

LITERATURE REVIEW: *Aged by popular culture*

The primary goal of my research has been to identify our perceptions of the representations of age and aging circulating in Western media and popular culture (broadly defined). Specifically, the research asked: What image(s) of age and aging are projected by Western media and popular culture? Reflecting on these two research objectives, this literature review will provide an examination of the significant literature relevant to a practical and theoretical understanding of the role of Western media and popular culture in fostering ageism in contemporary society, which includes the major sociopolitical influences which have shaped our perceptions of age and aging, including neoliberalism.

Historical and sociopolitical influences

Since the early 1800s, old age in Western culture has been perceived in either a positive or negative light based on a number of factors: 1) “a ‘good’ old age was depicted by good health, virtue, self-reliance and salvation; while 2) a ‘bad’ old age reflected sickness, sin, dependence, decay and disease” (Cole, 1992 *in* McHugh, 2003). Victorian morality also associated ‘bad’ old age with sin, as well as decay and dependence. Additionally, prior to the industrialization of the 1800s-1900s a primarily rural economy relied on experience that came with age, enabling older (and healthy) adults to fall into the ‘good’ old age category that had value within the society (Addison, 2006). This changed however with the increasing industrialization of the early 1900s which relied on strength and speed, qualities found in young workers that would increase productivity and profit. At the same time, the ‘Cult of Youth’ (Addison, 2006) that developed in Hollywood in the 1910s-1920s has now become ingrained in the consciousness of North Americans and much of the Western world, where it reinforces the belief that old age should be avoided regardless of the consequences. Association with older people is discouraged based on the grounds that doing so would “devalue” the younger person in contact with the aging individual (Calasanti, 2007, p. 337).

Individualism and neoliberalism

There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families...Economics are the method; the object is to change the soul (Margaret Thatcher, 1981, 1987).

In addition, there is another influence feeding ageism that is particularly strong and which is also embodied in contemporary media and popular culture – *neoliberalism*. The development of *neoliberalism* in the late 1970s–early 1980s, which was shaped by the ideology of *individualism* rooted in 19th century America (Hooyman and Gonyea, 1995), provided the foundation for capitalism and the subsequent introduction of neoliberalism into world systems of government (Harvey 2005). Emphasizing self-reliance, independence, and productivity, *individualism* negatively characterizes any form of weakness or dependence (Hooyman & Gonyea, 1995; Harvey, 2005). Building on the ideology of individualism, *neoliberalism* contributes to the belief that to have value as an older person in our society, you must continue to be healthy and productive and/or have enough wealth to maintain complete independence. And two of the primary tenets of neoliberal ideology – ‘*choice*’ and ‘*personal responsibility*’ – provide the method to maintain independence in old age.

The term ‘*neoliberalism*’ can be traced to the late 1800s in France (*néolibéralisme*), but its contemporary usage is usually attributed to Milton Friedman and Fredrich von Hayek, who in 1974-75, proposed ideas for a major new economic system based on deregulation and privatization of public services and assets designed to combat the threats to capitalism advanced by the social democratic policies of the left¹ (Harvey, 2004: 8-9). The economic policies that were put forward by Friedman, von Hayek and Paul Volcker, the newly appointed Chairman of the US Federal Reserve in July 1979, came to be known as *neoliberalism*. This system was quickly embraced by a number of other world leaders including China’s Deng Xiaoping, who began China’s ascent into the world of market capitalism in 1978; Margaret Thatcher, Prime Minister of the UK as of 1979; and Ronald Reagan whose US presidency began in 1980 (Harvey, 2005).

¹ Harvey points out that Chile provided the stage for the first experiment with neoliberal policies following Pinochet’s coup in 1973. The main effect of this experiment reflected an inequitable outcome: Chilean elites and foreign investors did very well financially while the standard of living for the general population decreased, while neoliberalism also helped to restore the class position of the elites (Harvey 2005, pp. 8-9).

The neoliberal policies put into place by Thatcher and Reagan rapidly became the new orthodoxy of economics that has dominated the political-economic structure of western nations since the mid 1980s. Neoliberalism holds that state involvement in public affairs inflicts a negative impact on the social and economic development of its citizens; and proposed that by reducing the power of the state, power would be transferred to the individual, a supposedly ideal situation embraced by nations with a strong belief in individualism (Navarro, 2002b). According to neoliberal thought “all forms of social solidarity were to be dissolved in favour of *individualism*, private property, personal responsibility and family values” (Harvey, 2005: 23). But although neoliberalism promises less government intervention in public affairs, neoliberal governments in fact remain involved in the administration of public institutions (Williams, et al., 2001; Navarro, 2001, 2007). However, rather than provide government support of public services, an economic market model of industry has been imposed on public institutions, (education, health, etc.). The purpose of government is thus transformed from a system that protects the interests of its citizens, to one that protects the interests of corporations.

In Canada in the 1980s-early 1990s, a subtle change started to take place in society as neoliberalism’s creeping ideological rhetoric entered the public domain. The mantra of “individual (or personal) responsibility” and “choice” could be found over and over again in everything from academic publications to the mainstream press. This rhetoric was accompanied by a political-economic shift that included the privatization and *profitization* of many of Canada’s social welfare programs (Williams et al, 2001). With the assistance of ‘effective’ government and corporate media support, *neoliberalism* and its underlying ideology, *individualism*, are now deeply embedded in government policies that emphasize individual responsibility, which in turn have affected policies and attitudes around older adults. As this ideological rhetoric is internalized and normalized, citizens have been transformed into consumers – customers readily available for the emerging markets provided by the *profitization* of social welfare programs (Ungerson, 1997; Williams et al, 2001; Navarro, 2007). This remarkably successful transformation has affected all aspects of Canadian life.

Neoliberalism's interconnection with 'successful aging'

Aging is not simply an individual activity. It takes place within a number of sociopolitical and economic variables, as well as health influences, which may often be beyond the ability of the individual to control (WHO, 2020, 2021). Consequently, research has shown that income and social status, two of the determinants of health, are among the primary factors affecting individual health, with the greater the disparity of income, the greater the differences in health (WHO, 2020). Carol Estes (2002), Vincente Navarro (2001, 2007), Steven P. Wallace (2014) and other scholars have applied the political economy approach to an analysis of health and aging to show that through government regulations, combined with social and health policies, capitalist societies influence the different life choices of the individual, ultimately affecting the health of older persons. In addition, a number of scholars over the last 15-20 years, have argued that the concept of *successful aging* has actually fostered ageism, and has enabled governments to rationalize decisions to cutback health and social welfare policies to older adults.

Calasanti, et al. (2012) agree emphasizing that:

As we have combined the belief that we should control aging ('disease') with promises of slowing or altering the ageing process, the pressure to not 'appear old' (that is, have visible markers of ageing) has increased. Again, the idea that individuals can control this process through lifestyle and consumer choices justifies the ageism heaped upon those of us who do not 'choose' to stem their ageing (Calasanti, Sorensen, & King (p. 21).

Theoretical perspective – the political economy of aging

The theoretical approach of the *political economy of aging* (Minkler & Estes, 1984; Walker, 1981) is one of several approaches that are situated within the paradigm of *critical gerontology* (Phillipson, 2005), and the one that has guided my research into the influence of media and popular culture on old age and aging.

From a historical frame of reference, the *political economy of aging* evolved out of the *political economy theory* in the late 1970s-early 1980s and was strongly influenced by social and political theorists that included Marx, Weber, Gramsci, the Frankfurt School, and others (Estes, 1979). Carol Estes (1979) in the US and Alan Walker (1981) in the UK are generally acknowledged as initiating the *political economy of aging*, although other gerontologists from North America and Europe also started using this perspective in the 1970s-1990s. They include: Meredith Minkler (1984) in the US; John Myles (1984), Jill Quadagno (1991), and Lynn McDonald (1996) in Canada; and Chris Philipson (1982) in the UK

(Chappell, 2008). The *political economy of aging* draws from critical theory, conflict theory, feminist theory and cultural studies for its perspective (Estes, 1999) that focuses on “the dynamics of inequality and power relations” (Quadagno & Reid, 1999). According to Estes (1991) in Minkler & Estes (Eds.) (1991):

“The basic premise of the political economy of aging theory is that the experience of old age and the treatment of seniors can only be understood within the context of the economy (both national and international, the state, the labour market, and the intersecting class, gender, age, and racial/ethnic divisions in society” (p. 31).

The political economy of aging perspective provided the necessary framework to investigate the different themes that evolved out of my research – from the creation of the cult of youth in the 1910s-1920s to the development of the “*aging enterprise*” (Estes, 1979) (which includes the aging and anti-aging industries), guiding my thematic data analysis. Estes’ (1991: 31) set of four premises form the basis for the political economy of aging. They are as follows:

- **Premise #1:** “The social structure shapes how people are perceived and how they perceive themselves.” Both Hollywood’s cult of youth ideology and the anti-aging industry are examples of social structure that promote the belief in the cultural imperialism of youth and the necessity to remain young (or at least youthful looking) particularly for women. This in turn feeds a gender bias and inequality.
- **Premise #2:** “The labels applied to both the elderly and social policy shape the experiences of old age.” An aim of my research is to document the ways in which older people are perceived based on negative stereotypes of older age. A political economy perspective argues that the negative stereotyping of older people benefits neoliberal government policy as it also promotes the neoliberal ideology that an active and illness-free old life is possible for everyone if they take individual responsibility for their own health. This in turn, allows neoliberal governments to decrease resources to older adults and affects the lives of older adults who do not have the capacity to be fourth age ‘*Super-Agers*’.
- **Premise #3:** “Social policy and the politics of aging mirror wider social inequalities and the power struggles around them.” Older women, particularly older single, divorced or widowed women, are the population who face the most financial challenges in older age due to circumstances throughout their lives that lead to inequality in older age (e.g. leaving the workforce for varying periods of time to take care of their children or caregiving for their parents). Retirement at age 65

or earlier is not financially possible for all older adults. And even if older adults leave the workforce at 65 due to health or other reasons, they may not find themselves in a good retirement position. Not all older adults have private pensions or savings or own their own home. Instead, they may have financial insecurity that results in housing or food insecurity.

- **Premise #4:** “Social policy reflects the dominant belief system that is crucial in enforcing, bolstering, and extending structural inequalities in the wider economic, political, and social order.” Ageism, for example, is pervasive in Canadian society. According to *The Revera Report on Ageism*, a survey produced for the International Federation on Aging in 2012, ageism is the most tolerated form of social discrimination in the country, more so than either gender or race-based prejudice. As ageism supports the idea that adults lose their value as they age, governments can therefore easily reduce funding and resources to social programs and health services to older adults (as demonstrated by the deplorable conditions that were highlighted in long-term care facilities by the pandemic in 2020). And too, if the dominant belief system embraces neoliberal values of individual responsibility and choice, funding and resources can be reduced or withdrawn from any segment of the population if it appears they are not adhering to these values of neoliberal productivity. In addition, while the impact of neoliberal ideology on health and aging happens at a structural and individual level, shaping government policy on health and aging, it also influences societal values and beliefs on a subliminal level, that are subsequently internalized by its individual citizens.

Ageism

The term *ageism* has had different interpretations since it was first coined by Robert Butler in 1969 when he described “age discrimination or *age-ism* [as] the prejudice by one age toward other age groups” in his article, *Age-ism: Another form of bigotry* (p. 243). A current definition provided by the World Health Organization in 2020 states that ageism is “the stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination against people on the basis of their age” (2020). Ageism is widespread across the globe and in most societies such as Canada’s it “is the most socially ‘normalized’ of any prejudice and is not widely countered – like racism or sexism” (WHO, 2020). Media has helped to foster ageism through the negative stereotyping of older people, resulting in age discrimination in the workforce, and the marginalization, and even

exclusion, of older people in their communities, which in turn “have negative impacts on the health and well-being” of the older population (WHO, 2020).

An earlier Canadian survey produced for the International Federation on Aging, *The Revera Report on Ageism* (2012), reflected the information provided by the World Health Organization 2020-2021. While any age group can be the recipient of ageism, the two groups most singled out today are the young and the old, but with the greater proportion of ageism focused on older adults (Revera Inc., 2012). The Revera Report found that ageism is the most tolerated form of social discrimination in the country, more so than either gender or race-based prejudice. It revealed that the most common forms of age discrimination are: 1) treating seniors as if they are invisible; 2) acting as if they have nothing to contribute; 3) assuming they are incompetent; and 4) allowing ageism to take place in the workplace and housing. The *Revera Report* also found that in general 89% of Canadians hold a negative view of aging, while Generations X and Y are the most likely group to have formed negative opinions on aging, which includes perceptions that people 75 and older are unpleasant, dependent, grumpy, and frail (p.10). A more recent *Revera Report on Ageism* published in May 2016, found that ageism “continue[d] to be widespread in Canada” and is still the “most tolerated form of social prejudice in Canada, with more than 42% of Canadians citing ageism, which is double to that of racism (20%) and sexism (17%)” (Revera, 2016, p. 9).

Categories and stereotypes of old age

Categories of older age have been debated and have evolved over the years. Neugarten (1974) was the first to draw the distinction between the ‘*young-old*’ and the ‘*old-old*.’ These categories have since been expanded to include the ‘*oldest-old*,’ while the division of old age has re-emerged as the *third* and *fourth* ages as proposed by Laslett (1996). The categories of old age are not straightforward as the actual defined chronological age varies depending on the study: 1) the *Young Old* (or ***third age***) – those individuals younger than age 65 or 75 [e.g. 60-69 or 65-74]; 2) *Middle-old* -70-79 or 75-84; and 3) the *Old-Old* (or the ***oldest-old*** or the ***fourth age***) – those over age 80+ or 85+ [although a very few studies refer to the *fourth age* as 75+). During the ***fourth age***, research often focuses on physiological changes in

vision, hearing and physical function (Baltes & Smith, 2003; Wingfield, Tun & McCoy, 2005; Smith, et al., 2001 in Coleman, et al. 2008); or on cognitive decline (Salthouse, 2009; Aartsen, et al., 2002).

There are four models of aging discussed in this research in relation to media and popular culture: 1) *aging as frailty and decline*; 2) *“successful aging” and healthy aging*; 3) the *“new ageism”* (Gullette, 2004) of *apocalyptic demography* with its old, rich and spoiled model of the early 2000s that has evolved from the *“greedy geezer”* model into the *“ok boomer”* model of the late 2000s; and 4) *the ‘fourth age’ ‘Super-Ager’* – those exceptionally healthy and physically fit ‘successful agers’ in their late 80s and 90s who still run marathons and engage in thrill seeking activities into the ‘fourth age.’ These models reflect historical and contemporary perceptions of age and aging and provide a framework for the political and socioeconomic connections driven by neoliberalism that fuel ageist representations of age and aging in the media and popular culture and feed an anti-aging industry and consumer ideology in contemporary society.

Model # 1: old age as frailty and decline

Extensive gerontological research conducted over the last ten years suggests that negative stereotyping of aging as physical and cognitive decline still remains a prominent model of aging in North American society (Binstock, 2005; Higgs & Gilleard, 2019). The biomedicalization of aging (strongly linked to the anti-aging industry and Hollywood’s ‘cult of youth’ ideology) forms the foundation for the 1st stereotype of aging by advancing a socially constructed view of aging as a medical problem or disease (Estes & Binney, 1989). In addition, the biomedical model of aging, which endorses the notion of old age as frailty and decline, strongly influences public attitudes about “old age as a pathological, abnormal and an undesirable state” that subsequently affects societal attitudes toward older adults, while it also encourages older people to *internalize*, or accept and absorb these negative attitudes at an almost subconscious level so that they become part of their own identities (Estes et al., 2001: 46).

But in this sense, these ageist attitudes have been internalized by younger people too. Doing so has allowed them to view older adults in a negative and dismissive way and enables them to separate themselves from the older generation. And in the process, older people have gradually slipped into invisibility. This harmful image of automatic frailty and dependency that characterizes the older adult has

become entrenched in the collective consciousness, where it reinforces negative associations of aging to the extent that it has become “a pervasive social attitude” (Chappell et al., 2008, p. 3) and consequently fosters ageism.

This negative model of aging as frailty and decline integrates societal attitudes that reflect the “*cultural imperialism of youth*” (Laws, 1995, p. 113) set in place by Hollywood decades ago, with the belief that aging is a disease that can be ‘fixed’ or even ‘cured’ (Kuczynski, 1998, de Grey, 2014). For example, Cambridge gerontologist, Audrey de Grey’ biomedical approach to aging is as a curable disease that has to be tackled at the cellular level is becoming increasingly more popular. A 2014 *Ageing Summit* in the UK brought academics and biomedical and pharmaceutical interests together to discuss methods [or “*anti-ageing therapies*”] that could slow down the aging process. The three-day summit clearly had a direct anti-aging focus, summarized in this statement: “The last three decades have shown us how plastic the ageing process can be. It is becoming apparent that, with increased knowledge, more and more of the *negative consequences of ageing can now be tackled, postponed or avoided* [italics added]” (EuroSciCon Ltd., 2014). This approach has enabled the aging and anti-aging industries to utilize the fear of illness and death to sell their products and services. They promise “age-defying” solutions to the “problem” of old age, suggesting that they can slow (or even stop) the aging process (Calasanti et al, 2012).

Taking an opposing position to de Grey’s view of aging as a curable disease, Masora (2001), (citing various studies in the US and Europe that all showed a high rate of dementia or physical disability in centenarians), argues that it is highly unlikely “for a person to live to a very long life without significant physiological deterioration” (p. 416). For example, the majority of centenarians in one French study (Allard, 1991) did not meet the *successful aging* criteria; instead: one third of the participant centenarians needed assistance with eating, one half to two thirds needed assistance with other activities of daily living, and two thirds of the participants were unable to leave their rooms (Masora, 2001: 416-17). Even in Japan, known to have a high number of centenarians, a 2006 study of 304 centenarians showed that:

“Only 2% were classified as ‘Exceptional,’ with all of their functions graded as excellent,” 18% were ‘Normal,’ exhibiting maintenance of fine cognitive and physical functions; [while] 55% were ‘Frail’ exhibiting impairment of either cognitive or physical functions and 25% were ‘Fragile,’ exhibiting deterioration of both physical and cognitive functions” (Gondo, et al., 2006: 305).

Model #2: Healthy or 'successful aging'

Healthy aging: "The process of developing and maintaining the functional ability that enables wellbeing in older age" (World Health Organization, 2020).

Coexisting with negative perceptions of the biomedical model of aging as frailty and dependency are perspectives that provide alternative and often more positive models of aging which emphasize individual agency over the aging process. '*Healthy aging*' as defined above, is the current version of these positive models of aging. Other earlier but similar models include: "*productive aging*" (Butler, 1969, 1985), which initially developed out of Butler's response to the prejudice (which he described as **age-ism**) that he saw directed at older adults over a proposed 1969 public housing complex for low-income seniors in Washington, DC; "*successful aging*" (Havighurst, 1961; Butler, 1974; Rowe & Kahn, 1987); "*active aging*" (WHO, 2002); and *healthy aging* (McPherson, 1995), which is now the model used by the World Health Organization [defined above] (WHO, 2020). Rowe and Kahn's model of "*successful aging*" has the three main principles: "low probability of disease and disease-related disability, high cognitive and physical functional capacity, and active engagement with life" (Rowe & Kahn, 1997: 433). Additionally, Laslett (1989) and Young & Schuller (1991) propose that life following retirement is a unique, cohort driven approach to older age, which they define as the *third age*.

"*The third age*" is a concept popularized by Peter Laslett's (1989) book, *A Fresh Map of Life*. He hypothesized that due to a combination of demographic and socio-economic factors a new and positive stage of life is emerging for older adults after retirement (specifically when the majority of a birth cohort become 70 years of age). Laslett argues that in place of "old age," the retirement years now provide older adults with greater agency, enabling them to make individual choices that will translate into personally fulfilling lives outside the confines of work providing them with a new identity – "*a new third age*." Although Laslett has built on the model of successful aging, in order to create a concept that provides another positive model of aging, it is also embedded in the neoliberal ideology of personal responsibility and choice, which includes the concept of agelessness and anti-aging.

Based on the concept of "*successful aging*," these models of older age attempt to dispel the myth that aging inevitably means decline and lack of function and ability and propose instead that a healthy and active life can be the norm for older adults. It should be noted that Butler's early definition of *productive aging* as "avoidance of disease or disease susceptibility, high cognitive capacity, and active

engagement with life,” (Butler & Gleason, 1985) is remarkably similar to the three main tenets of Rowe and Kahn’s *successful aging* model described above. Like Butler, Rowe and Kahn included the importance of activity in the lives of older adults and active engagement with a primary focus on “interpersonal relations and productive activity” (p. 433). They also made a distinction between two groups of “non-diseased” older adults: “*usual* (non-pathologic but high risk)” and “*successful* (low risk and high function),” with a goal of stimulating research that would identify the determinants of successful aging and develop interventions that would have the potential to reduce the number of adults in the *usual* category (p. 433). However, Rowe and Kahn (1998) emphasize that the primary components of *successful aging* are nevertheless hierarchically arranged with the *biomedical aspects* taking precedence over social engagement and active participation in life (p. 39). However, over time as critiques arose over the definition, Rowe and Kahn came to enhance the model of successful aging and placed more of an emphasis on “active engagement with life” (Holstein & Minkler, 2003). With the *biomedical* perspective forming the foundation, the focus of successful aging is on enhancing mental and physical health functioning which results in increasing longevity, while reducing disability and the frailty caused by mental and physical decline (Rowe & Kahn, 1997; Seeman, et al. 1994; Kahana, et al., 2003).

While concept of *successful aging* may be grounded in an intention to promote healthy and positive aging, certain problems are embedded in this concept, which have generated debates within the academic community over the last 15-20 years (Angus & Reeve, 2006; Dillway & Byrnes, 2009). First of all, it is important to note that academics such as Bytheway (1995) have argued that even having a category called “old age” generates a situation of ‘otherness’ that ignores the actual continuities that take place over time throughout life. And although the models of aging from Butler’s *productive aging*, Rowe and Kahn’s *successful aging* through to Laslett’s *third age* can be understood as attempts to dislodge the negative perspective of old age as frailty and decline, they rest upon the notion of agelessness and anti-aging, while seemingly banishing the notion of old age entirely, these concepts stigmatize frailty and old age even more. In addition, the discourses of successful aging and the third age are embedded in neoliberal values of individual responsibility and choice, which are in turn linked to the concept of anti-aging and the aging industry.

Debates around the concept of successful aging revolve around: the concept and definition of successful aging; the socioeconomic bias that is embedded in the model of successful aging; and the sociopolitical context in which the concept was developed, which includes American political and biomedical psychosocial models, interests and networks. As a result, other scholars argue that the influence of the successful aging model in fact supports a perspective that views aging in a negative light, consequently creating even more fear and anxiety around the normal aging process (Kaufman, et al, 2004). In this way, the model of successful aging has not eliminated the stigma or negative associations of old age, it has merely shifted the definition of “old” to an older age category where frailty resides—the *fourth age* (Higgs & Gilleard, 2019). As old age categories have been developed and shifted, Chappell (2008) suggests that: “Indeed, one day *old* might come to be equated with frail” (p. 229).

Some scholars have also raised concerns with the concept of *successful aging* itself, concerned that successful aging gives the impression that through a careful lifetime regime that encompasses proper diet and exercise, living into the *fourth age* without serious physical or mental deterioration is an achievable goal (Masoro, 2001; Holstein & Minkler, 2003; Bowling, 2007). This can clearly be seen in biomedical aging research that proposes that negative aspects of aging will be able to be eradicated in the future, such as the work of Cambridge gerontologist, Audrey de Grey, who takes the position that aging is a curable disease that can eventually be ‘cured’.

The fact that academic debates still continue over ‘*successful aging*’ reflect the continuing influence and persistence of this concept (Katz & Calasanti, 2014; Martinson & Berridge, 2015). In addition, the debates around successful aging (and anti-aging) that have taken place in academia have also been reproduced in the dominant media, specifically in text-based sources (e.g. newspaper and magazine articles) (Bonnesen, & Burgess, 2004; Abraham, 2009; Coxwell, 2020); television info-news programs (CBC, 2013), and the Internet, such as de Grey’s anti-aging research presented in *Ted Talks* and *YouTube* (de Grey, 2014)

Scholars have also asked the question: What exactly does it mean to age *successfully*? What happens if you don’t age successfully, and instead become frail either physically or mentally in old age? Have you then become a “failure” at aging? Or are you a successful ager only up until the time when any kind of physical or mental decline sets in? Bowling (2007) points out in a systematic review of the

literature examining the concept of successful aging that definitions vary considerably and with much inconsistency. Her research reveals that although successful aging consists of a number of components, many models are one-dimensional, focusing only on aspects of the biomedical or psychosocial models, such as remaining disease and disability free in the biomedical model or having an optimistic attitude about life. At the same time, Bowling points out that definitions were also vague and often stated implicitly. In addition, “criteria of successful aging [e.g. satisfaction with life, having close social contacts], in some studies have been labeled as predictors of the same concept in others” (Larson, 2002 *in* Bowling, 2007: 273). She concludes by suggesting that successful aging as a concept needs to expand and become more multidimensional, with greater sensitivity to individual and cultural differences, taking into account the political economy of aging.

Where previously ‘old age’ may have been conceptualized as age 60+ or 65+, the model of *successful aging* and *the third age* have not eliminated the stigma or negative associations of ‘old age,’ they are merely shifting the *old age* category into age 80-90+, where physical and mental decline occur more often – the *fourth age*. Nevertheless, because old age has become even more defined by physical and mental decline, individuals could be considered ‘old’ at 60, if frailty and dependence were present. However, even living to age 90+ does not prevent the pressure to age “successfully” to cease.

There are also a few writers within the popular press who avoid casting older adults in a stereotypical and homogenous mold and instead take a critical look at old age and the anti-aging industry. In an October 2014 *Maclean’s* article, *Age-old problems: Despite a demographic boom, the elderly are rendered invisible by a society in denial*, Anne Kingston, suggests that our society is in denial about the realities of old age. Instead, she argues that we have become obsessed with the belief in anti-aging, fostered by an anti-aging industry that reaps huge profits out of our fear and denial. She points out that those who discuss growing old as increased frailty and decline – the first model of aging – are few and unpopular in the academic community. One such alternative voice is Canadian sociologist, Stephen Katz, who points out that with a focus on rejecting and resisting old age, we are left unprepared for old age. Interviewed for a *Maclean’s* article in 2014 Katz pointed out that: “We talk about the ‘Rs’— revitalizing, rejuvenation, rementia. We don’t talk about the ‘Ds’ – decrepitude, dependency, death. Not everybody is healthy or independent or prosperous” (Kingston, 2014).

Model # 3: The “new ageism” of the ‘greedy geezer’ and “OK Boomer”

Another kind of ageism has resurfaced out of the combined perspectives of *successful aging* and *apocalyptic demography* – “the new ageism.” The “new ageism” of the *apocalyptic demographic* perspective (also referred to as *voodoo demography* or *demographic determinism*) underlies both the first (aging as *frailty and decline*) and third (the “new ageism”) models of aging. The *apocalyptic demographic* perspective generates resentment and anger in the populace, perpetuating a myth of the growing “catastrophic” landslide of an aging population who will drain the resources of the younger generation (Hooyman & Gonyea, 1999; Binstock, 2005; Gullette, 2011). “*Apocalyptic demography*” has been widely criticized by numerous gerontologists who argue that the consequences of an aging Boomer (a person born between 1946-1964) population, has been exaggerated and sensationalized by the media and used to justify government retreat from public responsibility, transferring that responsibility back to the community, the family, and the individual (Binney & Estes 1988; Gee & Gutman, 2000; Walker, 2010).

Nevertheless, apocalyptic demography has been reinforced through government policy and sustained by the dominant media, presenting the idea of aging as a social problem and planting the idea of older people as “*greedy geezers*” (Binstock, 2005; Chappell, 2007), suggesting entitlement at the expense of the younger generation. Ellen Gee and Gloria Gutman (2000) argue that in Canada, demographic determinism has been used by neoliberal governments to dismantle social programs and cut health care funding, while Binstock (2005) points out that in the US during the late 1980s as health care costs escalated, the blame was cast on older Americans who were accused of draining government resources, while the actual parties responsible were “healthcare providers, suppliers, administrators and insurers” (p. 75). In addition, during this time period older Americans were being blamed not only for rising health care costs in the US, but also for the general economic problems that were taking place within the country (Cohen, 1994). Media reinforced this perspective, fueling the apocalyptic demographic perspective and subsequently intergenerational antagonism through repetitive use of the term “greedy geezers” to refer to the negative effect older people were having on the economy (Cohen, 1994, p. 400).

However, the “new ageism” of the ‘*greedy geezer*’ is in fact not a new model, but a continuation of a “new ageism” that began in the early 1980s (Bytheway, 2005). With the emergence of neoliberalism in

the late 1970s the liberal policies of the New Deal that were enacted after World War II under President Franklin Roosevelt came under attack (Binstock, 2010). According to Binstock (2010) a neoliberal ideology based on individual responsibility and productivity was in conflict with the model of collectivity and “compassionate ageism” that formed the foundation for the programs and policies of the New Deal, such as Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security. Finding parallels with the situation of the “new ageism” found in contemporary society, older adults became the scapegoat for concerns about the economy, high unemployment rates and healthcare costs, and were portrayed as ‘*greedy geezers*’ (Fairlie, 1988) who were becoming increasingly dependent on younger workers, while draining the social security coffers by taking “Social Security handouts” (Dillaway & Byrnes, 2009: 712).

Mainstream media spread the “*new ageism*” through magazine and newspaper articles that targeted older adults. Binstock (2010) points out that in 1980, *Time Magazine* featured a cover story that portrayed older Americans as the “new elite” of healthy, rich, influential and largely selfish people. Other articles followed that generally depicted older adults as selfish and affluent. These accounts generated the term “greedy geezer” which was first used in a cover article in the *New Republic*, “Talkin Bout my Generation,” (Fairlie, 1988) with a cover featuring a caricature labeled “*greedy geezer*” (Binstock, 2010). Fairlie’s article criticized government programs for its senior population, arguing that this funding was wasted on this “unproductive” segment of society who were draining the resources of the general population (Butler, 1989).

The “*new ageism*” of the 21st Century is a continuation of the “*greedy geezer*” *image* that portrays boomers as an aging tsunami of an avaricious and selfish older generation who are sweeping across the North American landscape draining the resources and opportunities of the younger generation (Gullette, 2011, McMahon, 2014). Margaret Gullette (2011) suggests that while the “decline ideology” of frailty and decline no longer dominates the language about old age and aging, other even more insidious rhetoric, exemplified by “the *new ageism*” is now applied to older adults in the United States. Older adults of retirement age – in particular the Boomer generation – are lumped together into a uniform group and branded as: “rich, surfeited and overentitled” (Gullette, 2011:12).

These same themes can also be found more recently in Canadian mainstream media, Although the contradictory message of old age as either frailty and decline or successful ‘*Super-agers*’

(represented by the 90+ marathoners) are pervasive in the media, the “new ageism” of wealthy, arrogant and greedy seniors is becoming a more prevalent theme with news articles that have focused on the coming “aging tsunami” of rich and entitled Boomers who are draining the health and pension resources of the younger generation (McMahon, 2014, Schneller, 2019).

Text-based sources (e.g. newspapers and popular magazines) of popular media support ageism through language and article content. Terms such as *greedy geezer* (mentioned earlier) imply a selfish older person with a sense of entitlement, while terms such as curmudgeon, old coot, old fogey, codger, or geezer connote a disagreeable personality in men, and expressions such as crone, old bat, hag, or little old lady imply either unattractiveness or a dislikable personality in women (Palmore, 1999). Even the expressions “granny/gran” or “granddad/gramps” are often used in a pejorative manner, sometimes suggesting an unpleasant person or a bad driver (Gendron, et al, 2016). Ageist language, consisting of ageist words for older adults and expressions that denigrate aging, is ubiquitous and generally goes unnoticed in society, disseminated in the dominant media where it reinforces negative assumptions about older age and aging (Williams & Nussbaum, 2001; Walker, 2010).

For example, in September 2014, Tasmin McMahon, writing for *Maclean’s*, wrote a cover article, entitled, “Old. Rich. Spoiled.” Emphasizing that seniors are no longer the vulnerable and poverty-stricken population they once were in earlier decades, she argues instead that: “today’s seniors are arguably the wealthiest generation in history.” (p. 39). McMahon reproaches them for living the good life at the expense of the younger generation, thereby fueling intergenerational conflict. She further accuses them of everything from garnering an unfair proportion of government funding (from pensions, housing tax breaks, health care, etc.) to unfairly remaining in the workforce after age 65 thus stealing jobs that should go to the younger generation; to causing an escalation in real estate prices by competing with younger people in the home buying market.

McMahon suggests that young people need to form their own parallel organization, like the Canadian seniors’ organization CARP (formerly the Canadian Association of Retired Persons) and fight back. In order to address what McMahon views as the inequitable distribution of resources between young and old, the article concludes with recommendations from the Fraser Institute, suggesting that older adults should be forced to pay for more of their own health care costs, while governments should

reduce CPP and OAS based on a “means test” that would lower the “clawback threshold” for OAS benefits (p. 42). She claims that although it might seem fundamentally unfair to take such a step since older Canadians paid into a government system when they were employed to ensure they would have pension benefits when they retired, it would in fact be a just and reasonable change. Maintaining that the majority of older Canadians are now affluent, she argues that a solution to the problems facing Canadian society is for older adults “to pay more in taxes in order to support the less wealthy” – who in this instance are the young adults (p. 42).

There is also a new factor that has been added to the contemporary version of “*new ageism*” in dominant media – the increase in platforms of expression since the 1980s. Now, in addition to film, television and text-based media, since the late 1990s additional ways to disseminate information have become readily available on the Internet, through companies such as *Netflix, Inc.*, a streaming media company founded in 1997 (Netflix Media Center, 2015), and *YouTube*, a video sharing website which began in 2005 (Bellis, 2015). At the same time since the early 2000s social media has exploded: *Facebook*, launched in 2004 (Carlson, 2010), *Twitter* in 2006 (Carlson, 2011), *Pinterest* in 2009 (Carlson, 2012) and *Instagram* in 2010 (Instagram, (2021). And although cable television has been available in some form since the late 1940s, major expansion in the industry has taken place since 2000 in the form of video on demand and subscription video on demand (NCTA, 2015). Although my research on the influence of these new forms of media is limited, it is clear that they offer not only information, but more opportunities to screen entertainment that is ageist in nature.

An example of this can be found in more recent criticism targeted at the boomer generation in 2019, when the slang expression – “ok boomer” – surfaced on social media. The pejorative phrase has been used primarily by Millennials and Generation Z to mock or dismiss an individual from the boomer generation. This expression was first used in 2009 but was popularized and became a meme on *Tik Tok* and *Twitter* in October 2019 when thousands of teens responded with the phrase “ok boomer” to a viral audio clip of an older man declaring that: “millennials and Generation Z have the Peter Pan syndrome, they don’t ever want to grow up” (Lorenz, 2019). And in November 2019, 25-year-old New Zealand Green Party MP, Chlöe Swarbrick, made international news headlines and elicited accusations of ageism when she replied to an older lawmaker who had interrupted her speech to parliament on

climate change by saying “ok boomer” to indicate that the lawmaker had conservative views on the environment that were not worth consideration. This phrase also has an additional subtext of blaming the older generation of boomers for everything that is wrong in the world today – from the housing shortage, to the lack of decent employment for younger people, to environmental issues, while also suggesting that boomers, due to their conservative views do not believe in climate change (Schneller, 2019).

Model #4: *Third age “superheroes” and fourth age ‘Super-Agers’*

Third age “superheroes”

Building on Laslett’s *third age* model, in the early 2000s Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs (2000, 2005a, 2005b) proposed another model of aging – the “*boomers save the world third age superhero*” in their examination of aging through the lens of culture. Incorporating the third age framework into their hypothesis, they suggested that the boomer generation (now between the ages of 57-75 years of age), is a unique generation who would not only change perceptions about aging but would transform the very nature of retirement and aging. They argued that without a generation such as the boomers, Laslett’s *third age* concept could not be completely accomplished (2002: 380). They noted that many individuals from the early boomer generation grew up during the 1960s when a cultural revolution that included Vietnam, feminism, and the civil rights movement swept the Western world.

During the 1960s, Gilleard and Higgs (2007) suggest that cultural divisions based on gender and class differences shifted to those of a generational nature that focused on: “choice, autonomy and self-expression ... along with a growth in everyday hedonism” (p. 16). This period marked an era in which the slogan “don’t trust anyone over 30” was a key component. Being “young” was essential in the counterculture decade, which translated into an aversion of (and resistance to) aging and the attitudes and values held by the older generation. But although the ‘countercultural generation’ was rebelling against the values of an older generation that included materialism and conformity, they were able to do so because the wealth generated by WWII had created a stable society with full employment and economic growth that facilitated the expansion of a market economy and consumerism (Gilleard & Higgs, 2007: 16).

Quite quickly however, the individualism and idealism of the 1960s counterculture slid seamlessly into the ideology of a 1970s-80s neoliberalism focused on “choice” and consumerism (Harvey, 2005; Binkley, 2007; Health & Potter, 2005 in Gilleard & Higgs, 2007). Very early on in the countercultural revolution “youth culture” was commodified and shaped by market interests that saw numerous opportunities to expand the consumption of their products, first targeted to young people in the late 1960s-1970s, and later to boomers as they entered their 40s and 50s. In this way, Gilleard and Higgs (2007) argue that this persistence in resisting age by the boomers in turn also fed the anti-aging industry.

At the same time, there is a dialectic between the commodification of the counterculture and the social activism of the era. Gilleard and Higgs (2007) argue that because the boomers were part of a cultural revolution that brought tremendous social change during their youth, they also have the potential to engender important change around aging as they themselves age. Feminism and the Civil Rights movements of the 1960s that brought about more equality for women and African Americans, as well as the global anti-war movement that brought an end to the Vietnam War could have an equivalent in old age. Consequently, Gilleard and Higgs posit that the boomer generation, which largely defined itself by its opposition to the older generation in the 1960s and which is now beginning to enter older age, may transform the very nature of retirement and aging through its *rejection* of ‘old age.’ And as activism and collectivism were important to a segment of the boomer generation, this may carry over into their own age.

However, while the possibility exists for boomers to create positive change in the world during their retirement years, the negative beliefs boomers have internalized about being old may dampen that possibility considerably. If they turn to a rejection of old age in an attempt to remain ‘forever young,’ instead of ‘changing the world’ they may find that the ‘choices’ they have made have come at the cost of embracing an anti-aging industry and the services and products it offers. Instead, the notion of the *third age boomer superhero* will fade away.

There are some additional flaws in Gilleard and Higgs’ (2007) argument that boomers will change the nature of retirement. First of all, they make an assumption that boomers are a homogenous group of people, which they are not. Like any generation of people, individuals within the group vary based on class, gender, race, ethnicity and location of birth. Secondly, although Gilleard and Higgs to some degree

acknowledge class and gender, their emphasis is specifically on the baby boomer generation whom they say are unique because of their sociohistorical roots, which they place beyond class or gender. While it's possible that boomers from different classes and genders may have some generational connection based on being young during the turbulent 1960s, the same can be said for individuals who grew up during WWI or WWII. Nevertheless, I would argue that despite a generational commonality driven by being young in the counterculture of the 1960s, like previous generations, boomers today have a stronger affinity with individuals who share a similar socioeconomic background (which includes class, race, and ethnicity) as well as gender identity. And too, during the 1960s there were individuals who were very much immersed in the countercultural revolution and social activism, while others sidestepped that aspect of the decade and continued on as previous generations before them had done. Some of those 60s countercultural individuals remain engaged in social and political activism today, while others have embraced the neoliberal agenda and consumerism.

In addition, the Laslett and Gilleard and Higgs articles were written before the global economic crisis in 2008. The theories they proposed about the *third age* were made prior to the crisis, but even then failed to realize the class bias embedded in the retirement options for aging boomers. Written from a British perspective, Gilleard and Higgs emphasize the increased wealth, income, wealth and assets of the boomer generation, which provided them with much more personal freedom than previous generations. In Canada, for a time prior to 2008, "*Freedom 55+*" signified the endless possibilities of a financially secure life of leisure in early retirement. Although my knowledge of the repercussions of the economic situation in the UK is limited, I would expect that as in Canada, even in the late 1990s and early 2000s before the financial crisis of 2008, these dreams of a stress-free and financially secure third age, were only available to a select group of people.

Following the economic crisis of 2008, Boomers in contemporary Canadian society now have even fewer options available to them in their *third age*. The options of early retirement or financial security that existed for some people prior to 2008 in Canada are now distant memories for many other individuals, while in the US, a 2011 poll conducted in the US by the Associated press and LifeGoesStrong.com revealed that:

Baby Boomers fear retirement and are actively worried about their financial future. 44% of Boomer-aged Americans (born between 1946 and 1965) are not confident they'll have enough money to live

comfortably in retirement, [while] 57% say they lost money during the recession; and 42% of those affected say that's why they're delaying their retirement (ThirdAge.com, 2011).

Finally, I would argue that because the concept of the “*third age superhero*” rests upon the notion of agelessness and anti-aging, the concept stigmatizes frailty and old age even more, seemingly trying to banish the notion of old age entirely (Higgs & Gilleard, 2014, 2019). As old age is perceived as a state that must be resisted, individuals who fall into the category of unsuccessful agers are judged through a neoliberal lens that rejects frailty and dependency, and instead celebrates independence and productivity (Higgs & Gilleard, 2014).

Fourth age “Super-Agers”

Even though *old age*, now defined as being the *fourth* (or final) *age*, seems to have been shifted to a time closer to death, dominant media takes a contradictory position by either reinforcing the belief that frailty does not need to be part of life by celebrating *fourth age Super-agers* or by reinforcing the model of aging as frailty and decline through scaremongering newspaper articles and TV programs that suggest dementia and mental decline are inevitable.

Currently, media and popular culture give more attention to in the new fourth age ‘*super-agers*’ – those exceptionally physically fit individuals who are running marathons or bungee jumping in their 90s, than to older *third and fourth age* individuals who are trying to save the world.

For example, a newsclip on CBC’s *The National* in July 16, 2013 titled “The New 90,” highlighted individuals in their 90s who were physically active – performing aerobics, swimming, dancing, working out and engaging in thrill seeking activities, such as walking the *Edgewalk* around the CN Tower. Within the news clip, Dr. Parminder Raina, Lead Principal Investigator, on the Canadian Longitudinal Study on Aging which began in 2012, called these 90-year-olds “the survivors, the heartiest bunch” and emphasized that “good education, good nutrition, physical activity and brain activity” have the potential to improve cognition and general health (CBC, 2013).

Consequently, although images of physically healthy and exceptional adults of the *fourth age* are inspiring and may encourage individuals of all ages to become more physically active, media stories that highlight these individuals also have an underlying message that infirmity in late old age does not have to occur. Instead, the images and commentary of the 90+-year-old marathoner suggest that good health can

be achieved in the oldest-old as long as every individual takes *personal responsibility* for his or her own health throughout their lifetime – reinforcing neoliberal ideology of choice and individual responsibility. While providing inspiration for an ageist society afraid of illness and mortality, these kinds of popular news features also doubly stigmatize and marginalize the older adults who do not have the capacity to undertake these physical challenges and who are instead frail and in ill health. By implication, these kinds of messages also indirectly “blame the victim,” suggesting that accountability for illness and disability lie solely with the individual, and not with the structural inequalities engrained in North American society (Wallace, 2000, 2014; Higgs & Gilleard, 2019).

The influence of media and popular culture

Hollywood and the ‘cult of youth’: Historical background and cultural circumstances

Although it can be said that Hollywood in large part is responsible for the “*cultural imperialism of youth*” (Laws, 1995) that still dominates the industry today, it did not invent the anti-aging industry. The desire for youth and immortality are not new and can be traced as far back as the 5th Century BCE and the writings of Herodotus who told of a legendary spring or fountain that brought eternal youth to those who drank from it (Peck, 2009). In the early 1500s, explorers such as Ponce de León pursued the mythical Fountain of youth, while alchemists’ interest in creating gold was driven in large part by the belief that gold was an extremely powerful anti-aging element (Olshansky, Hayflick & Carnes, 2002). And aristocrats, such as the Hungarian Countess Elizabeth Bathory, searched for anti-aging remedies in the 17th Century, which included bathing in the blood of young virgins to try and halt the aging process (Bayer, 2005:13). But today, a technological fountain of youth sponsored by the *anti-aging industry* promises to restore a youthful image through scientific and medical knowledge.

Research into the history of Hollywood establishes that the *cultural imperialism of youth* has its roots in the “*cult of youth*” manufactured in Hollywood in the early 1900s (Addison, 2006). Various scholars have argued that “Hollywood and the Industrial Age became close partners in the creation of a youth-oriented consumer culture” during the 1910s-1920s and produced the “Cult of Youth” that denied the existence of even a ‘good’ old age (Addison, 2006), and in the process produced *ageism*. Heather

Addison (2006) traces the *cult of youth* to a number of factors, which include historical trends and specific circumstances that contributed to its formation and growth.

First of all, there were a number of historical trends in the 1910s and 1920s that facilitated its development. Prior to industrialization which had an emphasis on efficiency of production, experience was central to a rural economy. But with industrialization, experience was replaced by a need for strength, endurance and speed, central to a factory-based system that consequently favoured young adults, primarily young men. Industrialization, needing consumers for the vast amount of goods it was producing, turned to the advertising industry to promote its products. And to accommodate the growing need for consumers, ad agencies switched from a product-oriented approach to psychological strategies, targeting young adults who were perceived to be more pliable and receptive to the persuasive power of the advertisers' mantra of "buy, buy, buy" (Addison, 2006:5). At the same time as the rise of industrialization, old age was medicalized through the social construction of age as a disease, and consequently was designated as a medical problem as defined by the medical establishment (Estes and Binney, 1989).

In addition to the historical context of industrialization and an emerging consumer culture, there were also a number of particular circumstances that drove the creation of the cult of youth. Hollywood became established in the 1910s-1920s as the "manufacturer of dreams" (Addison, 2006). Located on the West Coast far away from the East Coast and the culture of New York allowed Hollywood to develop its own particular culture, which the New York print media characterized as superficial – a town filled with young and beautiful, but lazy and ignorant individuals who were seeking an easy way to achieve fame and fortune, a claim that was perhaps not far from the truth. The creation of the first fan magazine, *Motion Picture Story Magazine*, in 1911 (Internet archive, 2021) set in motion an industry that focused on youth to foster consumer desire that still thrives today.

Finally, the camera and the cinematography it produced generated anxiety and publicity because of the way in which they had the ability to magnify any facial imperfections or signs of old age. Promoted by the fan magazines, the very young "Baby Stars" with their smooth, unblemished skin were therefore ideal for the camera and the early days of Hollywood. These young starlets fulfilled Hollywood's image as a 'dream factory.' It was understood that the young stars, especially females, had to begin their careers in

their teens (age 16 or 17), which was seen as the ideal age even if these young starlets had a very short career of only 5-7 years. The endless marketing opportunities offered through Hollywood's dream factory were tapped into by the advertising industry. Popular magazines of the 1910s-1920s, and particularly Hollywood fan magazines, promoted youthfulness itself as an advantageous state that could ensure continued health, beauty and employment, while those who fit the negative model of aging (becoming old and frail) were at risk of being left behind by 'modern' society. Heather Addison argues that the popular fan magazines of the time may have been even more instrumental than Hollywood in creating the 'cult of youth' that generated societal values which reflected the "*cultural imperialism of youth.*" Ageism became the norm.

Fighting back against the ageism of Hollywood's dominant cinema

While the average age for Hollywood stars increased somewhat over time since the early 1900s by approximately 8 years, the average age for female actors remained young after the early days of cinema. Estimates vary, but according to a list published in *Motion Picture Magazine*, the average age of female stars in 1917 was 24.6, while males were on average 33.9 years of age (Addison, 2006).

Robert Fleck and F. Andrew Hanssen's 2012 research, *Persistence and change in age-specific gender gaps*, examined gender and age in US feature films produced between 1920 and 2011. Statistics from their research are only slightly different from those of the 1917 fan magazines. Based on two data sets: The Internet Movie Data Base (IMDB) and the "Top Ten Moneymaking Stars," Fleck and Hanssen's 2012 findings indicated that over the last 90 years, the gender gap increased slightly from 1920 to 2011 with two-thirds of approximately a half-million different roles in more than 50,000 feature films during that time frame played by males (p. 1). Their conclusion: youthfulness was as important in 2011 as it was in the 1920s. Statistics from their research show that the average (and median) age of both male and female Hollywood actors has increased over time. In 1920, the average age of female actors was 31; while in 2011 it was 38. The average for male actors was 38 (Fleck & Hanssen, 2012); while in 2011 it was 45. And in 1920, the average male lead actor was 35 years old, and 42 in 2011; while the average age of female lead actors in 1920 was 26, and 35 in 2011. In the 1950s, the median age for female stars was 32-33 years, with a quarter of these roles going to stars under the age of 27 (Guo, 2016).

However, in the same article, Fleck and Hanssen point out the glaring gender biases in cinema. At the beginning of their careers women in their early 20s received 80% of the leading film roles; by age 30 it was 40%; but past age 30, women only had 20% of the leading roles, while men had 80%. However, for male actors by age 30 there are many more roles available to them than women had in their 20s, reflecting a strong gender bias that has remained in place today (Fleck & Hanssen, 2012). Their research also highlights the fact that in 2011, “the proportion of film roles played by women has actually somewhat *fallen* over time, from 40-50% of leading roles in the 1920s and 1930s to about 35% today” (p. 2). And mirroring the situation in the 1920s, not only were female actors generally younger than their male counterparts, but they had much shorter careers (p. 2).

Although the average age of female and male Oscar winning actors rose from the 1930s to the 1970s, (from 33 in the 1930s, to 37 in the 1950s, to 41 in the 1970s, while for male actors the peak age was 57 years of age in the 1950s), the Oscar winning age decreased for both male and female actors in the 2000s (Shone, 2011). However, the Oscar situation changed in 2020. An article in January 2020 in one of the *I Craze Magazine* (an online entertainment magazine), discusses the controversy in Hollywood over 2020's Academy Award nominations. In addition to another year of all male director nominees and a lack of diversity, ageism is quite apparent in the 21.6-year gender age gap for the nominees in the Best Actor and Best Supporting Actor categories. The median age for male actors was 61.3 years and 39.8 for female actors, which is in sharp contrast to the average age of Oscar nominees over the past 25-years: 48.0 for male actor nominees compared to 41.2 for female nominees.

Even though the statistics reveal the ongoing ageism within the Hollywood system, resistance has been growing over the past last fifteen years as individual actors and the media have more frequently been challenging ageism in the film industry. Currently, age 40 seems to be the cut-off age for female actors in leading roles. At that age they lose access to 75% of possible film roles for women, while on the other hand age 40 is only the midpoint of careers for male actors (Guo, 2016). The age discrepancy in Hollywood has long been a bitter reality for female actors. For example, in 2015, Maggie Gyllenhaal (at age 37) exposed the ongoing ageism she experienced by revealing that she was turned down for a romantic leading role because she was considered *too old* to play opposite the leading man who was 55 (Waxman, 2015). What she experienced however was quite common, as 30 is the average age of a

female in a romantic leading role in Hollywood films, while the age for leading men has a much wider variation – from early 20s to 60s. (Noreiga, et al, 2015). The male/female age discrimination in the film industry has also been addressed by other actors, such as Nicole Kidman and Geena Davis for many years (Child, 2015; Coder, 2018; Allen, 2018; GDIGM, 2020).

In order to eliminate ageism in Hollywood and the additional age discrimination faced by women over 40, women also need to increase their power in the industry by gaining more access behind the camera – specifically in producing, directing and writing. The *Annenberg Inclusion Initiative in California* has been “documenting inclusion and diversity in the top 100 films [from each year], since 2007”. It should be noted that while there are categories for gender, race/ethnicity, LGBTQ, disability, age categories are not always included in all of their analysis. Statistics from the *2020 Annenberg Inclusion Initiative Annual Report* point to a lack of representation by women in these positions.

The following statistics are from their 2019 report (published in 2020), “a total of 4,451 characters were coded across the top 100 movies of 2019 in the US.” Statistics are as follows and are for 2019 unless otherwise indicated:

- 1) **Character age by gender in top-grossing films from 2019:** “Males: children (0-12yrs)=55.6%; teens (13-20=50.8%; young adult (21-39=61.2%; adults (40 yrs and older=74.6%. Females: children (0-12 yrs)=44.4%; teens (13-20 yrs=49.2%; young adults (21-39 yrs= 38.8%; **adults 40 yrs and older=25.4%.**”
- 2) **Gender of characters 40 years of age and older in 2007, 2013 and 2019:** “**2007: Males=77.9% and females 22.1%; 2013: Males=78.4% and females 21.6%; 2019: Males: 74.6% and females 25.4%.**”
- 3) **Gender and age in speaking roles:** “A full 66% of *speaking or named characters* were male and 34% were female. This calculates into a gender ratio of 1.9 males to every 1 female. The percentage of female-identified speaking characters in 2019 are not different for 2018 (33.1%) or 2007 (29.9%) **[But only 25.4% of women 40 years of age or older had speaking roles.]**”
- 4) **Gender and age in action films and animation:** “Only 28% of all speaking characters in actions films were girls and women, which was not meaningfully different from 2018 (29%) but was notably higher than 2007 (20%). A similar pattern emerged for female characters in animation (2019=33.3%, 2007=20.9%).”
- 5) **Age breakdown summary for females:** “Women only filled 38.8% of speaking roles among 21-39 year olds. **The findings were even more dire for women 40 years of age or older, as they only held a quarter of those roles cast within this age range. The percentage of women 40 years of age or older in 2019 (25.4%) does not practically differ from 2018 (25%) or 2007 (22.1%).**”
- 6) **Age breakdown for females (details):** “17% of females were under 20, 22% were in their 20s, 31% were in their 30s, 16% were in their 40s, **8% were in their 50s, and 6% were in their 60s or older.**”

- 7) **Age breakdown for males (details):** “10% of males were under 20, 11% were in their 20s, 32% were in their 30s, 26% were in their 40s, 12% were in their 50s, and 9% were in their 60s or older.”
- 8) **Leading roles:** “The percentage of girls/women as leads and co leads was at an all-time high in 2019 (43% of films). Although this point statistic does not differ from 2018 (39% of films), it is fully 23 percentage points higher than 2007 (20% of films).” However, only 3% of films from 2019 featured female leads/co-leads who were 45 years of age or older at the time of theatrical release (and only 1% of these roles were held by a woman of colour). “The percentage of films with women 45 years of age or older in leading or co-leading roles decreased from 2018 (11%) to 2019 (3%).” In 2007 the percentage women 45 years or older had 1% of leading or co leading roles.
- 9) **Age discrepancies in male and female actors:** “Major female characters are younger than major male characters. 21% of major female characters were under 20, 22% were in their 20s, 27% were in their 30s, 14% were in their 40s, 8% were in their 50s, and 9% were in their 60s. In both samples, female characters experience a precipitous drop from their 30s to their 40s, and few women age into their 60s.”

Behind the camera (by gender/no data for age): A total of 1518 individuals worked above the line as directors, writers and producers across the 100 top-grossing films of 2019. Only 22.3% of all these top leadership positions were filled with women.”

- 1) **Directors:** “112 directors were attached to the 100 top-grossing movies of 2019. 89.3% ($n=100$) were male, while only 12/112 of these directors were women (10.7%), which was significantly higher than 2018 (4.5%) and 2007 (2.7%). 2019 was the highest number and percentage of women directors across the 13-year sample. Ten of the 12 women directors in 2019 did not appear previously in our sample of top-grossing helmers.”
 “Across 1,300 movies in 2019, only 70 directing jobs were filled by women. Some women worked more than once, bringing the total number of individual women directors to 57. In comparison, 696 unique male directors worked across the 13-year time frame. This computed to a gender ratio of 12.2 men hired to every 1 woman.”
- 2) **Screenwriters:** “A total of 294 individuals penned the 100 top-grossing films of 2019. A full 80.6% ($n=237$) of screenwriters were men and only 19.4% ($n=57$) were women. The percentage of women screenwriters in 2019 was significantly higher (5 percentage points) than in 2018 (14.4%) or 2007 (11.2%).”
- 3) **Producers:** Almost a quarter of all **producers** (24.3% [$n=270$]) were women across the 100 top movies of 2019. No differences were observed over time (2018=21.1%, 2007=20.5%).

Other institutions, such as the *Institute on Gender in Media* (GDIGM), have also examined Hollywood’s gendered ageism. In 2004, Geena Davis set up the *Institute on Gender in Media* (GDIGM), fiscally sponsored by Mount Saint Mary’s University, in Los Angeles, California. According to their mission statement: “the Institute is the only research-based organization working collaboratively within the entertainment industry to create gender balance, foster inclusion and reduce negative stereotyping in family entertainment media” (GDIGM, 2020). In 2019, the GDIGM conducted a global study in partnership with TENA, analyzing the top 30 grossing films in 2019 from the US, UK, France and Germany in order to

examine “representation of older adults, with a specific focus on women ages 50+ in entertainment media” (GDIGM, 2020). “The final dataset included 32 films with 1235 leading, supporting and minor characters in these films. More specifically, the dataset includes 36 leading/co-leading characters (referred to as ‘leading characters’), 472 supporting characters, and 727 minor characters” (GDIGM, 2020).

As part of their research, they applied *The Ageless Test* to determine if women 50 years of age or older are represented as having “fully realized lives rather than serving as scenery in younger people’s stories” (GDIGM, 2020). The *Ageless Test* had two stipulations in order to pass the test. Each film that was analyzed must have:

- “At least one female character who is 50+ who matters and is tied into the plot in such a way that their removal would have significant effect.”
- “That [female] character must be presented in humanizing ways and not reduced to ageist stereotypes.”

They GDIGM produced a report of their findings: *Frail, frumpy and forgotten: A report on the movie roles of women of age*. The study “examined how entertainment media contributes to ageism by erasing older adults and presenting them in stereotypical ways in the top grossing films of 2019 in Germany, France, the UK and the US.” The following are some of the findings from that study:

- “Female characters make up only 25.3% of characters over 50, but 0% of females age 50+ in these films had leading roles.”
- 46.8% of films had a stereotyped female character age 50+, while 28.2% had no female character age 50+ at all (GDIGM, 2020)
- “Female characters 50+ are four times more likely than male characters 50+ to be shown as: “*senile* (16.1% vs 3.5%); seven times more likely to be depicted as homebound (16.1% vs 2.4%); four times more likely to be portrayed as *feeble* (19.4% vs 5.9%); and four times more likely to be shown as *frumpy* (19.4 % vs 4.7%) than men.”
- Female characters 50+ are more than twice as likely to be shown as unattractive than male characters age 50+ (29.0% compared to 12.9%).

Findings from the ‘Ageless Test’:

- “Only 1 in 4 films passed the *Ageless Test* by having a non-stereotypical female character age 50+ “
- “Characters age 50+ are under-represented in the most popular films when compared to the broader population (21.8% compared with 28%)”

- “One-in-three (35.3%) of characters under 50 are female compared with one-in-four (25.3%) characters 50+. This means that when audiences see female characters on the screen she is more likely to be a younger woman.”
- “While a small percentage of characters (0.3%) are depicted as gender non-conforming in films in this study, none of these characters are ages 50+. This is a complete erasure of older gender non-conforming adults in popular films.”
- “Characters under 50 are more than twice as likely to be cast in leading roles than characters 50+ (1.8% compared with 0.8%).”
- “No women ages 50+ appeared in leading roles in the top-grossing films in the study, while 2 men age 50+ were featured as leads.”
- “Characters ages 50+ are more likely to be shown in supporting roles than younger characters (46.5% compared with 35.1%).”
- “Characters ages 50+ constitute 16.9% of screen time in the films [they] analyzed.”
- “Characters ages 50+ speak 21.8% of the time that characters are speaking in the film.”
- Older adults in popular films are commonly depicted in stereotypical, degrading ways tied to age. Over half (56.9%) of characters 50+ are depicted with at least one stereotype, with two stereotypes on average
- Mental stereotypes depicted by older characters found in these films include: stubborn (32.8%), cranky (31.9%), intolerant or bigoted (10.3%), feeble (9.5%), senile (6.9%), stingy (5.2%).
- Emotional stereotypes depicted by older characters found in these films include: lonely (15.5%), socially inactive (10.3%), depressed (5.2%)
- Physical stereotypes depicted by older characters found in these films include: physically inactive (12.8%), sickly (6.9%), homebound (6.0%), dependent on others (4.3%)
- Appearance stereotypes depicted by older characters found in these films include: physically unattractive (17.2%); frumpy (8.6%), ‘not at all fashionable’ (17.2%)
- Sexuality: “Characters under 50 are more likely to have at least one sexual partner than characters 50+ (16.6% compared with 9.5%). “
- Sexuality: “Among characters 50+, male characters are more likely go have at least one sexual partner than female characters 50+ (10.6% compared with 6.5%).”
- Sexuality: “Characters under 50 are 3 times more likely than characters 50+ to be depicted in a sex scene (8.4% compared with 2.6%). They found no difference by gender in sex scenes for characters 50+.”

Unfortunately, the *cult of youth* still prevails as Hollywood’s most dominant discourse, endorsing a pervasive ageism with a strongly gendered bias both on and off screen. In addition to the superhero movies and youth-based dramas or romantic comedies, the theme of youthful immortality is a noticeable element in a number of films that include films in the vampire genre (i.e. the *Twilight* series [2008-2012]), and to a lesser degree, in certain sci-fi films, such as *In Time* (2011). During the promotion of this film about a dystopian future in which the poor die at 25 while the wealthy remain 25 forever as long as they have enough money to ‘buy time’ that will extend their lives indefinitely, 25-year-old actor Amanda Seyfried emphasized the importance of being young in Hollywood. The following statement reflects the

internalization of the ideology of youth perpetuated in Hollywood that persuades actors to try and maintain a youthful image at all cost:

“Why can’t we all stay 25 forever? That’s exactly what we’re all trying to do in Hollywood, all of us. Some of us have gone under the knife to preserve our youth, some of us just think about it. Some of us are just scared of it. We look at ourselves and go: ‘how do I keep that wrinkle from forming? It can become an obsession’” (Shone, 2011).

There is also an emerging technological trend in Hollywood that may change the future of acting (and actors) and film entertainment itself. Currently, innovations in CGI (computer-generated images) VFX (virtual reality) have developed the very popular effect of *de-aging*, which is used to de-age actors either to a younger or older version of themselves in post-production, rather than generate the effect through costumes, make-up, camera techniques, or the use of another actor altogether. The first major use of this technology was in “*X-Men: The Last Stand*,” a superhero film that was released in 2006 (Welk, 2019). Since then, CGI VFX has been applied in a number of Hollywood films, often to create versions of an actor/character’s younger self in flashbacks sequences, but quite recently de-aging technology was applied to characters throughout an entire film in Scorsese’s *The Irishman* (2019), with some degree of success. Sensing the continuing direction in Hollywood on youth, an earlier version of the recent CGI de-aging trend was utilized by Marlon Brando (1924-2004) toward the end of his career. Having a rather visionary perspective on current film trends, Brando sought out assistance from special effects technicians who were experimenting with early versions of VRX in order to create an animated 3D version of his face for future film use after his death (Ranama, 2019).

In addition to applying CGI de-aging technology for cinematic narrative purposes, it is also used as a cosmetic tool, often referred to in Hollywood as “digital beauty.” (Smith, J, 2019). Today, instead of enduring painful facelifts and constant Botox injections to maintain a youthful appearance, de-aging technology can achieve that same, if not better, effect for actors in post-production. But this advancing technology also raises a number of concerns and ethical issues for actors, their audiences, and society in general. In an article written for the *National Post* in 2019, Justine Smith points out that: “Attaining perfection has never been so accessible, and a future Hollywood populated only by fresh-faced 25-year-olds seems like an especially strange dystopian possibility.” But what will that future hold for the older adult actor on and off screen? Will there even be a place for older adults at all in this world?

Hollywood and the 'cult of youth'

Today, youth remains the focus of Hollywood film with the objective of obscuring the reality of older age and aging. This is also easily achieved by the prevalence of plots and themes that are focused on youth (or to a lesser degree, middle age), which translates into the subsequent lack of older people in any kind of substantial film role. When older actors are seen in films, whether playing a rare leading role or cast in a supportive or secondary role, they depict characters which too often reflect ageist stereotypes. Secondary and supportive film examples include: *Meet the Fockers*, 2004 (silly and stupid); and *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*, 1989 (demented, deaf, and incompetent). *Grumpy Old Men*, (1993), is an example of a film representing other ageist stereotypes of older people with characters who are cantankerous, lonely and boring; while *About Schmidt* (2002) and *Something's Gotta Give* (2003) present ageist and misogynist representations in both leading and secondary characters. Finally, having actors play characters 10-15+ years older than their actual age further obscures the reality of aging and old age.

With youth the focus of mainstream narrative films, older actors have found they have limited options for work as they do not fit into the plots that Hollywood has long produced. According to Chivers (2011): "*Growing* old means one thing in contemporary culture and *looking* old means another" (p. 8). As a result, with old age interpreted in this way, when Hollywood films depict old age they often utilize illness (frequently dementia), disability or impending death narratives to convey the "social burden of growing old" (Amir Cohen-Shalev, 2009 & 2012), with films such as *Head Full of Honey* (2018), *The Notebook* (2004), and *Iris* (2001). A number of independent US, UK and Canada films also feature older leading characters in films in which dementia plays either a central or secondary role, including *Still Alice* (2014 - US independent film, *Still Mine* (2012 – Canada); *The Iron Lady* (2011 – UK); and *Away from Her* (2007 - Canada).

As a result, because of the Hollywood perception that looking old means frailty and illness, which then translates into being old (an undesirable trait), actors working in Hollywood are allowed to grow old as long as they manage to disguise evidence of aging, which vary by gender that include:

- 1) Trying to hide their age with *anti-aging* products and services that include cosmetic or surgical and non-surgical means (such as Botox, chemical peel, microderabrasion, and collagen

injections) is a strategy primarily utilized by female actors (Addison, 2006). But even when actors have youth enhancing cosmetic surgery, they often struggle to find any film work at all as they age, especially in romantic leading roles (discussed above). But while the pressure to look young is most strongly exerted on female actors who often resort to cosmetic surgery or Botox to preserve a more youthful image, different options are available for their male counterparts (Chivers, 2011; Gravagne, 2013).

- 2) If actors do not choose surgery, they can play roles that often are usually focused on aging, usually depicting old age as frailty and decline, and often utilizing illness, disability or impending death narratives with films such as *Away from Her* (2007) and *Iris* (2001) that have dementia as their theme (Chivers, 2011).
- 3) “Acting young” is an option that generally applies to males. Male actors often try to emulate youthfulness through action roles that emphasize their physical fitness and strength. For example, a number of older male actors from the 1980s have starred in action film sequels in which they did the majority of the action sequences themselves, reinforcing the “new American myth of super agers” (Rahnama, 2019) and replicating the model of ‘*successful aging*’ (Rowe & Kahn, 1997). These actors and their films include: Harrison Ford (age 64) in *The Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008); Sylvester Stallone, (age 73) in *Rambo: Last Blood* (2019); and Arnold Schwarzenegger (age 72) when he played the lead role in *Terminator: Dark Fate*. However, these male actors, such as Ford (*Indiana Jones*) are willing to *look* “old” and reveal their actual age, as long as they appear to *act* “young.”
- 4) But “The most successful way to age is to appear not to age at all,” and to do this, actors must turn to the services and products of the anti-aging industry (Chivers, 2011).

By developing and nurturing the image of youth as the ideal both on and off screen, Hollywood has in turn fed the anti-aging industry that includes Botox, *cosmeceuticals*, and cosmetic surgery and the pharmaceutical industry), as well as the cult of the celebrity. And by positioning older characters in the background of film narratives – in supportive roles or cameo roles, old age slips into *invisibility*, further reinforcing ageism.

Breaking away from the ‘cult of youth’ narrative

There are of course exceptions to the ‘cult of youth’ narrative of Hollywood. Pamela Gravagne (2013) suggests that although ageism is represented and nurtured through contemporary popular film, it also has the potential to act as a platform of resistance which can transform societal attitudes as well as our own lived experience of age and aging. Although mainstream and even independent films most often feature older actors in starring roles that specifically deal with aging but often in the context mentioned above of dementia and frailty, even within Hollywood itself there are a limited number of films where the topic of age plays a central role and not as a narrative of decline. For example, in the past decade Hollywood has produced a small number of comedies and dramas, and even romantic dramas and/or comedies with an older cast that appeal to their older audiences. Films such as *The Intern* (2015) address

the value that older workers and the experience they offer in the workplace; *The Irishman* (2019), with its CGI VFX technology, is a somewhat shallow reflection by a mob hitman about his life and connection with the Teamsters Union; *The Book Club* (2018) focuses on love and sexuality in the context of a book club of older women.

But, as would be expected, the majority of even the more 'positive' of these films focus on leading male characters. And too, comedies are easily at risk of falling into ageism, with jokes that are at the expense of the older characters, even in animated films such as *The Croods* (2013) with stereotypical ageist 'humour' mocking the grandmother of the clan or in films like the cult classic, *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation* (1989), where one of the grandmothers is ridiculed because of her hearing and cognitive impairments. In addition, although exceptions exist for female actors (e.g. Sally Field was 65 in *Lincoln*, 2012; Meryl Streep [age 63] and Tommy Lee Jones [age 66] in the romantic comedy, *Hope Springs*, 2012), the few roles that do exist for female actors as they age usually demand that they play a character much older (or sometimes younger) than their actual age. A good example is illustrated by *Mean Girls* (2003) where Amy Poehler (age 32) plays the mother of a 16-year-old daughter, while her daughter is played by Rachael McAdams, whose real-life age at the time was 26.

There are also Canadian examples of independent films that depict a non-stereotypical version of older adults. The film *Still Mine* (2012) is a very good example. The plot is based on an 89-year-old man (played by 73-year-old James Cromwell) fighting with his municipal bureaucracy over building regulations as he tries to build a new home for himself and his wife (Geneviève Bujold, who at age 70, plays a woman in her 80s). Although his wife has early-stage dementia, her illness is not at the centre of this film. Instead, the movie is a love story of two people in the last stage of their lives together, within a plot that illustrates the generational conflict between the older man and a young bureaucrat over the new building codes that don't match the older man's knowledge and experience. However, once again because 'younger' actors are playing roles of characters 15+ years older than the actual age of the actor, an accurate portrayal of 'old age' is not represented on screen.

While dominant cinema still has had a tendency to favour fast-paced physical action over slower paced narratives, there are films outside of that formula that attempt to oppose stereotypes of old age which include: Clint Eastwood's *The Old Man and a Gun* (2018) and *Gran Torino* (2009) (albeit both with

a large number of action sequences); *Quartet* (2012); *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (2012); *Hope Springs* (2012); *Something's Gotta Give* (2003); and *About Schmidt* (2002). The UK-production, *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, presents a cast of older people whose retirement plans have been outsourced to India. In addition to *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, and *Calendar Girls* (2003), the UK has produced a number of other films with older actors that also defy the stereotypes of older age: *The Second Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (2015), (complete with Richard Gere as the 'silver fox'); *Quartet* (2012); and *Philomena* (2013). These films come out of a tradition of "British heritage cinema" and at their core there is a respectful sensitivity towards older age that feature "a genteel aging protagonist" who represents a positive and intelligent vision of female old age (Dolan, 2020).

Additionally, films such as *Something's Gotta Give* (2003), *Hope Springs* (2012), and *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (2012) depict the lives of older adults in a way that challenge social conventions by featuring older adults in intimate relationships, questioning the stereotypical belief that intimacy and sexuality are not part of the lives of older people. However, even though there are stories about aging and old age that are interesting and meaningful, such as *Quartet* (2012) and *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (2011), it should be pointed out that the majority of these films are either independent productions (not Hollywood) or come from countries other than the US. Finally, films that portray older adults in intimate and/or romantic relationships too often contain covert and overt sexism and ageism, if not outright misogyny, as well as the presence of class and white male entitlement. The above-mentioned *About Schmidt* and *Something's Gotta Give* (where there is a 34-year age difference between Jack Nicholson (63) and Amanda Peet (29), who are engaged in a sexual relationship in the beginning of the film) are prime examples of this.

Hollywood has also continued its long tradition of producing 'May to December' romantic comedies and dramas, with age gaps of 20-30+ years the between the leading male actor and the female co-lead. As well as *Something's Gotta Give* (2003), further examples are numerous and include: the James Bond franchise, where there has usually been a 10-20+year age gap between the various actors who played Bond and the 'Bond' girls; *Crazy Heart* (2009) a 27-year age gap between Jeff bridges (58) and Maggie Gyllenhaal (31); *Magic in the Moonlight* (2014) a 28-year age gap between Colin Firth (54)

and Emma Stone (26); and *Lost in Translation* (2003), with its 35-year age gap between Scarlett Johansson who was 17 when she played opposite Bill Murray who was 52.

There are rare exceptions of films that have a reverse age gap, but unlike 'May-December' films with the older man/younger women relationship that pass unnoticed and are largely accepted by audiences in general, the reverse age gap films are thematically more complex and often immersed in controversy (i.e. *Harold and Maude* (1971) with a 52-year age gap between Ruth Gordon [Maude] who was 79 and Bud Cort [Harold] who was in his early 20s); and *The Reader* (2008) with a 20+ year age gap between Hana (Kate Winslet) whose character is in her mid 30s and Michael (David Kross) whose character is 15. And too, older males/actors who are in relationships with younger women in romantic comedies or dramas are often portrayed as charming and desirable – 'silver foxes' – while there is no equivalent flattering term for an older female actor in a romantic/sexual relationship with a younger man. Instead, 'cougar' is the term commonly used, insinuating that the female character is either predatory, humorous and/or pathetic.

Despite those issues, it is still important to recognize the importance of the financial success of these films, as box office returns have a major influence on the types of films that are produced and screened in movie theatres. Profit making films are key in Hollywood. Although blockbuster superhero movies are still popular among young adults, (especially young men), and make large sums of money for the film industry, even prior to the arrival of COVID-19 younger audience attendance at movie theatres had decreased in the last decade, while the older audience of baby-boomers had increased (Dolan, 2020). However, with a few exceptions (such as the action movies and the Clint Eastwood's films that have been mentioned previously) the marketing possibilities of the emerging 'silver' audience have generally been overlooked by Hollywood, revealing in another way the embedded ageist structure of dominant US cinema (Dolan, 2020). Nevertheless, aside from the profitability factor of 'silver' audience films for production and distribution companies, movies have the ability to resist the stereotypes of old age, even if the majority of these films are most often produced outside of the boundaries of Hollywood.

Hopefully independent film companies (and Hollywood) will build on their previous successes in the 'silver' film world and expand by producing movies that include interesting and diverse older characters, and not only in films with a thematic focus of older age and aging, but films with a variety of

themes and across genres. In order for ageist stereotypes to end, aging has to be realized as a normal part of life, and older adults have to be portrayed, not as 'old' people, but as people – individuals with varied interests, desires and capabilities, no different from people from any other generation. Drawing from the ideas and perceptions reflected in the 'silver' films of independent film productions, combined with resistance from individuals and institutions alike to the ageism that has been promoted through popular culture, dominant cinema could turn its lens to a representation of older age in more respectful and multidimensional ways in the future and help to eliminate ageism.

The anti-aging industry

"For now at least, resisting age rather than ageism greases more palms, oils more deals, and turns more dollars" (Gilleard & Higgs, 2000, p.71).

Inadvertently or intentionally (depending on the academic perspective), the model of *successful aging*, has been reinforced through the historical impact of Hollywood and the 'cult of youth,' which has fostered the notion of *anti-aging*. Picked up by the dominant media and appropriated by the *aging enterprise* and the "aging industry" (Calasanti et al., 2012; McHugh, 2003), the *anti-aging and aging industries* comprise all aspects of the commodification of aging including private health care options focused on age-related health concerns, (e.g. private hip and knee replacement surgeries, paid companions for older adults, etc.), as well as retirement homes and communities; travel companies; fashion; and legal services (Estes, 1993). The aging industry "includes a large segment of the \$900 billion medical-industrial complex [that] assures that the needs of the aged will be processed and treated as a commodity" (Estes, 1993: 292-3). In the US, Estes (2001) points out that aging and American old age policies are determined by four primary social processes: "(a) the biomedicalization of aging, (b) the commodification of aging, (c) the privatization of old age policy, and (d) the rationalization of old age policy" (p. 1). And while Canada has not fully embraced the route of complete privatization of old age policy, the commodification of aging is big business indeed.

With the biomedicalization of aging as the root of the 1st model of aging focused on frailty and decline, it is no surprise that it is deeply embedded in the *anti-aging industry*. At the same time, the "*cultural imperialism of youth*" (Laws, 1995, p. 113) that is entrenched in the consciousness of North Americans and much of the Western world, reinforces the belief that old age should be avoided

regardless of the consequences, while association with older people is discouraged based on the grounds that doing so would “devalue” the younger person in contact with the aging individual (Calasanti, 2007, p. 337). These attitudes are sustained by a popular media that continues to bow to the worship of youthfulness while denigrating aging through a variety of methods including: the use of ageist language (Bonnesen & Burgess, 2004; Fealy et al., 2012) ageist and anti-aging advertisements (Carrigan, & Szmigin, 2000; McHugh, 2003), and popular film and television that either render aging invisible or degrade older adults (Chivers, 2012; Blaikie, 1999).

In this way, with aging under the domain of biomedicine, the aging industry is afforded endless opportunities for the promotion of new products, where in fact corporate profit, not improved health is the priority (Estes & Binney, 1989). Anti-aging ads and websites fuel the concept of “agelessness” by promoting surgeries, diets, exercise regimes, and various formulas to eliminate signs of aging. Findings from an academic study and analysis of 96 anti-aging websites, combined with 19 in-depth interviews with men and women between the ages of 42 and 61, show that this branch of the anti-aging industry relies on the biomedical model of aging to sell its products by presenting “old age as unacceptable,” but manageable and even avoidable through the consumption of anti-aging products and therapies (Calasanti, et al., 2012).

The term *anti-aging* is connected to the establishment in 1993 of the American Academy of Anti-Aging Medicine (A4M) (Mykytyn, 2010). The mission statement of this biomedical organization is: “the advancement of technology to detect, prevent, and treat aging related disease and to promote research into methods to retard and optimize the human aging process” (Longevity Magazine, 2017). Although initially the focus of anti-aging medicine was to optimize the aging process through less biomedical means such as diet, exercise and natural supplements (Hurd Clarke, 2011), that quickly shifted to promote an anti-aging commercial and clinical industry that promoted anti-aging products, programs and treatments marketed as ways to prevent, slow or even reverse aging (Binstock, Fishman & Johnson, 2006). And according to Dr. Robert Katz, (one of the co-founders of the A4M), the ultimate purpose of anti-aging medicine is to “never grow old” (Kuczynski, 1998, cited in Clarke Hurd, 2011, p. 74). While definitions may still vary about the exact nature of the anti-aging industry, Mehlman, et al. (2004) supply a comprehensive definition that consists of five categories of products and services including: “cosmetic

treatments and surgery; exercise and therapy; food and beverages; vitamins, minerals, and supplements; and cosmetics and cosmeceuticals" (p. 305).

Financially well-off baby-boomers reaching retirement age present a prime marketing prospect for the aging industry which includes retirement communities and developments, financial planning and investment services, travel companies, pharmaceutical and cosmetic corporations, private cosmetic surgery clinics and services, and fashion and media conglomerates (Coupland, 2009; Bayer, 2005; McHugh, 2003). In the retirement industry, for example, advertising is devoid of any of the negative images of "unsuccessful" aging. Images of vitality and independence are key to advertisers - successfully aging seniors may have grey hair, but their bodies nevertheless still appear youthful and energetic (McHugh, 2003). Loneliness and physical and mental decline are banished, replaced by a vision of seniors blissfully living out their "golden years" in pursuit of fun-filled leisure activities, volunteer work, travel and happiness. In the world of *successful aging*, old age has been banished, replaced by an eternal youth that awaits them in the gated retirement community of "Sun Valley" with other immortals just like themselves (McHugh, 2003).

Although the marketing of middle age is not a new phenomenon Gilleard & Higgs (2007) point out that what is new is the marketing of middle age (and the retirement years of the *third age*) as the start of a new stage of life beginning in middle age – *a way to reinvent oneself*. To accompany these new life changes, products, such as self-help books, and a vast array of anti-aging products and cosmetics, have been marketed that promise a way to "ward off the signs of old age" (Gilleard & Higgs, 2000). It is this "appropriation by the market" that Gilleard & Higgs (2007) propose links the 1960s youth culture with the baby boomers of today (p. 21).

This "appropriation by the market" can be seen in websites and print media, such as senior's magazines, (e.g. *Zoomer* and BC's *Senior Living*), that proliferate with ads promoting retirement complexes; investment planning; insurance, banking, and home security services; holiday travel and cruise vacations; supplements and vitamins, and an assortment of health products, including mobility devices. Calasanti, et al. (2012) point out that anti-aging ads and websites take a different tactic to promote surgeries, diets, exercise regimes, and various formulas to eliminate signs of aging. From findings based on their analysis of 96 anti-aging websites, combined with 19 in-depth interviews with men

and women between the ages of 42 and 61, they show that this element of the anti-aging industry relies on the biomedical model of aging to sell its products by presenting “old age as unacceptable” but manageable and even avoidable through the consumption of anti-aging products and therapies.

Employing the model of *anti-aging*, the aging industry builds on the fear of illness and death generated by the negative aging model, combined with *successful aging* to sell products or services targeted at older adults. Integrating the belief that aging is a disease that can be “cured,” (de Grey, 2014) with societal attitudes that reflect the dominance of *the cult of youth*, the anti-aging industry promises “age-defying” solutions to the “problem” of old age, suggesting that they can slow (or even stop) the aging process (Calasanti et al, 2012). This perspective is reflected in some genres of popular culture – both film and TV. For example, *Altered Carbon* (Netflix, 2018-2020), is a sci-fi TV series about being able to buy immortality through wealth – switching your consciousness/ mind to another “sleeve” or body, while the film *In Time* (2011) suggests that youthful immortality is possible, but again, only with the required amount of wealth to ‘buy time’ and the end goal – immortality.

Additionally, because aging itself has a negative connotation, ‘news’ articles can also be found that refer to aging as a disease with a possibility of a “cure” thereby supporting the notion of anti-aging (Patton, in Abraham, 2009). For example, in a 2009 article in the *Globe and Mail*, “The quest for the test tube of youth,” Carolyn Abraham examines the notion of *anti-aging*, focusing on genetic research designed to extend human lifespan in a healthy manner. Although the article warns the public to be aware of the difference between the “pseudo-scientific anti-aging industry and the genuine science of aging” by pointing out that there is no such thing as *anti-aging* – death is after all inevitable for all of us – she nevertheless concludes her article with comments from Noel Patton, an American entrepreneur and researcher who disagrees (Abraham, 2009, p. 7). Patton, who is marketing an Astragalus treatment to “immortalize” human cells, believes that “a cure for aging” will eventually be discovered (p. 7).

However, categorizing age in this way also further stigmatizes older adults who cannot (or will not) appear to look or act young. But for other individuals, believing in an ageless self feeds the desire to *look* (and subsequently *feel* younger) younger than one’s years, and provides numerous potential consumers for the cosmetic and plastic surgery industries. Hair dyes and cosmetics for example, mask grey hair and attempt to hide wrinkles, while facelifts purportedly provide older individuals with a new

image that is more consistent with how they really feel about themselves (Calasanti, et al., 2012; Hurd Clarke, 2011). This mirrors Sally Chivers (2011) research on aging in popular culture and the aging industry, which emphasizes that there is a difference between *being old* and *looking old* on screen:

Growing old means one thing in contemporary culture and looking old means another;” for the anti-aging industry and on the silvering screen, the distinction between the two is elided. Looking old means being old, which in this discourse, means being ill. To age visibly means to admit to ill health. By this logic, healthy aging is an imitation of youth and so images that reveal wrinkles suggest ill health (p. 8).

Chivers also argues that the dominant cinema promotes ageism on and off screen. Because Hollywood values youth at the box office and maintains control of popular cinema, its films promote an ageism that is both implicit and often explicit through removal of evidence of older age and aging on screen.

Chivers goes on to suggest that obscuring the reality of older age and aging is easily achieved in film, first of all by the prevalence of plots and themes that are focused on youth, (or to a lesser degree, middle age), translating into the subsequent lack of older people in any kind of substantial film role. Secondly, casting older actors in auxiliary or supportive film roles rather than central roles continues to remove evidence of age and aging, further reinforcing ageism. And by positioning older characters in the background of film narratives – in supportive roles or cameo roles, old age slips into invisibility. And by developing and nurturing the image of youth as the ideal both on and off screen, Hollywood has in turn fed the anti-aging industry that includes Botox, *cosmeceuticals*² and cosmetic surgery and the pharmaceutical industry, as well as the cult of the celebrity (Gravage, 2013). Over time, although plots and themes may have changed, the “idea that age is physical and physically demeaning, has not” (Chivers, 2011, p. xvii).

Nevertheless, although the media and popular culture industries often promote a perspective that denies physical or mental disability in old age, this perspective is not consistent. Instead, the dominant media seems to take a schizoid position by either reinforcing the belief that frailty does not need to be part of life by showcasing individuals who are still physically strong and mentally capable in their 90s, or by presenting news features that suggest that dementia and mental decline and dementia are inevitable.

² “The term *cosmeceuticals* combines the terms cosmetic and pharmaceutical and refers to a topical skin treatment formulated to improve personal appearance, promising added benefit beyond those afforded by traditional cosmetics or moisturizers” (Bayer, 2005).

The negative point of view can be seen in the popular media in scaremongering newspaper articles and TV programs that suggest that dementia is on the increase. Combined with ageist humour directed at declining memory (e.g. birthday cards or buttons with phrases such as, "Of all the things I've lost, I miss my mind the most"), these kinds of popular media images and text implicitly reinforce the equally damaging model of aging as disease and decrepitude (Bonnesen, et al, 2004, p.123).

Language found in print media further reinforces ageism and the negative model of aging by supporting the model of aging as frailty and physical and mental decline. Popular media articles couch ageism in phrases of bodily deterioration and decay, seamlessly sliding into newspaper and magazine articles that are not necessarily focused on aging (Fealy, et al., 2012; Murtha, 2009). For example, in a short *Globe and Mail* article about swimming as physiotherapy, negative depictions of aging and feeble bodies flourish (Murtha, 2009). The ageist language provides descriptions of aging bodies that include: "gnarled arthritic hands", "third knobby-kneed octogenarian, and "arthritic knees and hips," (Murtha, 2009, p. L6), strengthening the negative model of aging as physical decline and decay.

The theme of aging as frailty and decline is also still featured prominently in the dominant cinema. Chivers (2011) points out that when older actors or aging are occasionally featured in Hollywood films, they are usually depicted within the context of a model created in order to reassure the audience that they are still youthful. For example, films that accentuate old age often focus on a life-threatening illness or the impending death of the central character who looks back on an unsatisfied life full of regret and remorse. In addition, she emphasizes that because these films are generally produced within the Hollywood system, they support values that are more in line with the dominant political and economic system that underwrites them, with the result that by "...transforming late life into a set of encounters with illness, disability, and the need for care [the theme of these films] relates it to political economy rather than to moral economy..." (Chivers, 2011, pp. 146-7). In this way, old age has been homogenized and banished to the sidelines in popular culture, rendered invisible and without value, while hiding the more serious problems facing contemporary society.

Scholars such as Kevin McHugh (2003) also maintain that the model of *successful aging* and the secondary notion of anti-aging attached to it advance the idea of "anti-aging and agelessness, [which] are cloaked denials of decline, disease and death" (McHugh 2003, p. 165). Expanding on Cole's (1992)

notion of “bipolar ageism,” which includes both negative and positive models of aging that foster stereotypes of old age, McHugh’s argument is that while ‘successful aging’ was developed to counteract the ingrained negative way of thinking about aging as “loss and decline,” it operates within an anti-aging model that focuses on the “management” of aging and the consumption of *third age* lifestyles (p. 180).

Leonard Hayflick (2004) has a similar perspectives, calling *anti-aging* an oxymoron, arguing that “no intervention will slow, stop, or reverse the aging process in humans” (p. 573). Nevertheless, financially well-off baby-boomers reaching retirement age present a prime marketing prospect for the aging and anti-aging industries, which include retirement communities and developments, financial planning and investment services, travel companies, pharmaceutical and cosmetic corporations, private cosmetic surgery clinics and services, and fashion and media conglomerates. However, unless attitudes change about aging, it would seem that the anti-aging and aging industries are here to stay, continuing to reap large corporate profit.

In addition, the theory of agelessness has also led to the proposal by some academics that old age is merely a “cultural concept” that maintains ageism and should therefore be eliminated (Bytheway, 1995). Molly Andrews (1999), on the other hand argues that there is “a seductiveness to agelessness” as it creates a false reality that old age does not exist, thus causing us to disconnect from our own future (p. 303). And according to Kevin McHugh (2003) substituting agelessness for categories of age, reinforces ageism and fuels the commodification of aging through the various divisions of the anti-aging industry.

Looking at the influence of culture from another perspective, scholars such as Margaret Gullette (2004), Margaret Cruickshank (2003) and Laura Hurd Clark (2011) argue that, although dependent on individual societies and cultures, our aging process is shaped according to the attitudes and values of an ageist culture present in our society, consequently causing us to internalize the ideology of *aging as decline*. This viewpoint emphasizes that internalization of negative attitudes towards older age and aging takes place because we are “*aged by culture*”³ rather than by biological forces or chronological stages of aging (Gullette, 2004). As would be expected, cross-cultural research indicates that there is less internalized ageism in older adults from cultures with less ageist views (Levy & Langer, 1994). Speaking

³ The phrase “*aged by culture*” was first used by Margarett Gullette in her invited lecture: “What menopause again! After the Hormone Debacle.” Women’s Studies Research Centre (WSRC), Brandeis, Dec. 12, 2006.

from a critical feminist perspective, many of these scholars also suggest that the ageist and sexist attitudes are applied more to women than men as they age. Mike Featherstone and Mike Hepworth (2005) further point out that just as we are “aged by culture” (Gullette, 2004), in Western society aging bodies represent the demonstration of a process of loss and deterioration (p. 356).

Internalized aging stereotypes begin in childhood (DePallo, et al., 1995; Hurd Clark, 2010; Gullette, 2004, 2011) where they are then reinforced throughout the life course by sustained exposure to negative attitudes and stereotypes about older people present in North American and European society (Palmore, 1999; Levy et al., 2012; Dionigi, 2015). These attitudes and stereotypes are then subsequently internalized into negative self-stereotypes in older age (Greenberg et al. 2002; Levy, 2003).

Becca Levy and Mahzarin Banaji (2002) suggest that because these negative stereotypes apply to others for a long period of time, to a certain degree succumbing to an internalization of these negative stereotypes of aging is easy because there is no reason psychologically to guard oneself against these stereotypes (p. P203). Research also identifies other factors that influence this process of self-stereotyping including: the dominance of aging stereotypes over experience with older adults in affecting the attitudes individuals have towards old age and older individuals, (although research has also shown that experience and positive interactions with older adults can influence attitudes towards older adults and aging) (Dionigi, 2015; Funk, 2016; Babcock, 2016; Cadieux, et al., 2019), and the continual drawing on stereotypes in order to quickly and efficiently process the large amount of information that individuals encounter daily (MacCrae et al. [1994], *in* Levy & Banaji, 2002: 203; Donizetti, 2019).

As mentioned earlier, although more positive models of aging have emerged to counteract the negative biomedical model, *old age* has now been shifted into an older age category. Where previously old age may have been conceptualized as age 60+ or 65+, the *successful aging* and *third age* models are merely shifting the *old age* category into age 80-90+, where physical and mental decline occur more often (Higgs & Gilleard, 2014, 2019). However, even living to age 90+ does not prevent the pressure to age “successfully” to cease. Subsequently, despite evidence to the contrary, popular media often promotes a perspective that denies physical or mental disability in old age. For example, when focusing on the oldest old, popular media often highlight the exceptional individuals who are able to maintain a physically and mentally healthy and active life in their fourth age (e.g. 90+-year-olds running marathons, performing

aerobics, swimming, dancing, working out and engaging in thrill seeking activities, such as the bungee jumping or doing the *Edgewalk* at the CN Tower), suggesting that a robust old age is achievable for the general population (ODN, 2014; City News, 2013, CBC, 2013).

Although these kinds of images of physically healthy and engaged adults of the *fourth age* are inspiring and may help to diffuse the fear of old age and death that are entrenched in Western society (Martens, et al. 2004) and encourage individuals of all ages to become more physically active, media stories such as these nevertheless also have an underlying message that infirmity in late old age does not have to occur. Instead, the images and text suggest that good health can be achieved in the oldest-old as long as every individual takes personal responsibility for his or her own health throughout their lifetime, thereby reflecting the neoliberal ideology of choice and individual responsibility (CBC, 2013).

However, besides a denial of the process of aging, these adventurous pursuits are often only available to a specific class of elderly – those who are financially secure, making class a key factor in the concept of successful aging (Macnicol, 2015; Gilleard & Higgs, 2005a, 2005b). And while providing inspiration for an ageist society afraid of illness and mortality, these kinds of popular news features also doubly stigmatize and marginalize older adults who do not have the capacity or resources to undertake these physical challenges and who are instead frail and in ill health (Higgs & Gilleard, 2014; Rubinstein & de Medeiros 2015). By implication, these kinds of messages also indirectly “blame the victim,” suggesting that accountability for illness and disability lie solely with the individual, and not with the structural inequalities engrained in North American society (Wallace, 2014; Navarro, 2007). And as Estes, et al. (2001) pointed out decades ago, the *enterprise of aging*, often connected to research on aging, is inextricably linked to corporate interests that stand to gain from aging adults.

We live in a world saturated with a ‘cult of youth’ ideology embedded in popular culture and Western media which has fueled the commodification of aging and the related industries that reap vast profits through their anti-aging products and services. Despite the fact that the ideology of youth promotes ageism through its negative portrayal of age and aging, the impact of these influences has been underestimated. My research objectives have had the intention of identifying perceptions of age and aging circulating in Western media and popular culture with the hope of affecting change about attitudes towards aging; ultimately with the goal of reducing an ageism that is often internalized and largely

tolerated in our society. The participants in my research were quite aware of the ageism in media and popular culture and were very critical of it. Nevertheless, we live in a society that has in large part been '*Aged by popular culture.*' Further research is needed to explore the subtle ways that popular culture is able to affect us on a subconscious, as well as subliminal level. As individuals, we must do all that we can to resist ageism and the negative messages of older age and aging promoted by media, popular culture and the anti-aging industry.

However, as media and popular culture have helped to perpetuate the ageist societal attitudes that are embedded in the aging and anti-aging industries, they also share a responsibility in stopping it. Rather than continue to support the 'cult of youth' ideology and the stereotypes of older age that are promoted through these industries, media and popular culture must instead fight ageism, beginning with replacing stereotypes with the diversity that exists in older age, just as it does in the younger population. All generations consist of individuals with a variety of abilities, interests, and ideas. Like the rest of the general population, older adults come from a wide range of socioeconomic, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and express themselves through a variety of gender roles and identities. Resistance to the cult of youth and the anti-aging industry is possible.