

## Visual ageism: social practices and representation of older adults in media content

Loredana Ivan

The way older people are visually represented in different media content, whether online or in traditional media, is not harmless but reflects social practices and prejudices we might hold about the aging process and what it is like to be old. Such visual representations allow reflections on the meanings of those social practices and their impact on the everyday interactions involving older people.

In 2018, Loredana Ivan and Eugène Loos coined the term *visual ageism*, defined as the social practice of visually underrepresenting older adults or misrepresenting them in a prejudiced way (Ayalon & Tesch-Römer, 2018). Visual ageism occurs not only in terms of *attributes* – negative evaluations or characteristics associated with old people – but also in terms of *roles*, as when they are represented in peripheral, minor roles: the “object” rather than the “subject” of certain actions (a process known as *objectification*). For example, a recent study (Ivan & Loos, 2023) exploring the visual representation of older people in the marketing and advertising strategies of technological products found that visual ageism occurs not only in terms of attributes, but particularly in the roles older adults play: small roles, placed in positions that lack authority.

Moreover, though some changes have occurred over the past 20 years and older adults have begun to be more positively depicted in different media, changes in the roles they play in visual content occur much slowly. For example, the same study of the visual representation of older people in the marketing and advertising strategies of technological products (Ivan & Loos, 2023) shows that there has been no change in their roles during the past 10 years.

The objectification of older adults in visual portrayals of them presented by media content seems to be stronger in the case of adults with cognitive impairments. For example, technological products are solely “designed for” and “visualized as” used by carers, whereas older people with cognitive difficulties remained “the objects” of technology. They are represented as a “problem to be managed” by technology and objectified in the same category as wallets, keys, children, dogs, or prisoners (Vermeer *et al.*, 2022)

## A new form of visual ageism

In more recent years, a new form of visual ageism has emerged in media content: representing older adults as similar to young people, but “with grey hair”. The fashion industry and glossy magazines present numerous older women in their sixties or older appearing to be in perfect shape, very fit, with teenage figures. Such visual representations put a lot of pressure on women in particular to age without showing the marks of time. The dominant discourse is that if model **Maye Musk** (75) or actress **Jane Fonda** (85) can still look glamorous, then anybody can. This new form of visual ageism could be just as harmful as the absence of older people in visual media content or as their objectification. It is not only regular people who cannot keep up with this pressure of looking young at any age, but also some of those who have been many years praised for the “ability” to stop time. The famous sitcom *Sex and the City* was rebooted in 2021, more than two decades after its first episode. Audiences were disappointed with how the four main characters had aged and found it difficult to accept that they did not look the same as they did 23 years ago. The sitcom’s main actress, **Sarah Jessica Parker**, criticized the “misogynistic chatter” about aging women surrounding the new project, saying: “I know what I look like. I have no choice. What am I going to do about it? Stop aging? Disappear?”

This new form of visual ageism is more directed at women than the other forms discussed here, considering that physical beauty is a feature more associated with women. Nevertheless, ageism lies at the **intersection** between other forms of *-isms*, for example, sexism, ethnocentrism, and racism, and the way older people are visually represented in the media follows these intersections. For example, in advertising and marketing campaigns for technological products, older people tend to be more associated with mechanical technologies (e.g., cars), with electronics, and in general with older technologies, though this is more the case for older men than for older women, as older technology is associated with masculinity and craftsmanship. In addition, older characters visually represented in such campaigns tend to be white, middle-class people.

To reduce visual ageism in the media, we suggest (Ivan *et al.*, 2020) **new sets of images that counteract the forms of ageism** described here and include people with diverse backgrounds and looks, health situations, and life conditions, in order to foster more respect and a better understanding of old age.

### Further reading:

LOOS, Eugène; IVAN, Loredana (2018). “Visual Ageism in the Media”. In: L. Ayalon & C. Tesch-Roemer (eds.). *Contemporary Perspectives on Ageism*, p. 163-176. Springer [online]. Available at: <https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/27836/1/1002169.pdf>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-73820-8>

IVAN, Loredana; LOOS, Eugène; TUDORIE, George (2020). “Mitigating visual ageism in digital media: designing for dynamic diversity to enhance communication rights for senior citizens”. *Societies*, vol. 10, no. 4, p. 76. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc10040076>

IVAN, Loredana; LOOS, Eugène (2023). “The marketing of technology Products for older people: evidence of visual ageism”. In: A. Rosales, M. Fernández-Ardèvol, & J. Svensson (eds.). *Digital Ageism: How it operates and approaches to tackling it*. Routledge. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003323686-6> [online]. Available at: <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/oa-edit/10.4324/9781003323686/digital-ageism-andrea-rosales-mireia-fern%C3%A1ndez-ard%C3%A8vol-jakob-svensson>

VERMEER, Yvette; HIGGS, Paul; CHARLESWORTH, Georgina (2020). «Selling surveillance technology: semiotic themes in advertisements for ageing in place with dementia». *Social Semiotics*, vol. 32, no. 3, p. 1-22. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2020.1767399>

### Recommended citation

IVAN, Loredana. «Visual ageism: social practices and representation of older adults in media content». *COMeIN* [in line], June 2023, no. 133. ISSN: 1696-3296. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7238/c.n133.2341>

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[ageism](#); [visual ageism](#); [visual ageism forms](#); [visual ageism and media](#)



Loredana Ivan

Associate professor in the Communication Department at the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (Bucharest, Romania) and **seminar** instructor at the UOC



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