Swinburne University and Auckland University of Technology Study:
How older adults are represented in Australian local, state, and national newspapers.

Ageism is one of the most socially accepted forms of prejudice in Australia, and the media plays a powerful role in reinforcing it. Through editorial content and advertising, newspapers shape how older Australians are perceived, too often relying on ageist language and tired stereotypes. Research by Swinburne University (Australia) and Auckland University of Technology (New Zealand) examined how older adults are represented in Australian local, state, and national newspapers.

The first study focused on visual ageism, which refers to the prejudiced or often absent portrayal of older adults in media and advertising. Older adults appeared in 21.1 per cent of newspaper advertisements. Given that people aged 65 and over make up around 16 per cent of the population, this adequately reflects their demographic presence. However, visibility alone does not guarantee respectful representation. Of the 1,083 advertisements featuring older adults, 488 contained stereotypical portrayals. These often showed older adults in poor health, dependent on medical care, struggling with technology, or limited in daily activities and independence. On a more positive note, a smaller number of advertisements highlighted older adults' contributions to society through work and education.

The second study examined newspaper written content. Terms such as 'elderly' and 'senior,' along with descriptors like 'angry,' 'silly,' or 'irritable,' were commonly used and carried negative connotations. State and national newspapers were more likely to use deficit-focused language, framing older adults as a 'difficult problem,' a 'budget issue,' or contributors to 'public debt.' Coverage also raised concerns about who would support the ageing population and bear its associated costs. Older adults were frequently portrayed as physically frail, cognitively impaired, and vulnerable to systemic harms. They were also depicted as impediments to societal progress, framed as resource hoarders or occupying employment and housing that could otherwise benefit younger generations. Positive representations emphasised older adults as contributors to society, knowledge sharers, and lifelong learners.

Ageist media content can contribute to social exclusion and poorer health outcomes. Repeated exposure to negative portrayals increases stress, anxiety, and depression, and can limit access to employment, education, and healthcare. When media narratives consistently frame older adults through negative stereotypes, they shape public expectations and influence how older people are treated and valued. The media must reconsider the use of 'stock images' in advertising, as these cost-effective visuals often rely on negative stereotypes.

Poor representations can lead to audience dissatisfaction, while organisations that challenge age stereotypes may benefit from greater trust and loyalty. Improved diversity training and collaboration with the ageing sector offer opportunities to reshape media narratives and promote more inclusive portrayals of ageing.

Challenging ageism in media representation is not only a matter of fairness, but a fundamental step toward creating a more inclusive society that values ageing, diversity, and contribution across the lifespan.

To view the research article related to newspaper advertising visit:
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