23)[a]
General Positive Stereotypes[b]	*n* (*f*)	*n* (*f*)
Interested in love	10 (66.7%)	9 (29.0%)
Ordinary (not eccentric)	13 (86.7%)	13 (41.9%)
Modern	8 (53.3%)	4 (12.9%)
Fit	8 (53.3%)	10 (32.3%)
Reflective	9 (60.0%)	17 (54.8%)
Middle/upper class	15 (100%)	17 (54.8%)
Primary Movie Themes[b]	*n* (*f*)	*n* (*f*)
Retirement	1 (6.7%)	8 (25.8%)
Widowhood	5 (33.3%)	7 (22.6%)
Death/dying	1 (10.0%)	7 (22.6%)
Disease (health)	2 (13.3%)	6 (19.4%)
Cognitive decline	1 (6.7%)	4 (12.9%)
Loneliness	10 (66.7%)	9 (29.0%)

[a]Totals are greater than the number of films watched as some films had multiple older main characters.
[b]Totals are greater than the number of characters tracked given that some characters had multiple themes as part of the story arc.

for the 2016–2021 films. Similarly, "nostalgia" rose from 0% to 40%. For men, less frequent negative stereotypes were found in some areas. "Isolation" decreased (55% vs. 25%) as did "negative attitudes toward others" (46% vs. 15%). On the other hand, "burdensomeness" increased from 18% to 30%, and other negative stereotypes remained more consistent and more frequent for males (e.g. "aging loss," "learning and memory"). For women, positive stereotypes remained relatively unchanged, except "elder in the community," which decreased (80% to 60%); however, this also decreased for men (91% vs. 55%) as did "positive attitude toward others" (100% vs. 65%) and "being reflective" (73% vs. 45%). Men did show an increase in being seen as "fit" (18% vs. 40%). Regardless of the timeframe, all the women were presented as middle class or above, but for men, this decreased from 72% to 45%. All the women were white and heterosexual

Table 5. Gendered, ageist stereotypes: all movies

Female stereotypes[b]	Female characters (n = 16)[a] (films = 10) n (f)	Male stereotypes[b]	Male characters (n = 31)[a] (films = 23) n (f)
Sexless/not interested in sex	0 (0%)	Dirty old man	10 (32.3%)
Harsh	0 (0%)	Powerful	3 (9.7%)
Worried about looks	7 (46.7%	Gray fox/sexy	1 (3.2%)
Warm	2 (13.3%)	Grumpy old man	15 (48.4%)
Bitter	1 (6.7%)	Man's man	17 (54.8%)
Complaining	3 (20.0%)		
Wicked old witch	0 (0%)		

[a]Totals are greater than the number of films watched as some films had multiple older main characters.
[b]Totals do not reflect singular characters as some characters represented multiple stereotypes.

across time periods. For men, racial representation did not markedly change from one time frame to the next (only 6% were people of color), but one of the recent films featured a main character who was a gay man (*Swan Song*, Pat played by Udo Kier). Table 6 provides these results in full.

Discussion

Results of this content analysis provide insight into how older people are represented and what changes have occurred over time utilizing established stereotypes. Our findings are similar to those of Markov and Yoon's (2021) analysis of television shows with regards to low representation of characters who are LGBTQ+ and/or people of color in that nearly all of our film characters were heterosexual and white. This is reflective of both the "whitening of old age that is a byproduct of the silvering of the screen" (Dolan 2018, p. 22) as well as the maintenance of heteronormative cultural values. However, our results included more characters who were not middle/upper class than previous studies

Table 6. Analysis by year and gender

Characteristic	Total 2001–2006 films (n = 4)	Total 2016–2021 films (n = 6)	Total films 2001–2006 (n = 9)	Total 2016–2021 films (n = 14)
Gender	*n (f)*	*n (f)*	*n (f)*	*n (f)*
Female	5 (31.3%)	10 (33.3%)	--	--
Male	--	--	11 (68.7%)	20 (66.7%)
Negative Stereotypes	*n (f) M*	*n (f) M*	*n (f) M*	*n (f) M*
Aging loss	1 (20.0%) 1.00	1 (10.0%) 1.00	5 (45.5%) 1.4	8 (40.0%) 1.63
Nostalgic	0 (0%)	4 (40.0%) 1.25	8 (72.7%) 2.25	13 (65.0%) 2.31
Isolation	0 (0%)	2 (20.0%) 2.00	6 (54.5%) 2.17	5 (25.0%) 1.40
Learning & memory	1 (20.0%) 3.00	1 (10.0%) 1.00	2 (18.2%) 2.00	5 (25.0%) 1.60
Death & dying	0 (0%)	2 (10.0%) 2.00	5 (45.5%) 1.80	4 (20.0%) 1.50
Burdensome	0 (0%)	2 (20.0%) 1.00	2 (18.2%) 2.00	6 (30.0%) 1.00
Rigidity toward aging/life	0 (0%)	3 (30.0%) 1.25	7 (63.6%) 2.14	11 (55.0%) 1.91
Untidy	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (18.2%) 2.00	0 (0%)
Negative attitude toward others	0 (0%)	1 (10.0%) 1.00	5 (45.5%) 1.20	3 (15.0%) 1.33
General Negative Stereotypes[a]	*n (f)*	*n (f)*	*n (f)*	*n (f)*
Pries into other people's business	0 (0%)	1 (10.0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Decreased social status	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (9.1%)	3 (15.0%)
Behaves oddly/eccentrically	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3 (27.3%)	2 (10.0%)
Cheap	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (18.2%)	0 (0%)
Suspicious/paranoid	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (18.2%)	0 (0%)

(*Continued*)

Table 6. (*Continued*)

Characteristic	Total 2001–2006 films (n = 4)	Total 2016–2021 films (n = 6)	Total films 2001–2006 (n = 9)	Total 2016–2021 films (n = 14)
Positive Stereotypes	*n (f) M*	*n (f) M*	*n (f) M*	*n (f) M*
Positive outlook on life/aging	4 (80.0%) 2.75	7 (70.0%) 1.6	6 (54.5%) 2.00	11 (55.0%) 1.73
Elder of community	4 (80.0%) 2.50	6 (60.0%) 1.83	10 (91.0%) 2.10	11 (55.05%) 2.09
Contributes (not a burden)	4 (80.0%) 2.25	9 (90.0%) 1.89	10 (91.0%) 1.8	18 (90.0%) 1.94
Positive attitude with others	4 (80.0%) 3.0	7 (70.0%) 2.86	11 (100%) 2.09	13 (65.0%) 2.08
General Positive Stereotypes[a]	*n (f)*	*n (f)*	*n (f)*	*n (f)*
Interested in love	3 (60.0%)	7 (70%)	3 (27.3%)	6 (30.0%)
Ordinary (not eccentric)	4 (80.0%)	9 (90.0%)	4 (36.4%)	9 (45.0%)
Modern	2 (40.0%)	6 (60.0%)	2 (18.2%)	2 (10.0%)
Fit	3 (60.0%)	5 (50.0%)	2 (18.2%)	8 (40.0%)
Reflective	2 (40.0%)	7(70.0%)	8 (72.7%)	9 (45.0%)
Middle/upper class	5 (100%)	10 (100%)	8 (72.7%)	9 (45.0%)
Primary Movie Themes[a]	*n (f)*	*n (f)*	*n (f)*	*n (f)*
Retirement	0 (0%)	1 (10.0%)	5 (45.5%)	3 (15.0%)
Widowhood	1 (20.0%)	4 (40.0%)	2 (18.2%)	5 (25.0%)
Death/dying	1 (20.0%)	0 (0%)	4 (36.4%)	3 (15.0%)
Disease (health)	1 (20.0%)	1 (10.0%)	5 (45.5%)	1 (5.0%)
Cognitive decline	0 (0%)	1 (10.0%)	0 (0%)	4 (45.0%)
Loneliness	3 (60.0%)	7 (70.0%)	5 (45.5%)	4 (45.0%)

[a]Totals are greater than the number of characters tracked given that some characters had multiple themes as part of the story arc.

(e.g. DeSutter & VanBauwel 2023; Markov & Yoon 2021), but only men were presented in this lower socioeconomic status.

Men were featured more often (e.g. Neville & Anastasio 2019; Smith et al. 2010) with only one third of the characters being women. In addition, women were also less likely to be the solo lead and were not often presented in powerful professional positions as found in other studies (Lauzen et al. 2007). Nearly all the films presented characters in a positive stereotypical light with very little negative ageist content (e.g. Robinson et al. 2007). Interestingly, men were featured in more negative stereotypical ways, which decreased from the first time period to the second, but for women, negative stereotyping increased. These findings point to the intersectionality between age and gender and how aging expectations are showcased in film (e.g. grumpy men, bitter women).

Furthermore, our findings are consistent with the successful aging model found in other analyses (e.g. Markov & Yoon 2021) in that older people were often presented as active (socially and physically) and without health concerns. A neoliberal pressure to maintain the body to "successfully" age is not only a marketing scheme, but it is also as equally disadvantageous as the death and dying narrative (Bañón & Zecchi 2020). Homogeneous depictions of aging influence fail to encapsulate the heterogenous experience of age as well as influence how value is assigned to age (Chivers 2021). Balanced portrayals of older people can provide a counter narrative that can demonstrate the richness of aging, and perhaps some change is on the horizon. For example, in *Our Souls at Night*, while Addie (played by Jane Fonda) and Louis (played by Robert Redford) do match the successful aging model – physically fit, socially active, and without disease/decline – they are implementing unique strategies to tackle challenges that can accompany aging (i.e. widowhood and loneliness), showcasing that older adulthood includes surprises and new experiences. Similarly, *The Wife* has a narrative arc that does not rely on tropes about older people; rather, the viewer is watching the secrets of a long marriage come to light and revealing a historical context that suppressed women's success. Nonetheless, both Joan (played by Glen Close) and Joe (played by Jonathan Pryce) are white with access to wealth, privilege, and power. Given that positive portrayals of aging can be beneficial to older people regarding their own aging (Fung et al. 2015), and perhaps these more nuanced characterizations also provide the same benefits while they center new aging narratives for other viewers.

Future research should seek to test how younger audiences react to positive portrayals of aging and older people. For example, would these representations similarly help younger people to develop a more positive outlook on their aging or even aging in general? If so, this could be a useful tool in educational settings to explore the meaning of age and aging, and in turn, address ageist beliefs.

In Cohen-Shalev's (2009) introduction to "Visions of Aging: Images of the elderly in film," he writes, "there is a glaring paucity of believable, committed, and altogether worthwhile cinematic realization of old age" (p.1). Much like any other nondominant group, the film industry will continue to produce movies that rely on anachronistic and reductionistic characters built on stereotypes because an audience presumably exists for them. However, what was once "mass appeal" may be shifting as increased access to movies is occurring through streaming applications that not only produce their own content but also host Hollywood films (Shary & McVittie 2016). Additionally, market pressure may help tip this balance. Representing older people in positive ways (but maybe not too positive) may mirror the fact that Baby Boomers are a sizable part of the population with reflective power and economic freedoms (Hatch 2005; Lemish & Muhlbauer 2012). Hence, films will need to be marketed to them in ways that will compel them to watch it, and this will likely mean more movies with older main characters. This silvering of the film industry calls into question our collective ideas about what it means to be older and how adherence to chronological age as a marker of old age is a fallacy (Dolan 2018). These narratives prevent us from seeing that "old age, just like any age, is filled with contradictions, ambiguities, and individual difference that should be nurtured and allowed full expression" (Gravagne 2012, p. 73). Future research should seek to replicate this study looking at films with older people as supporting characters to determine if positive portrayals are being propelled, at least in part, due to the age group in which the film is being marketed given that Robinson et. al (2009) found that teen movies did in fact rely on negative stereotyping 60% of the time.

Women and Men in Film: Ageism and Sexism

Ageism and sexism intersected in our films in that greater reliance on ageist jokes also had more sexist content. Previous research suggests

that ageism and sexism are positively correlated (e.g. Chonody 2016), and perhaps films with more ageist content are meant to appeal to those who also hold sexist beliefs. For example, in *VFW*, the entire film centers around four veterans who need to fight off a horde of drug-addled, zombie-like people to make it to a strip club. The film was riddled with ageist jokes and sexist comments consistent with the "man's man" type. Sexism and the objectification of women is also found in the "dirty old man" portrayal whereby May–December relationships are normalized for older men (Dolan 2020). Maurice (played by Peter O'Toole in *Venus*) is the quintessential example of a "dirty old man" as the 74-year-old (age at release) chases the 24-year-old Jessie (played by Jodie Whitaker) like a horny teenager. For aging men, younger women reinforce their desirability, and their age becomes irrelevant to their sexual needs (Bañón & Zecchi 2020).

In fact, many of the films had "man's man" type characters, and quite a few also had "dirty old man" features – aspects of masculinity that suggest virility and vitality have been maintained. In one of our films, Earl (played by Clint Eastwood in *The Mule*) is the prototypical "man's man" – a 90-year-old veteran turned drug mule. Chivers' (2011) analysis of Clint Eastwood roles, which is applicable here, indicated that he is the representation of white patriarchy – he both bucks the system by creating his own rules, but he also relies on his privilege and status to do so. This "demonstrates that he has aged with [his] masculinity fully intact," which provides a reinforcement of a certain imaging of late-life masculinity (Chivers 2011, p. 101). Given that "normative masculinity… [is] embodied by middle-aged and younger men" (Thompson 2004, p. 1), showcasing older men who defy their age is not dissimilar to the depiction of women who have "transcended" their age. Privilege is invisible for the "man's man" portrayal of masculinity "against the visibility of physical aging," but his masculinity is presented as "exaggerated and compensatory" (Chivers 2011, p. 99). The film industry is responsive to trends, and the reliance on recognizable narratives is part of the business of making money; thus, the older man who is longing for his "macho past" sells (Whelehan & Gwynne 2014, p. 2). These portrayals therefore reflect aging fears related to physical prowess (Chivers 2011), and how old age is presented differently according to gender (e.g. Dolan 2018).

When deconstructing the representation of older women in film, the viewer is forced to wrestle with the question of what is the aging body and what social meaning does it have? For women who are postmenopausal, the loss of reproductive capacity puts her sexual attraction into question (Whelehan & Gwynne 2014) as her body is devalued and she becomes socially invisible (Gravagene 2012) and her social value is lost (e.g. Calasanti & Slevin 2006). A shift in the representation of sex and sexuality has been seen in the culture with the formerly asexual older woman being replaced with the "sexy-oldie" (Vares 2009). The quintessential female is the actress who has "defied" aging and is an "exemplar and embodiment of a feminized regime of successful aging" (Dolan 2020, p. 6). In our analysis, this representation was found in Vivian (played by Jane Fonda) in *Book Club* where the character represents a more traditional masculine role of lifelong "Lothario," and while older, she does not appear so. Men have enjoyed greater latitude to occupy this space of the "gray fox," which has long been part of the cultural lexicon. For example, Harry (played by Jack Nicholson) is a committed bachelor known for only seeking sexual relationships with young women in *Something's Gotta Give*. Due to his power and wealth, Jack is sexy even though he is not age transcendent.

While the "sexy oldie" may change some narratives, this imagery will also run the risk of reinforcing long-held beliefs that support gendered ageism. That is, the "sexy oldie" will likely be worried about her looks and maintenance of the male gaze. While all our female characters might not be categorized in this way, nearly half were worried about their looks, which has also been found in previous studies as well (e.g. Bañón & Zecchi 2020). Age denial and age shaming are the natural consequences for women when looking young is the only way to successfully age. In turn, this shapes the way that the aging process is perceived. It is something to be stopped or reversed (Tortajada et al. 2018), which, in turn, creates fear and anxiety at the possibility of "failure" (Chonody & Teater 2016). Accordingly, the mature aged female body is only useful in the media if it can stand as proof of an aging process that has been thwarted. Dolan (2018) suggests that the increased visibility of older female actors "is earned by their adherence to capitalist and patriarchal imperatives of female body management" (p. 121). If this standard cannot be met, then they are kept away from the "public eye as they are considered to be *abject* bodies that do not fit the model of successful aging" (emphasis in original;

Tortajada et al. 2018, p. 2). The youth-obsessed culture in concert with neoliberal consumerist ethos creates the performance of aging for women whereby "patriarchal strategies shift powerful women into heteronormative frameworks" (Tortajada et al. 2018, p. 2) and reinforces the unrealistic social standards for women's physical appearance (Braithwaite 2002; Hatch 2005).

Conceivably as a greater number of female directors and producers enter film making, increased diversity of representation will follow. In 2019, only 20% of writers, producers, editors and cinematographers working on top grossing films were women (Lauzen 2019). Just a few years later, it appears that some ground has been laid with films such as *Barbie* (co-written and directed by Greta Gerwig, Margot Robbie as a producer), which was the highest producing film of 2023 (Rubin 2024), and *Anatomy of Fall* (co-written and directed by Justine Triet). Some evidence suggests that the media is becoming "more inclusive of older women and more permissive regarding a greater variety or representation of older women" (Lemish & Muhlbauer 2012, p. 176). Nonetheless, this opening of the strict boundaries for how older women are portrayed only really applies to those who are white, privileged, and heterosexual. For women of color as well as queer women, their invisibility remains (Lemish & Muhlbauer 2012), replicating the way in which intersectional identities are hidden or overlooked on a social level, including in feminist movements (e.g. Borah et al. 2023; Gieseler 2019; Hooks 2014; Jonsson 2014, 2016; Lépinard, E. 2019; Valdes 1995). Moya Bailey coined the term "misogynoir" to reflect the intersection of misogyny and anti-Black racism, which also materializes in how Black women are represented in mainstream media (Bailey & Trudy 2018). Research confirms the underrepresentation of Black women in film. For 2022 theatrical releases, only four leads (of 88) were Black women (UCLA 2024), and in the top 100-domestic grossing films of 2022, they were only 18% of women characters with a speaking role (Lauzen 2023). These data point to an important and powerful message – who is not featured is just as important as who is (Lindemann 2022).

Similarly, sexual orientation intersects with sexism. Heteropatriarchy can be defined as "the social systems in which heterosexuality and patriarchy are perceived as normal and natural" (Arvin et al. 2013, p. 13); thus heterosexual males are not only dominant in the culture but are overrepresented in cultural artifacts. In GLAAD's (2024) analysis of 2022

theatrical and streaming releases, 28.5% had an LGBTQ+ character (55.8% male, 60% white). While the increased representation is promising, of these 292 characters, nearly 30% appeared for less than a minute, and an additional 27% were shown for less than 5 minutes; only 95 characters (33%) were in the film for more than 10 minutes (GLAAD 2024). Greater parity in gender and race was found in these characters but their overall limited screen presence speaks to their undervaluation. Given that our analysis had zero black women or women from the LGBTQ+ community as leads, films with older main characters appear to reflect these hierarchical systems of oppression and marginalization that privilege whiteness, heterosexuality, and maleness.

Limitations

The results of this analysis should be considered within the context of its limitations. First, the method utilized to identify the film list was not comprehensive for all films featuring an older main character. The authors ran across several movies while conducting this study which were not included (e.g. *Sometimes Always Never; Best Sellers*). In addition, very few action-type films were found on the lists that we consulted. For example, Liam Neeson's (70 years old at the time of release) 2022 film *Blacklight* or Bruce Willis's (67 years old) 2022 film *Wrong Place* did not come up on any of our searches. Perhaps these films are disregarded as a film about an older person given that the main character is the picture of virility, stamina, and vigor. In other words, despite their age, they represent youth as well as hegemonic masculinity. Inclusion of these films would likely have further shifted the results in favor of even more male representation given that they occupy most roles in the action film genre. Future research should seek to examine how older male and female characters are represented in this specific area of filmmaking to determine how age and gender intersect. Despite visiting multiple websites and compiling a list of 300 films, other search processes would likely have added to our scope. Second, the creation of the list of developmental milestones may have been expanded to include life review/reminiscence. While this can certainly occur at any life stage, it is an activity that is often associated with older adulthood. This characteristic was nonetheless captured on the thematic stereotype framework.

Conclusion

This study provides a new way to examine ageism in film through a framework based on scales of aging stereotypes, thus providing a systematic approach to content analysis. In turn, its use can offer new insights into how the reproduction of "types" can be viewed within both positive and negative stereotypes. Older main characters are presented in less negative ageist ways, but the promising shift lies in those films that are giving the audience a more balanced portrayal. That is, while successful aging discourse is front and center, some films couch this within the context of realistic, developmental struggles, such as loneliness. Nonetheless, if prevailing narratives – however benign or malevolent – remain unchallenged, the wider culture will be resistant to change, too. Greater social pressure for content that presents a more nuanced picture of older adulthood is needed, which may be realized as the population "grays."

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Appendix 1: Thematic Movie Analysis Tracking Sheet

Movie:

Release date:

NEGATIVE STEREOTYPES/PORTRAYL

Aging Loss – if any of the characteristics below are demonstrated, mark this general category for each character and rate it from 1 to 3 (1 = a little; 2 = moderate; 3 = mostly present in the character)

Can't hear
Don't like the way they look
Slow/tired
Weak/clumsy
Not active
Frail

Nostalgic – if any of the characteristics below are demonstrated, mark this general category for each character and rate it from 1 to 3

It's a depressing time of life
Talking about the "good ole days"
Complain about the younger generation
Less content with age (include complaints about aches and pains)

Isolation – if any of the characteristics below are demonstrated, mark this general category for each character and rate it from 1 to 3

They don't interact as much
Observe life, but don't participate
Hang around the house a lot

Learning & Memory – if any of the characteristics below are demonstrated, mark this general category for each character and rate it from 1 to 3

Can't learn new things easily
Not interested in tech
Senior moment

Death & Dying – if any of the characteristics below are demonstrated, mark this general category for each character and rate it from 1 to 3

Worried about health

Fear all your friends will be dead

Burdensome – if any of the characteristics below are demonstrated, mark this general category for each character and rate it from 1 to 3

Financial dependence on adult children

Burden on society

Less financial independence

Rigidity toward Aging/Life – if any of the characteristics below are demonstrated, mark this general category for each character and rate it from 1 to 3

Set in their ways

Uncooperative

Inflexible

Intolerant

Impatient

Pessimistic

Untidy – if any of the characteristics below are demonstrated, mark this general category for each character and rate it from 1 to 3

Personal appearance

Homes are shabby

Dirty

Negative Attitude toward Others – if any of the characteristics below are demonstrated, mark this general category for each character and rate it from 1 to 3

Make people feel ill as ease

Ungrateful

Cruel

Sour
Inconsiderate
Selfish

Passivity – if any of the characteristics below are demonstrated, mark this general category for each character and rate it from 1 to 3

Uncertain
Indecisive
Dull
Passive to others

General Negative Stereotypes – track each characteristic below by individual character

Pry into other people's business
Decreased social status
Behaves oddly or Eccentric
Cheap
Suspicious or paranoid
Conservative
Excessive demands for love/reassurance

Ageist Content or Actions in the Film – if any of the characteristics below are demonstrated, mark this general category for each film and rate it from 1 to 3

Complimented with "you look good for your age" or "you don't look that old"
Told jokes about age
Others used simpler language or patronizing tone
Called "young lady" or "young man"
Told they were "too old for that"
Holding doors open due to age
Avoided because of age
Ignored due to age

Male Stereotypes – track each characteristic below by individual character

"Dirty old man"
Powerful
Gray fox/sexy
"Grumpy old man"
"man's man"

Female Stereotypes – track each characteristic below by individual character

Sexless/not interested in sex
Harsh
Worried about looks
Warm
Bitter
Complaining
"wicked old witch"

POSITIVE STEREOTYPES/PORTRAYL

Positive Outlook on Life/Aging – if any of the characteristics below are demonstrated, mark this general category for each character and rate it from 1 to 3

Privilege to grow old
Cooperative with others
Flexible to new situations
Optimistic, looks toward the future in a positive way

Elder of Community – if any of the characteristics below are demonstrated, mark this general category for each character and rate it from 1 to 3

Wisdom
Respected
Example to young people
Makes a difference in the world, community, or someone's life

Contributes (not a burden) – if any of the characteristics below are demonstrated, mark this general category for each character and rate it from 1 to 3

Power in business/politics/field of practice and maintains it
Self-reliant
Productive

Positive with Others – if any of the characteristics below are demonstrated, mark this general category for each character and rate it from 1 to 3

Friendly
Trustworthy
Kind or empathic
Grateful
Generous

General Positive Portrayals – track each characteristic below by individual character

Interested in love
Ordinary (not eccentric)
Modern
Fit
Reflective
Middle class or upper class

Movie Themes	
Retirement	
Widowhood	
Death/dying	
Disease (health)	
Cognitive decline	
Loneliness	

Tracking	
Gender Male Female Trans/nonbinary	
Sexual orientation Gay/lesbian Heterosexual	
Race African American Asian Caucasian	
Physical features Wrinkles Gray hair/balding	
Actor English American Russian Canadian German	
Film English American	
Relationship status Married Divorced Widowed Never married Unclear/unstated	*Transitioned in movie:* Married to widowed Widowed to married/partnered Partnered to divorcing/separating Never married to married/partnered

Living arrangements	*Transitioned in movie:*
Home	Home to independent living
Apartment	Home to nursing home
Facility (independent living)	Home to jail
Facility (nursing home)	
Facility (unclear)	
Unclear/unstated	
Living with whom?	*Transitioned in movie:*
Partner/spouse	Alone to adult child
Alone	Alone to adult child to facility (nursing home)
Child	Alone to independent living facility (alone)
Grandchild	Alone to independent living facility (with partner/spouse)
In a facility	Alone to nursing home (alone)
Sibling	Partner to alone
Friend	Other?
Unclear/unstated	

A film about older people **without** a developmental milestone (e.g. widowhood) as the main thrust: Yes/No

A film about older people **with** a developmental milestone (e.g. widowhood as the main thrust): Yes/No

Overall, the movie incorporated the objectification of women (e.g. remarks, behavior): Yes/No

Main character dies: Yes/No