Check for updates

Original article

MEDIA INTERNATIONAL AUSTRALIA

Media International Australia
1–17
© The Author(s) 2025

Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/1329878X251375141
journals.sagepub.com/home/mia

Stereotypes: Older adult representation in Australian newspaper advertising

Michael Butson[1] **and Richard Wright**[2]

Abstract

Newspapers feature advertising that can shape public perceptions, sometimes reproducing harmful beliefs based on ageing stereotypes. Ageism is one of the most normalised and accepted forms of prejudice in Australia. As visual imagery often attracts more attention than language alone, this study explores the representation of older adults in Australian newspaper advertising. The study identified 5124 advertising images over a 16-week period and included 14 Australian newspapers representing local, state and national levels. Our results suggest, when you consider Australia's older adult demographic proportion, there is adequate visibility of older adults in newspaper advertisements. Nevertheless, we also identified concerning aspects of stereotyping, including representations of older adults in poor health and being incapable. Findings highlight the need for advertising professionals to be more mindful of their choice of imagery. Recommendations include the use of a multiplicity of images and involving older adults at each stage of advertisement design.

Keywords

advertising, newspapers, Australia, visual ageism, ageing stereotypes

Introduction and background

Ageism is deeply embedded in modern Western societies, where 'old' is often equated with 'bad'. Negative views of ageing are common in countries like Australia, New Zealand and the United States (Ayalon and Roy, 2023; Curryer and Cook, 2021). Despite growing awareness of global ageing (Hyde, 2024; Levy and Macdonald, 2016), research on age-based prejudice has lagged behind studies on race and gender bias (Nelson, 2015). Robert Butler coined ageism over 50 years ago,

[1]Swinburne University of Technology, Hawthorn, VIC, Australia
[2]Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand

Corresponding author:
Michael Butson, Department of Management and Marketing, Swinburne University of Technology, John St, Hawthorn, VIC 3122, Australia.
Email: mcbut@swin.edu.au

defining it as 'systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against individuals because they are old' (Butler, 1969: 12). More recently, Walling (2024) described ageism as a pattern of prejudice, discrimination and marginalisation that negatively impacts older adults' physical and mental health. Lippmann (1922) defined stereotypes as common images linked to particular groups. These shape how we understand and treat others, and how groups view themselves (Dionigi, 2015). Ageism involves stereotypes, prejudice or discrimination based on age, directed at others or oneself (World Health Organisation, 2021).

Ageist content can contribute to exclusion, self-limiting behaviours and harm to health (Auman et al., 2005; Henry et al., 2024; Levy et al., 1999). Ageism increases stress, anxiety and depression (Kang and Kim, 2022) and limits access to employment, education and healthcare (Mikton et al., 2021). Negative stereotypes also shape how older adults view themselves and their own ageing (Xu, 2021). Viewing older adults through negative stereotypes shapes our expectations and perceptions of their behaviour, often skewing our own responses (Nelson, 2015). Despite this, media portrayals of older adults, particularly in advertising, remain under-researched (Butson et al., 2023; Ivan et al., 2020).

Newspaper advertising includes display advertisements, classified advertisements, coupons and inserts. Display advertisements use visuals to build brand awareness or promote products, while classified advertisements are brief and text based. Coupons offer discounts, and inserts are full-page advertisements for product launches or special offers (Syeda, 2022; Tripathi, 2023). Images in advertisements, including photographs, illustrations, logos and graphics, shape portrayals of older adults and may reinforce or challenge stereotypes (Tripathi, 2023). Advertising revenue covers most production costs, and newspapers attract advertisers through flexibility, regional targeting, credibility, reader engagement and cost-effectiveness (Lauerer, 2019). Consequently, newspaper advertisements are carefully structured, combining persuasive text and visuals to engage readers and drive consumption (Jibril, 2017). While advertisers are motivated by commercial goals, scholars argue they also bear social responsibility. Guided by ethical principles, advertisers are encouraged to avoid harmful content and help reduce ageism and stereotypical representations (Eisend, 2022: 317).

This study examines how older adults are represented in Australian newspaper advertisements, chosen for their wide reach and influence. Specifically, the study examined digital replica editions, which are online versions of newspapers accessed via electronic devices. These editions typically mirror the layout and content of traditional print versions, including articles, images, photographs and advertisements (Neijens and Voorveld, 2018). Newspapers play a significant role in the dissemination of information. As a flexible medium, they can reach broad audiences while also targeting specific local communities. Newspaper advertising not only informs but also shapes attitudes (Lin et al., 2021). From a media research perspective, visual ageism focuses on how older individuals are depicted visually (Loos and Ivan, 2018). This article begins with a review of literature on visual ageism (Loos and Ivan, 2018) and the representations of older adults, then outlines the use of content analysis of visual images (CAVI) and thematic analysis to examine how older adults are represented in Australian newspapers. It concludes with recommendations for social gerontologists and advertising professionals.

Visual ageism

Visual ageism is 'the social practice of visually underrepresenting older people or misrepresenting them in a prejudiced way' (Loos and Ivan, 2018: 164). Visual media, including photography and digital imagery, can subtly reinforce negative stereotypes about ageing (Silk et al., 2021). In

advertising images, this often results in distorted or stereotyped representations of older adults, including exaggerated, unrealistic or overly uniform depictions (Loos and Ivan, 2018). Visual ageism research typically follows two approaches: assessing the visibility of older adults in media and analysing portrayals that might be stereotypical and thus likely to reinforce societal bias (Butson et al., 2023). Visual ageism theory, as proposed by Loos and Ivan (2018), has been employed to examine the representation of older adults across various media contexts, including public organisation websites (Butson et al., 2023; Loos et al., 2022), cosmetics advertising on websites (Kenalemang, 2022) and cover images on news websites (Myrczik et al., 2025). These studies provide valuable empirical insights into how visual media representations contribute to shaping societal attitudes toward ageing. By identifying recurring visual patterns, visual ageism research highlights how media can either reinforce or challenge ageist perceptions. However, to the best of the author's knowledge, visual ageism theory (Loos and Ivan, 2018) has not yet been applied to the representation of older adults in Australian newspaper advertising. Addressing this gap, the present study draws on visual ageism theory to investigate how older adults are visually portrayed in Australian newspapers.

Representations of older adults in advertising

This article examines both the numerical and ageing stereotypical representation of older adults in advertising, with a focus on newspaper advertisements (Prieler et al., 2022). In recent years, scholarly attention to this topic has declined, as evidenced by the limited availability of current research (Eisend, 2022). Understanding how older adults are represented in advertising holds both theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, advertisements shape public perceptions, influence social norms and contribute to the construction of group identities. Negative portrayals of older adults' risk reinforcing ageist stereotypes. Practically, older adults represent a growing and influential consumer group, and their misrepresentation can damage brand perception and reduce the effectiveness of marketing efforts (Prieler, 2024).

Two theoretical frameworks help explain the significance of media representations: Ethnolinguistic Vitality Theory (EVT) and Cultivation Theory (Gerbner, 1998; Giles et al., 1977). EVT suggests that groups of greater social importance are considered to have greater 'vitality'. A group that possesses more vitality will receive much greater support and representation in society as a whole, including in the media. Therefore, by looking at how groups are represented within media content (e.g. advertising), one can gain insight into the social standing and the perception of these people within a society (Olsen, 2024). EVT can be a valuable lens through which to analyse the representation of older adults in advertising, while largely used in the context of language and minority group survival (e.g. Yagmur, 2011; Yagmur and Kroon, 2003). Core EVT concepts (e.g. vitality, status and demography) can be extended to examine the representation of older adults and characters (e.g. Atkinson and Plew, 2017; Lim, 2000). EVT encourages more inclusive, equitable advertising practices.

In the context of this study, the way older adults are depicted in newspaper advertisements may signal their perceived importance or marginalisation within society (Prieler et al., 2022). Cultivation theory (Gerbner, 1998) was selected for this analysis because it offers a valuable framework for understanding how prolonged exposure to media can shape audience perceptions and social beliefs, particularly concerning age, aging and the representation of older adults. Consistent portrayals of older adults, whether positive or stereotypical, can shape public attitudes, norms and expectations about ageing (Prieler, 2024). Cultivation theory has previously been used to explore the representation of older adults in Australian magazines (Olsen, 2024), television advertisements (Prieler

et al., 2014, 2022). However, to the best of the author's knowledge, this is the first study to apply EVT and cultivation theory to assist exploring the representation of older adults in Australian newspaper advertising.

Building on the body of existing research, together, these frameworks can support an examination of both the frequency and type of older adults' representation in newspaper advertising, highlighting the broader societal implications of media advertising. Newspaper advertisements often reflect societal values (McDonald et al., 2020; Ye and Li, 2022). However, media frequently underrepresents older individuals and aging populations (Russ-Mohl and Torben-Nielsen, 2012). The presence or absence of groups in media can signal their social importance and shape public perceptions (Prieler et al., 2022). A constant and subtle stream of images, which Edstrom (2018) refers to as 'media buzz', emerges from sources such as newspaper advertisements. This visual background influences how aging is viewed and performed, reinforcing preferred representations within society (Edstrom, 2018).

Advertisers and those they employ often fail to accurately reflect the real lives of older adults and the realities of ageing (Carrigan and Szmigin, 2002). Media and advertising are frequently guilty of stereotyping older people, even if unintentionally. Ageist assumptions may limit advertisers' ability to effectively reach and engage this demographic. In addition, reliance on stereotypes can damage brand perception (Windels et al., 2024). As previously mentioned, visual ageism has been explored by gerontologists across various media, such as magazines (Kenalemang, 2022; Lewis et al., 2011) and websites (Kamalvand, 2022; Loos et al., 2022), little research has focused specifically on visual ageism in Australian print and online newspapers, including all national, state and local outlets. This study aims to fill that gap by contributing to existing scholarship and deepening the understanding of visual ageism in media. The next section outlines the methodology used to examine these issues.

Methodology

This study examines the representation of older adults in Australian newspaper advertising, focusing on two key aspects: their visibility and their portrayal through ageing stereotypes. The objective was to assess the presence of older adults in advertisements and quantify the proportion featuring them. Drawing on frameworks of visual ageism and ageing stereotypes (Dionigi, 2015; Loos and Ivan, 2018; Reissmann et al., 2021), the study employed a CAVI alongside thematic, deductive analysis. Content analysis is a research method used to identify the presence of specific themes within qualitative data, applicable to both images and text (Kleinheksel et al., 2020). Thematic analysis is a well-established and flexible approach that organises qualitative data into patterns or themes.

Making generalisations about the frequency of visual representations of specific population groups, such as older adults, requires the classification and quantification of media content (Bell, 2004). CAVI, a widely used method in media studies, was chosen to examine the visibility of older adults. CAVI offers a foundational approach to uncovering the meaning behind media representations and allows for broad statements about visibility. It also highlights which subjects receive priority attention in the media, helping to identify patterns of representation and visibility (Bell, 2004).

According to Kiyimba et al. (2018), newspapers remain a valuable data source for researchers interested in sociocultural and health issues. Additionally, newspapers are readily available online, easily accessible and cost-effective. Table 1 provides an overview of the newspapers selected for this study. Data were collected over 16 weeks, from 5 August to 24 November 2024. This period was chosen because older adults featured prominently in discussions on topics such as the ageing population, the cost-of-living crisis and changes to retirement funding. Furthermore, the Victorian

Table 1. Overview of newspapers.

Newspaper title	Publication frequency	Ownership	National/ State/ Local	Newspaper type
The Age	Daily	Nine Entertainment	State (Victoria)	Tabloid Newspaper
Herald Sun	Daily	News Corp Australia	State (Victoria)	Tabloid Newspaper
Sydney Morning Herald	Daily	Nine Entertainment	State (New South Wales)	Tabloid Newspaper
The Financial Review	Monday- Friday (once on the weekend)	Nine Entertainment	National	Tabloid Newspaper
The Nightly	Monday- Friday	Seven West Media	State (Western Australia)	Digital Only Newspaper
The Australian	Monday- Friday (once on the weekend)	News Corp Australia	National	Broadsheet Newspaper
Geelong Advertiser	Monday- Friday (once on the weekend)	News Corp Australia	Local	Tabloid Newspaper
Gisborne Gazette	Monthly	South Ward of Macedon Ranges Shire	Local	Tabloid Newspaper
Wyndham Star Weekly	Weekly	Independent Australian Family-Owned Media Company	Local	Tabloid Newspaper
Maribyrnong and Hobsons Bay Star Weekly	Weekly	Independent Australian Family-Owned Media Company	Local	Tabloid Newspaper
Cranbourne Star News	Weekly	Independent Australian Family-Owned Media Company	Local	Tabloid Newspaper
Shepparton Advisor	Weekly	Independent Australian Family-Owned Media Company	Local	Tabloid Newspaper
Dandenong Star Journal	Weekly	Independent Australian Family-Owned Media Company	Local	Tabloid Newspaper
Sunbury and Macedon Ranges Star Weekly	Weekly	Independent Australian Family-Owned Media Company	Local	Tabloid Newspaper

Seniors Festival was held in October 2024. Fourteen newspapers were purposively sampled to represent a balanced mix of national, state and local publications. Particular attention was given to including local newspapers due to their disproportionately high number in Australia. Purposeful sampling also ensured that each newspaper had a digital replica available online (Palinkas et al., 2015). Every digital edition published during the study period was included, with data collected on every day a newspaper was released.

To accurately measure visibility, all older adults appearing in advertising images were included in the analysis. Each advertisement featuring older adults, whether showing one or multiple individuals, was counted as a single occurrence. Repeated advertisements, whether featuring older adults or not, were also included. This approach was essential for capturing accurate visibility data because many advertisements were reproduced across different newspapers or appeared multiple times within the same publication. Additionally, the text accompanying advertisements featuring older adults was analysed to better understand their representation across a sample of Australian newspapers.

There is no clear or universal threshold for when an individual becomes 'old' or 'older'. Culture, policy and personal experience create a broad spectrum in which many individuals may be considered to enter this stage of life. Cultural factors and improvements in health continue to blur these definitions (Advertising Standards Authority, 2025). In this study, older adults are defined as individuals aged 65 and over. This age is widely accepted in most Western countries and roughly corresponds to the typical retirement age. It is also commonly regarded as the beginning of older age.

Identifying older adults was essential for discussing their representation and analysing the accompanying content. Images with blurred faces or individuals positioned in the background, making identification difficult, were excluded from the analysis. Objectivity involves developing clear nominal categories, which is important for enhancing both validity and reliability. Therefore, a well-defined classification structure with clear operational definitions and descriptions was used (Simcock and Sudbury, 2006). The determination of whether an individual was over 65 years old in newspaper advertisements was based on specific criteria. However, the presence of a single factor was not necessarily enough to classify someone as an older adult. For example, grey hair alone was not sufficient, as many middle-aged or younger individuals may have prematurely grey hair.

- There was a specific reference to age in the advertisement.
- The physical appearance of the individual (e.g. based on visible signs of ageing, such as grey hair, wrinkles and possible older-age salient features in the environment and/or text) (Butson et al., 2023; Kowalewska and Grodzki, 2019; Ylanne, 2021).
- The presence of retirement scenarios or middle-aged children, and/or the presence of grandchildren.

The research involved meticulous record-keeping, including documentation of dates, times and methods of data collection. All data were sourced from publicly accessible websites. Since coding was initially conducted solely by the first author, external academics were consulted to verify and challenge the findings. At four time points (once per month), two academics independently coded one publication from each newspaper. Disagreements about the visual representation of older adults occurred on three occasions; in these cases, the first author made the final decision on classification. A small number of discrepancies also arose in coding stereotypical representations. To address these, ageing stereotype theory and previous coding examples were referenced to ensure consistency, and the coding scheme was adjusted as needed.

The CAVI focused on identifying and quantifying instances of portrayals that might be considered stereotypical across the dataset (Dionigi, 2015; Loos and Ivan, 2018; Reissmann et al., 2021). A thematic analysis was conducted following the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), using a predominantly deductive, or 'top-down', strategy to investigate representations of older adults in a sample of local, state and national Australian newspapers. The initial phase involved familiarisation with the data, including preliminary notetaking to capture early

impressions. In the second phase, codes were applied to both visual and textual content. Although the process was theoretically informed (e.g. ageing stereotypes), open coding was employed to allow the coding structure to evolve iteratively throughout the analysis. All coding and thematic development were conducted using NVivo (Version 14).

Coding focused on identifying the central phenomena within each advertisement, categorising content based on the presence of older adults or age-related data. As previously noted, older adults were coded using multiple criteria (e.g. physical appearance or retirement scenarios). A deductive approach, informed by visual ageism and ageing stereotype theory, guided the development of codes and subsequent themes. Initial codes included categories such as 'dental', 'hearing', 'caregiving', 'mobile phones' (technology), employment, and education. As coding progressed, new codes emerged, and existing ones were occasionally revised (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). Subsequent phases involved identifying and reviewing themes, each of which captured meaningful patterns relevant to the research aim. Key themes included representations of older adults in poor health and requiring care, portrayals that reinforced incapacity, and depictions of older adults as active contributors. A codebook was developed in Microsoft Excel to organise and visualise the data, supporting the generation of conclusions (Tracy, 2020). This codebook was updated regularly as coding was refined.

Results

This study investigated the representation of older adults in Australian newspaper advertising. A total of 5124 advertising images were identified during data collection. Of these, 1083 images (21.1%; SD = 5.9) featured older adults, while 4041 (78.9%) did not. Figure 1 provides a breakdown of the number of advertisements by newspaper publication. Older adults appeared more frequently in Victorian local newspapers (23.6%) compared to state and national publications (18.2%). The highest visibility of older adults was recorded in the Financial Review (28.5%), Sunbury and Macedon Ranges Star Weekly (27%), and The Shepparton Advisor (26%). In contrast, the lowest representation was found in The Nightly (5.1%), The Australian (14%) and the Sydney Morning Herald (17.9%). Generally, during the weeks of August and September, older adults were less visible in advertisements. Visibility peaked in October, with older adults appearing on 306 occasions, accounting for 28.2% of all advertisements featuring this age group. Examples of advertising not featuring older adults included sporting advertising and gambling (e.g. horse racing), primary and high school advertising and beauty products. Arguably, with older adults not being the major target market of these goods and services.

Numerical representation

The study found that older adults appeared in 21.1% of newspaper advertisements. Given that older adults are estimated to comprise between 16% and 22% of the current Australian population, this level of representation can be considered a reasonably accurate reflection of their demographic presence (Butson et al., 2023). Visibility peaked among older adults during October, particularly increasing in local newspapers. This is likely explained as October in Victoria is 'Senior's Month' including advertising the month as a 'Seniors Festival' (Victorian State Government, 2025). It was common for advertising in local newspapers to include a range of events, aged care facilities and tours, and the sale of goods and services targeting older adults.

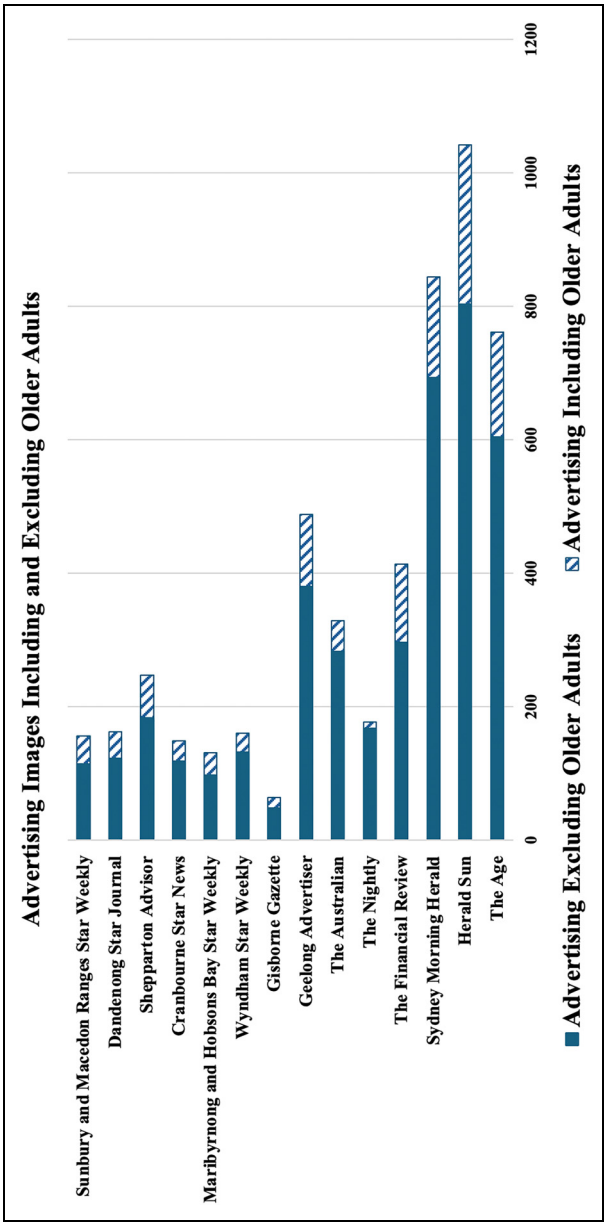

Figure 1. Number of advertisements by newspaper publication.

Stereotypical ageing representations

The study identified 1083 advertisements that featured older adults. Of these, 488 were classified as containing stereotypical representations of ageing (Dionigi, 2015; Reissmann et al., 2021), while the remainder were assessed as presenting neutral representations. Neutral themes typically involved the promotion of goods and services, such as travel, retirement and trade-related offerings. In contrast, advertisements reflecting ageing stereotypes included representations of older adults in poor health or requiring medical products and care; depictions of older individuals as 'incapable'; and, in some instances, as 'contributors' to society.

Older adults in poor health, and requiring medical care & products

A total of 338 advertisements (31.2%) featured visual and textual representations of older adults in poor health or requiring care and support. This was the most frequently identified theme and was evident across local, state and national newspaper publications. Among these, 153 advertisements (14.1%) broadly related to health, including promotions for doctors, hospitals and medical facilities. An additional 89 advertisements (8.2%) focused on specific illnesses and conditions, such as poor vision (12, 1.1%), dental concerns (19, 1.75%), hearing issues (18, 1.66%), COVID-19 and other viruses (17, 1.56%) and dementia (7, 0.65%). Older adults also appeared in advertisements primarily targeting the health and wellbeing of other population groups, such as children and infants; 32 advertisements (2.95%) included older adults in these contexts. Furthermore, 52 advertisements (4.8%) depicted older adults as requiring care and support, commonly in the context of services or programs aimed at helping them remain 'active', 'independent', and 'living at home'.

Older adults being 'incapable'

To a lesser extent newspaper advertising in the study represented older adults as 'incapable'. A total of 61 advertisements (5.63%) reinforced stereotypes of older adults as incapable. These portrayals included depictions of physical incapacity, such as being unable to perform everyday tasks, restricted to low-intensity physical activities, or lacking independence due to physical barriers and limitations. Older adults were also commonly represented as struggling with technology, including mobile phones, computers and internet use. Several advertisements suggested heightened vulnerability to technology-related fraud, such as banking or text message scams. These visual and textual representations of older adults as 'incapable' appeared consistently across national, state and local newspaper publications.

Older adults being 'contributors' to society

Positive representations of older adults primarily emphasised their contributions to society. In the context of employment, older adults were valued for their experience, reliability and continued participation in the workforce. A total of 89 advertisements (8.21%) depicted older adults in various occupational roles. Additionally, 46 advertisements (4.24%) featured older adults in acting roles, including appearances in films and television. These representations were relatively consistent across national, state and local newspapers. Furthermore, 61 advertisements (5.63%) portrayed older adults as embodying qualities such as wisdom and knowledge. In these instances, older adults were often shown engaging in educational activities, including teaching, mentoring or presenting at

summits and conferences. These representations reinforced their role as informed and respected contributors within professional and public settings.

Discussion

The numerical representation of older adults

Visual ageism includes 'the social practice of visually underrepresenting' older adults (Loos and Ivan, 2018: 164). Previous research has consistently shown that older adults are generally underrepresented across various advertising (e.g. television, print media and website advertising) (Badowska and Rogala, 2016; Butson et al., 2023; Eisend, 2022; Kessler et al., 2010). However, over recent decades, there has been a gradual increase in the visibility of older individuals in media content (Ivan et al., 2020). The findings of this study support this trend. As Australia's population continues to age (Butson et al., 2024), it is increasingly important that the representation of older adults in newspaper imagery and advertising continues to match with their demographic proportion. While this study did not find the overall numerical representation of older adults to be particularly lacking, the prevalence of ageing stereotypical representations remains a more pressing concern.

Stereotypical representation of older adults

The media visibility or 'media buzz' (Edstrom, 2018) generated by images in Australian newspapers plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions of individuals, often contributing to the construction of a 'preferred' representation of older adults (Edstrom, 2018). Visual ageism is the social practice of 'visually misrepresenting older adults in a prejudiced way' (Loos and Ivan, 2018: 164). The findings of this study support existing concerns surrounding visual ageism, confirming that older adults are frequently depicted in stereotypical (Loos and Ivan, 2018). In particular, advertisements were largely characterised by imagery and narratives representing older adults as being in poor health or in need of medical care and support. These advertisements often featured support devices such as lifts or walkers, typically to promote home care services. Older adults were represented as passive listeners to younger doctors or healthcare staff. Many advertising campaigns centred on disease, pain or physical decline, reinforcing the stereotype that ageing is primarily defined by loss. These advertisements were typically displaying advertising with visually rich content designed to promote specific medical products and services (Syeda, 2022). These advertisements were present across all newspaper publications except The Nightly. This exception may be attributed to The Nightly featuring the lowest representation of older adults, with its advertising content including older adults primarily focused on retirement and travel opportunities.

This is consistent with previous research indicating that older adults are commonly featured in advertising related to health, hygiene and medical services or products (Eisend, 2022). Studies have shown that such portrayals are often perceived by audiences as stereotypical representations (e.g. Kolbe and Burnett, 1992; Smith et al., 1982). Furthermore, it fails to acknowledge the diversity of older people in society and treats them as a homogeneous group (Koskinen et al., 2014). The current study was conducted during a period of extensive media coverage concerning Australia's ageing population. The Australian Government has expressed concern about this demographic shift, suggesting that 'population ageing in Australia is poised to cause unmanageable chaos for the nation's public services'. Additionally, the ageing population has been described as a 'demographic time bomb' (Johnstone and Kanitsaki, 2009: 87). Arguably, this representation of an ageing population, combined with other negative representations of older adults such as depictions of them

being in poor health or in need of medical care, as identified in this study, is both misleading and potentially harmful to the health and social welfare interests of older Australians (Johnstone and Kanitsaki, 2009).

In Western contexts, the health and wellbeing concerns of older adults are often naturalised and framed as an inevitable consequence of ageing (de Araújo et al., 2023). However, recent evidence suggests that the physical health of older Australians is improving, with many reporting a positive quality of life (Butson et al., 2025). Despite these developments, ageing continues to be framed primarily as a medical issue, contributing to the conflation of older adults with stereotypes of ill health, frailty and dependency (Phoenix and Tulle, 2017). These stereotypical and overly homogenised representations reinforce the myth that 'to be old is to be ill', a narrative implicitly supported by many Australian newspapers (Stewart et al., 2012: 881). Exposure to such negative ageing stereotypes, or the attribution of illness to age itself, has been shown to produce adverse health outcomes, including increased anxiety, elevated blood pressure and depression (Dionigi, 2015; Stewart et al., 2012). Furthermore, cultivation theory suggests that repeated exposure to these advertisements might influence readers perceptions of reality and can shape public attitudes, norms and expectations about ageing (Prieler, 2024).

In this study, older adults were often depicted as only capable of low-intensity physical activity, reinforcing overly homogenised and limiting portrayals. Older adults were seen with mobility devices, even when not relevant to the product or service on offer. When shown performing physical activity they were typically shown with lighter weights, in seated positions or completing very gentle physical movements. Other individuals were also often present (e.g. family, carers or younger instructors), subtly signalling that older adults require guidance and support to safely complete some physical activity. This supports previous research showing that older adults are frequently perceived as physically incapable (Austin et al., 2013; Bocksnick and Dyck, 2018; Butson et al., 2023). Furthermore, such depictions parallel ableist views of disability, which emphasise dependence and impairment (Friedman and Van Puymbrouck, 2021), presenting older adults as less capable than younger individuals. These representations potentially highlight the notion of a 'youthful fitness culture' (Cavallini et al., 2022: 3) within the physical activity space. Additionally, they reinforce the idea that, for older adults, engaging in higher-intensity physical activity is perceived as a mismatch between age and appropriate behaviour (Cavallini et al., 2022). Exposure to this form of visual ageism can lead older adults to internalise stereotypes, potentially discouraging physical activity (Jin and Harvey, 2021). From the perspective of EVT (Prieler, 2024), more positive representations of older adults engaging in physical activity could strengthen perceptions of their vitality, strength and societal value.

Older adults and technology are often seen as worlds apart (Mannheim and Kottl, 2024; Mariano et al., 2021). Stereotypes commonly portray older individuals as incompetent or incapable in using technology (Birkland, 2024). Older adults were frequently depicted receiving assistance or guidance from customer service staff or others when using smartphones, laptops, tablets or medical technology devices. Visually, they often appeared confused or hesitant, suggesting a lack of confidence or technological skills. These representations can lead to 'stereotype threat', where older adults avoid technology for fear of confirming negative representations (Mariano et al., 2021).

In this study, Australian newspapers frequently depicted older adults as unable to use technology. Such representations can reduce technology use and contribute to performance difficulties, reinforcing barriers to technology acceptance and adoption among older adults (Mannheim and Kottl, 2024). Contrary to stereotypical assumptions of older persons as a homogeneous group of 'non-users' or 'incapable', older individuals hold more complex representations and approaches to using technology. Older adults are increasingly adopting new technology and hold positive views of using them (Mannheim and Kottl, 2024).

Similar to portrayals of incompetence, older adults were often depicted as dependent on others due to physical limitations. Visual cues suggested they were unable to manage tasks independently and required assistance with basic activities such as personal care, medication management or household duties. While dependency is not inherently negative, media portrayals often frame it as a marker of frailty or burden, reinforcing harmful ageing stereotypes (Mackenstadt and Adams-Price, 2024). When older adults receive assistance, it is sometimes viewed as confirmation of their incapacity, contributing to perceptions that they are unable to perform daily tasks independently (Cordingley and Webb, 1997). Cultivation theory suggests that repeated exposure to such representations can shape behaviours to align with these depictions (Prieler, 2024). As such, it is essential to recognise the media's influence in shaping public attitudes toward ageing and to actively challenge representations that promote negative stereotypes. Encouraging more positive and diverse portrayals of older adults is central to this effort (Imran, 2023).

In contrast to the negative representations, we also found evidence of older adults being represented positively. Drawing on EVT (Prieler, 2024), the frequent presence of older adults in the media not only signifies visibility but, when combined with their depiction as active contributors to society, also reinforces their value. This included their involvement in various employment sectors and acting roles as well as their roles in education, teaching, mentoring and knowledge-sharing. Together, these representations contribute to a more empowered and respected image of older adults in Australian media (Olsen, 2024). These findings align with previous ageing and stereotype literature that portrays older adults as having a strong work ethic, wisdom, academic skills and intelligence (Dionigi, 2015; Rothermund and de Paula Couto, 2024; Swift and Steeden, 2020). Although older adults continued to be prominently featured in advertisements for travel and vacations, the results of the current study are somewhat encouraging. Advertisers have been criticised for overlooking older adults' interest in a broader range of experiences, particularly those focused on learning, rather than repeatedly targeting them with content related to medical insurance and vacations (Gutterman, 2022). However, advertisements promoting learning and knowledge sharing were largely limited to national and state publications. In contrast, education-related advertising in local newspapers primarily focused on primary and secondary schooling (e.g. enrolments and student achievements), serving as a publication to inform local residents of opportunities and develop community connection.

The professionalisation of news advertising and imagery has been intensely disrupted in the past two decades (Thomson et al., 2022). Arguably, this has led to an increase in the use of 'stock images' (i.e. pre-existing, convenient and cost-effective images) in newspaper advertising. Stock images are being selected that lack concrete context and often rely on stereotypes in order to be widely usable (Thomson et al., 2022). If stock images are being selected as part of Australian newspaper advertising, it is important the industry considers how this could be reinforcing ageist stereotypes.

Australia's slower demographic shift compared to other countries offers a valuable opportunity for its advertising industry. By learning from the successes and missteps of nations such as Italy, Germany and the United Kingdom, advertising professionals can address demographic concerns more effectively and help advance diversity and inclusion in advertising (Olsen, 2024). While advertising creators naturally design images and content to align with their marketing goals, negative portrayals of older adults can have adverse business consequences. Research indicates that audiences may express dissatisfaction with poor representations of older people and might even boycott products or services perceived as offensive to this demographic (Prieler, 2024). Organisations that challenge age stereotypes in advertising may benefit from increased loyalty and trust among older adults.

Producing authentic and positive representations in advertising should be in the interest of organisations – both from an economic standpoint and as part of their corporate social responsibility commitments. This does not require an exact or hyper-realistic representation of every aspect of society but rather an intersectional and less stereotyped approach to portraying age in branded communication. When skilfully integrated into advertising, such representations can positively influence societal perceptions while strengthening an organisations long-term relevance and appeal across diverse audiences (Olsen, 2024). To assist this process and reduce visual ageism, approaches such as 'design for dynamic diversity' which advocates using a variety of realistic and nuanced images of older adults – are recommended to combat negative stereotyping (Loos and Ivan, 2018: 172). Moreover, combating visual ageism requires designing advertisements not merely 'for' older adults but co-creating 'with' them, involving them at every stage of the creative process (Ivan et al., 2020: 8; Olsen, 2024). This inclusive approach fosters opportunities for mutual problem-solving and helps advertisers build capacity to address visual ageism effectively. Achieving this in practice demands societal motivation for change and a commitment to increasing awareness and understanding of visual ageism and its negative impacts on older adults (Butson et al., 2023).

Conclusion

This study offers insights into ageing stereotypes in Australian newspaper advertising but has limitations. Findings are based on a specific four-month period and purposefully sampled newspapers, so results are not generalisable. Although the results align with trends in Western countries (Koskinen et al., 2014), further research should explore multimodal media representations. Using physical appearance to identify individuals over 65, as in similar studies (Butson et al., 2023; Kowalewska and Grodzki, 2019), may reinforce stereotypes. Advertising portrayals can significantly affect older adults' wellbeing and societal attitudes. While older adults are visible in advertisements, they are often depicted through negative stereotypes such as frailty or incapable. More effort is needed to ensure media reflects the diversity of older adults. Granting older adults visual communication rights, allowing them to influence their representation, is vital (Ivan et al., 2020). Approaches like designing for dynamic diversity and designing with older adults rather than for them can help reduce visual ageism and ageing stereotypes (Loos and Ivan, 2018).

ORCID iD

Michael Butson https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7543-7747

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

Advertising Standards Authority. (2025) The depiction of older people in ads: qualitative and quantitative research report. Report, Jigsaw, UK, March.

Atkinson JL and Plew MS (2017) Present, perceived as old, but not memorable: analysis and perceptions of older characters in animated Disney films. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 7(6): 1–12.

Auman C, Bosworth HB and Hess TM (2005) Effects of health-related stereotypes on physiological responses of hypertensive middle-aged and older men. *The Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences* 60(1): P3–P10.

Austin S, Qu H and Shewchuk RM (2013) Age bias in physicians' recommendations for physical activity: a behavioural model of healthcare utilisation for adults with arthritis. *Journal of Physical Activity and Health* 10(2): 222–231.

Ayalon L and Roy S (2023) Combatting ageism in the Western Pacific region. *The Lancet Regional Health* 35: 1–8.

Badowska S and Rogala A (2016) Identifying the portrayal of 50+ consumers in Polish print advertising. *Economics and Business Review* 2 (16)(4): 77–91.

Bell P (2004) Content analysis of visual images. In: C Jewitt and T Van Leeuwen (eds) *The Handbook of Visual Analysis*. London: Sage Publications, pp.10–34.

Birkland JL (2024) How older adult information and communication technology users are impacted by aging stereotypes: a multigenerational perspective. *New Media & Society* 26(7): 3967–3988.

Bocksnick JG and Dyck M (2018) Identifying age-related stereotypes: exercising with older adults. *Activities, Adaptation & Aging* 42(4): 278–291.

Braun V and Clarke V (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3(2): 77–101.

Butler RN (1969) Age-ism: another form of bigotry. *The Gerontologist* 9(4-Part-1): 243–246.

Butson M, Jeanes R and O'Connor J (2023) Promoting physical activity participation to older adults: a critical analysis of leisure facility advertising. *Managing Sport and Leisure*: 1–14. Epub ahead of print 3 July 2023. DOI: 10.1080/23750472.2023.2228805.

Butson M, Jeanes R and O'Connor J (2024) Experiences of older adults leisure-time physical activity in aquatic and leisure facilities. *World Leisure Journal* 67(1): 124–144. Epub ahead of print 9 May 2024.

Butson M, Jeanes R and O'Connor J (2025) The effectiveness of aquatic and leisure facility advertising: an older adult perspective. *Annals of Leisure Research*: 1–18. Epub ahead of print 10 January 2025. DOI: 10.1080/11745398.2025.2450774.

Carrigan M and Szmigin I (2002) Advertising and older consumers: image and ageism. *Business Ethics, the Environment and Responsibility* 9(1): 42–50.

Cavallini MF, Tredway AO, Covan AJ, et al. (2022) Elderly individuals have similar attitudes towards physical activity and exercise as the young and middle aged, but are less likely to seek companionship or gym memberships. *Journal of Family Medicine and Disease Prevention* 8(1): 1–10.

Cordingley L and Webb C (1997) Independence and aging. *Reviews in Clinical Gerontology* 7(2): 137–146.

Curryer C and Cook PS (2021) Counting the costs of ageism: discrimination and COVID-19. *Australasian Journal on Ageing* 40(3): 237–240.

de Araújo PO, Soares IMSC, do Vale PRLF, et al. (2023) Ageism directed to older adults in health services: a scoping review. *Revista Latino-Americana de Enfermagem* 31(e420): 1–16.

Dionigi RA (2015) Stereotypes of aging: their effects on the health of older adults. *Journal of Geriatrics* 2015: 1–10.

Edstrom M (2018) Visibility patterns of gendered ageism in the media buzz: a study of the representation of gender and age over three decades. *Feminist Media Studies* 18(1): 77–93.

Eisend M (2022) Older people in advertising. *Journal of Advertising* 51(3): 308–322.

Friedman C and Van Puymbrouck L (2021) Ageism and ableism: unrecognised biases in occupational therapy students. *Physical & Occupational Therapy in Geriatrics* 39(4): 354–369.

Gerbner G (1998) Cultivation analysis: an overview. *Mass Communication and Society* 1(3-4): 175–194.
Giles H, Bourghis RY and Taylor DM (1977) Towards a theory of language in ethnic group relations. In: H Giles (ed) *Language, Ethnicity and Intergroup Relations*. London, UK: Academic Press, pp.307–348.
Gutterman AS (2022) *Older persons' rights movement*. Older persons rights project.
Henry JD, Coundouris SP and Nangle MR (2024) Breaking the links between ageism and health: an integrated perspective. *Ageing Research Reviews* 95(102212): 1–8.
Hyde M (2024) Editorial: beyond borders: exploring ageing in a global context. *Journal of Global Ageing* 1(1): 2–8.
Imran MA (2023) Redefining older Australians: moving beyond stereotypes and consumer narratives in print media representations. *Media International Australia* 194(1): 148–165.
Ivan L, Loos E and Tudorie G (2020) Mitigating visual ageism in digital media: designing for dynamic diversity to enhance communication rights for senior citizens. *Societies* 10(4): 76.
Jibril AT (2017) Reviewing the concept of advertising from the print media perspectives. *Journal of Creative Communications* 12(3): 239–249.
Jin B and Harvey IS (2021) Ageism in the fitness and health industry: a review of the literature. *Journal of Aging and Physical Activity* 29(1): 99–115.
Johnstone MJ and Kanitsaki O (2009) Population ageing and the politics of demographic alarmism: implications for the nursing profession. *Australian Journal of Advanced Nursing* 26(3): 86–92.
Kamalvand A (2022) Social construction of visual ageism on Iranian news websites during COVID-19. *Journal of Aging Studies* 62: 101063.
Kang H and Kim H (2022) Ageism and psychological well-being among older adults: a systematic review. *Gerontology and Geriatric Medicine* 8: 1–22.
Kenalemang LM (2022) Visual ageism and the subtle sexualisation of older celebrities in L'Oréal's advert campaigns: a multimodal critical discourse analysis. *Ageing and Society* 42(9): 2122–2139.
Kessler EM, Schwender C and Bowen CE (2010) The portrayal of older people's social participation on German prime-time TV advertisements. *The Journals of Gerontology. Series B, Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences* 65B(1): 97–106.
Kiyimba N, Lester JN and O'Reilly M (2018) *Using Naturally Occurring Data in Qualitative Health Research: A Practical Guide*. Switzerland: Springer.
Kleinheksel AJ, Rockich-Winston N, Tawfik H, et al. (2020) Demystifying content analysis. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education* 84(1): 7113.
Kolbe RH and Burnett MS (1992) Perceptions of elderly and young adult respondents toward the portrayal of the elderly in advertising: implications to advertising managers. *Journal of Marketing Management* 2(1): 76–85.
Koskinen S, Salminen L and Leino-Kilpi H (2014) Media portrayal of older people as illustrated in Finnish newspapers. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-Being* 9(1): 1–10.
Kowalewska K and Grodzki E (2019) The representation of mature adults in TV commercials: a cross-cultural content analysis of portrayals in Poland and in the U.S. *Ethics in Economic Life* 22(1): 103–118.
Lauerer C (2019) *Advertising and Journalism*. Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication. Available at: https://oxfordre.com/communication/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228613-e-775 (accessed 29 August 2025).
Levy BR, Ashman O and Dror I (1999) To be or not to be: the effects of aging stereotypes on the will to live. *Omega* 40(3): 409–420.
Levy SR and Macdonald JL (2016) Progress on understanding ageism. *Journal of Social Issues* 72(1): 5–25.
Lewis DC, Medvedev K and Seponski DM (2011) Awakening to the desires of older women: deconstructing ageism within fashion magazines. *Journal of Ageing Studies* 25(2): 101–109.

Lim TS (2000) Age vitality across eleven nations. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 21(4): 308–323.

Lin Y, Ahmad Z, Shafik W, et al. (2021) Impact of Facebook and newspaper advertising on sales: a comparative study of online and print media. *Computational Intelligence and Neuroscience* 2021(1): 5995008.

Lippmann W (1922) *Public Opinion*. New York: Harcourt.

Loos E and Ivan L (2018) Visual ageism in the media. In: L Ayalon and C Tesch-Romer (eds) *Contemporary Perspectives on Ageism*. Switzerland: Springer Open, pp.163–176.

Loos E, Ivan L, Sourbati M, et al. (2022) Visual ageism on public organisations' websites". In: V Ylanne (ed) *Ageing and the Media*. UK: Policy Press, pp.113–132.

Mackenstadt D and Adams-Price C (2024) Negative aging stereotypes: fear of dependency impact on anxiety and depression in middle and older adults, examined by gender. *The International Journal of Aging and Human Development* 100(3): 293–317. Epub ahead of print 21 March 2024.

Maguire M and Delahunt B (2017) Doing a thematic analysis: a practical, step-by-step guide for learning and teaching scholars. *All Ireland Journal of Higher Education* 9(3): 1–14.

Mannheim I and Kottl H (2024) Ageism and (successful) digital engagement: a proposed theoretical model. *The Gerontologist* 64(9): 1–14.

Mariano J, Marques S, Ramos MR, et al. (2021) Too old for technology? Stereotype threat and technology use by older adults. *Behaviour & Information Technology* 41(7): 1503–1514.

Mcdonald RE, Laverie DA and Manis KT (2020) The interplay between advertising and society: an historical analysis. *Journal of Macromarketing* 41(4): 1–25.

Mikton C, de la Fuente-Núñez V, Officer A, et al. (2021) Ageism: a social determinant of health that has come of age. *Lancet* 397(10282): 1333–1334.

Myrczik J, Schwender C, Franke A, et al. (2025) The faceless and vulnerable other – the visual portrayal of older people on German online news sites within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Ageing and Society* 45(2): 276–300.

Neijens PC and Voorveld HA (2018) Digital replica editions versus printed newspapers: different reading styles? Different recall? *New Media & Society* 20(2): 760–776.

Nelson TD (2015) Ageism. In: TD Nelson (ed) *Handbook of Prejudice, Stereotyping, and Discrimination*. New York: Psychology Press, pp.337–353.

Olsen DA (2024) Rewriting the myth of invisibility: The presentation of older adults in Australian advertising. In: M Stumpf (ed) *Diversity in der Wirtschaftskommunikation*. Wiesbaden: Springer, pp. 217–238.

Palinkas LA, Horwitz SM, Green CA, et al. (2015) Purposeful sampling for qualitative data collection and analysis in mixed method implementation research. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research* 42(5): 533–544.

Phoenix C and Tulle E (2017) Physical activity and ageing. In: J Piggin, L Mansfield and M Weed (eds) *Routledge Handbook of Physical Activity Policy and Practice*. New York: Routledge, pp.264–273.

Prieler M (2024) Representations of older people in advertising: a review. *Advertising & Society Quarterly* 25(1).

Prieler M, Ivanov A and Hagiwara S (2022) The representation of 'others' in East Asian television advertisements. *International Communication Gazette* 84(1): 44–65.

Prieler M, Kohlbacher F, Hagiwara S, et al. (2014) The representation of older people in television advertisements and social change: the case of Japan. *Ageing and Society* 35(4): 865–887.

Reissmann M, Geithner L, Storms A, et al. (2021) Stereotypes about very old people and perceived societal appreciation in very old age. *Zeitschrift für Gerontologie und Geriatrie* 54: 93–100.

Rothermund K and de Paula Couto MCP (2024) Age stereotypes: dimensions, origins, and consequences. *Current Opinion in Psychology* 55: 1–7.

Russ-Mohl S and Torben-Nielsen K (2012) Old is not sexy. How media do (not) report about older people, and how older Swiss journalists started their own newspapers online. *Romanian Journal of Journalism and Communication* 7(1): 59–68.

Silk M, Correia R, Verissimo D, et al. (2021) The implications of digital visual media for human-nature relationships. *People and Nature* 3(6): 1130–1137.

Simcock P and Sudbury L (2006) The invisible majority? Older models in UK television advertising. *International Journal of Advertising* 25(1): 87–106.

Smith RB, Moschis GP and Moore RL (1982) Some advertising effects on the elderly consumer. In: Proceedings of the annual meeting of the southern marketing association, Dallas, Texas, pp.149–152.

Stewart TL, Chipperfield JG, Perry RP, et al. (2012) Attributing illness to 'old age:' consequences of a self-directed stereotype for health and mortality. *Psychology and Health* 27(8): 881–897.

Swift HJ and Steeden B (2020) Exploring representations of old age and ageing. Centre for Ageing Better. Available at: https://ageing-better.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-03/Exploring-representations-of-old-age.pdf (accessed 31 January 2025).

Syeda S (2022) Different newspaper ad formats in marketing communication. *Asian Journal of Multidimensional Research* 11(8): 25–35.

Thomson T, Miller E, Holland-Batt S, et al. (2022) Visibility and invisibility in the aged care sector: visual representation in Australian news from 2018–2021. *Media International Australia* 190(1): 146–164.

Tracy SJ (2020) *Qualitative Research Methods: Collecting Evidence, Crafting Analysis, Communicating Impact*. USA: John Wiley & Sons.

Tripathi T (2023) What is newspaper advertising? Types, costs and examples. Available at: https://www.themediaant.com/blog/what-is-newspaper-advertising/#2_Classified_Ads (accessed 20 July 2025).

Victorian State Government. (2025) Victorian seniors festival. Seniors online Victoria. Available at: https://www.seniorsonline.vic.gov.au/festival (accessed 25 July 2025).

Walling A (2024) Ageism revisited. *American Family Physician* 110(1): 87–89.

Windels K, Dubosar E and Mueller S (2024) Same age, different experience: Exploring ageism in the advertising industry across departments and intersectional identities. *Journal of Current Issues and Research in Advertising* 45(2): 257–275.

World Health Organisation (2021) *Global Report on Ageism*. Available at: https://www.who.int/teams/social-determinants-of-health/demographic-change-and-healthy-ageing/combatting-ageism/global-report-on-ageism (accessed 29 August 2025).

Xu W (2021) Ageism in the media online representations of older people. Available at: https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1544592/FULLTEXT01.pdf (accessed 17 February 2025).

Yagmur K (2011) Does ethnolinguistic vitality theory account for the actual vitality of ethnic groups? A critical evaluation. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 32(2): 111–120.

Yagmur K and Kroon S (2003) Ethnolinguistic vitality perceptions and language revitalisation in Bashkortostan. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 24(4): 319–336.

Ye Z and Li W (2022) Advertising and values: a study on cultural values manifested in advertising targeting the urban middle class in China. *Cross-Cultural Decision Making* 44: 8–15.

Ylanne V (2021) UK Magazine advertising portrayals of older adults: a longitudinal, content analytic, and a social semiotic lens. *International Journal of Ageing and Later Life* 15(1): 7–38.