

**The perceptions of older persons in residential care facilities regarding how they are  
portrayed in the print media**

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**Dissertation submitted in fulfillment of the requirements of the degree Magister Artium in  
Research Psychology at the North-West University,  
Potchefstroom Campus**

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**October 2010**

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the following people who have supported me in various ways throughout my research:

- Professor Vera Roos. Thank you for sharing your expertise, support and encouragement. You have provided me with a clear vision of research and your passion has inspired in me in so many ways. Thank you so much for the sincere interest that you took in my research and for always guiding me.
- The matron and participants and the residential care facility in which the research was conducted. Thank you for allowing me into your home and sharing your experiences.
- Tim Stewart for the language editing of this article.
- Karen van der Wet for the translation of the Afrikaanse opsomming.
- The North-West University for the financial support during 2010.
- My parents and sister. Thank you for your support and encouragement.
- My friends and colleagues. Thank you for all your support, motivation and for always making me positive.
- My teachers and lecturers that believed in me and that guided me throughout my life. Thank you.

## SUMMARY

### **The perceptions of older persons in residential care facilities regarding how they are portrayed in the print media**

**KEYWORDS:** older persons, perceptions of older persons, residential care facilities, print media, and stereotypical portrayal

Despite the growing numbers and valuable contributions of older individuals to society, they continue to face negative attitudes towards them. Such attitudes are largely influenced by portrayal of older persons in the media. Understanding how the media portrays older people to the public can provide significant insights into the nature of the images from which older people may make comparisons and which inform the perceptions, opinions, and attitudes of other people. There is little knowledge of perceptions of media portrayal in old age, and this study aimed to obtain insight from the point of view of older people regarding how they are portrayed in the printed media.

Qualitative research has been applied to gain insight in the older persons' perceptions. The case study method was chosen since it allowed the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of older person's perceptions regarding how they are portrayed in the media. The participants in this study consisted of nine male and 12 female individuals residing in a residential care facility. Persons between the ages of 60 and 85 were purposively chosen since they can contribute to meaningful insight regarding how they are portrayed in the print media. Data was collected by means of conducting focus group discussions and individual interviews. The use of these methods enabled dynamic interactions resulting in the production of rich, detailed information. Data was analyzed using thematic content analysis and key-word-in-context analysis. Guidelines to ensure the integrity of the findings have been applied.

The findings indicated that older persons perceive their portrayal in the media to be minimal in terms of the exposure that they receive. Older persons feel that on the seldom occasion

when they are in the media, they are presented as an isolated population separated from younger persons. The portrayal of older persons in the media is also perceived as stereotypical in the sense that older persons are presented as sick, inactive, weak and fragile. The implications of such portrayal according to older persons are that they influence intergenerational relationships and they also confirm stereotypical assumptions about older persons. Older persons feel that they rather want to be portrayed in terms of the valuable contributions that they are making to all spheres of life, despite old age. The media should thus promote positive ageing, which could contribute to the stimulation and motivation of older persons. Findings of this study also indicate that while older persons enjoy reading magazines and newspapers they are often limited to do so due to financial restrictions and physical limitations such as poor eyesight. The findings of this research of older persons perceptions regarding their portrayal in the media has implications for intergenerational relationships as well as to advertisers and marketers who are looking to appeal to the older population.

Word count: 458

## OPSOMMING

### **DIE PERSEPSIE VAN OUER PERSONE IN RESIDENSIËLE SORGFASILITEITE OOR HOE HULLE IN DIE GEDRUKTE MEDIA UITGEBEELD WORD**

**SLEUTELWOORDE:** ouer persone, persepsies van ouer persone, gedrukte media, stereotipiese uitbeelding

Ten spyte van die groeiende getalle en waardevolle bydraes van ouer persone tot die samelewing, staar hulle steeds negatiewe houdings teenoor hulle in die gesig. Sodanige houdings word hoofsaaklik beïnvloed deur die manier waarop ouer persone in die media uitgebeeld word. Begrip van hoe die media ouer mense aan die publiek uitbeeld, kan beduidende insigte lewer oor die aard van die beelde waarmee ouer mense hulleself mag vergelyk; en op grond waarvan ander mense hul persepsies, opinies en houdings vorm. Min kennis bestaan oor die persepsies van die manier waarop die media bejaardheid uitbeeld, en hierdie studie het ten doel om vanuit die oogpunt van ouer mense, insig te bekom oor ouer persone se persepsies oor hoe hulle in die gedrukte media uitgebeeld word.

Kwalitatiewe navorsing is gebruik om insig in die persepsies van ouer persone te bekom. Die gevallestudiemetode is gekies aangesien dit toelaat dat die navorser 'n grondige begrip van ouer persone se persepsies van hoe hulle in die media uitgebeeld word, kan verkry. Die deelnemers in die studie het bestaan uit nege manlike en 12 vroulike individue wat in 'n residensiële sorgfasiliteit woon. Persone tussen 60 en 85 jaar oud, is doelgerig gekies aangesien hulle waardevolle insig kan gee oor ouer persone se persepsies van hoe hulle in die gedrukte media uitgebeeld word. Data is ingesamel deur fokusgroepbesprekings te hou en individuele onderhoude te voer. Die gebruik van hierdie metodes het dinamiese interaksie moontlik gemaak wat gelei het tot die inwin van ryk, gedetailleerde inligting. Die data is met behulp van tematiese inhoudsanalise en sleutelwoord-in-konteks-analise, geanaliseer. Riglyne wat die integriteit van die bevindinge verseker het, is toegepas.

Die bevindinge dui daarop dat ouer persone se persepsie is dat hulle minimale blootstelling van die media ontvang. Ouer persone voel dat, wanneer hulle wel in die media uitgebeeld word, hulle as 'n geïsoleerde deel van die bevolking, wat van jonger persone afgesonder is, voorgestel word. Die uitbeelding van ouer persone in die media word ook as stereotiperend gesien op grond van die waarneming dat ouer persone as siek, onaktief, swak en broos uitgebeeld word. Ouer mense is verder van mening dat die implikasie van hierdie soort uitbeeldings, die verhoudings tussen verskillende generasies beïnvloed en stereotipiese aannames oor ouer persone bevestig. Ouer persone voel dat hulle eerder uitgebeeld wil word in terme van die waardevolle bydraes wat hulle tot alle lewensfere maak – ten spyte van hul ouderdom. Die media behoort dus eerder positiewe veroudering te bevorder, wat tot die stimulering en gemotivering van ouer mense kan bydrae. Die studie se bevindinge dui ook aan dat alhoewel ouer persone dit geniet om tydskrifte en koerante te lees, word hulle dikwels daarin beperk as gevolg van finansiële en fisiese beperkings, soos swak sig. Die bevindinge van hierdie navorsing oor die persepsies wat ouer persone het oor hoe hulle in die media uitgebeeld word, hou implikasies in vir verhoudings tussen generasies, asook vir adverteerders en bemarkers wat graag die ouer bevolking wil bereik.

Aantal woorde: 490

## **PREFACE**

The candidate opted to propose an article, with the support of her supervisor.

Prof Vera Roos

**CONSENT**

**PERMISSION TO SUBMIT THE ARTICLE FOR EXAMINATION PURPOSES**

I, the supervisor, hereby declare that the input and effort of S.Sedick, in writing this article, reflects research done by her on this topic. I hereby grant permission that she may submit this article for examination purposes in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Magister Artium in Research Psychology.

Signed on this day.....at the North-West University.

.....

Prof V. Roos

Supervisor

**TITLE OF MANUSCRIPT, AUTHORS AND CONTACT ADDRESS**

**The perceptions of older persons in residential care facilities regarding how they are portrayed in the print media**

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**MANUSCRIPT FOR EXAMINATION**

# The Perceptions of Older Persons in Residential Care Facilities Regarding How They are Portrayed in the Print Media

## Abstract

Despite their growing numbers and valuable contributions, older persons have to contend with pessimistic attitudes towards them, their way of thinking and their capabilities. Such attitudes tend to be influenced by media portrayals of older persons. Understanding how the media portray older persons can give insight into how older people make comparisons and how others form perceptions of, opinions on and attitudes towards them. The objective of this study was therefore to explore and describe the perceptions of older persons in residential care facilities regarding how they are portrayed in the print media. This objective was achieved through a qualitative research study that was exploratory, descriptive and contextual in nature. A sample of 21 older residents in a residential care facility participated voluntarily in the study. Nine males and 12 females ranging between 60 and 85 years of age took part in the research. Data obtained from focus group discussions and individual semi-structured interviews were analyzed using thematic content analysis and key-word-in-context analysis. The main themes that emerged from the data were that the older persons perceived the extent of their media portrayal as minimal and stereotypical with far more attention given to younger persons. Conclusions and recommendations for future research are provided.

*Key words:* older persons, perceptions of older persons, print media, stereotypical portrayal

Older persons have significant role in all countries (Moschis, 2003). Many people regard older persons as a valuable asset in a society: they are important resources for their families and communities particularly during times of crisis; they inspire younger generations through their personal resilience and practical knowledge stemming from years of experience; and they look after their grandchildren and neighbors (WHO, 2008). The United Nations defines “older persons” as people aged 60 years and older (Asagba, 2005). The world is rapidly ageing. According to the WHO (2008), the number of people aged 80 and older is increasing particularly quickly: by 2050 they will constitute 20% of the world’s older population.

Despite their growing numbers and valuable contributions, older persons have to contend with pessimistic attitudes towards them, their way of thinking and their capabilities. These attitudes are often referred to as ageism, a concept that is based on the view that older persons have reduced mental and physical abilities (Minichiello, Browne & Kendig, 2000). Liliana, Margarida and Helena (2008) describe ageism as discrimination based on chronological age, which usually results in an image of older persons as unproductive, sick, depressed and cognitively impaired. It is thus a form of bias that devalues and stereotypes older persons.

The media is believed to perpetuate and reinforce negative stereotypes of old age (Minichiello et al., 2000). One such belief is that the media is largely responsible for shaping people’s cultural attitudes, norms and values (Dahmen & Cozma, 2009). Dahmen and Cozma (2009) believe that the portrayal of older persons in the media influences the public’s explicit and implicit attitudes and beliefs regarding old people and old age. In this regard, advertising is a key factor in the consumer’s experience of the media (Zhang, Harwood, Williams, Ylaine-McEwen, Wadliegh & Thimm, 2006). According to Kessler, Rakoczy and Staudinger (2004), the depiction of older persons in the print media is either negative, minimal or overly positive. Thus, the influence of the media often reflects the unhealthy beliefs in contemporary society about older persons (Nicely, 2007). Such beliefs are that older persons are old-fashioned, lonely, inactive and unproductive (Robinson, Popovich, Gustafson & Fraser, 2003). Also, images in advertising affect not only how younger persons foresee their future as older persons and how they interact with older persons, but they

also influence the ways in which older persons involve themselves in social life and evaluate their own capabilities (Kessler et al., 2004).

This influence of the media on the perceptions people have of older persons is supported by various theories including the cultivation theory (Robinson, Callister, Magoffin & Moore, 2007). The cultivation theory holds that the more exposure people have to the media, the more congruent their opinions become with the “world” created by the media. Such congruence is a key theoretical rationale for research on ageing and the media since it reinforces the view that ageing images in advertising significantly influence how older persons are perceived and treated. Inaccurate, unflattering portrayals of older persons in the media can lead to unhealthy stigmas, ideologies and stereotypes (UNECE, 2009). Such portrayals may affect older persons’ perceptions of themselves as well as the perceptions of their family, friends, and younger generations who make frequent use of the media (Robinson et al., 2003). According to Robinson and Umphrey (2006), young people’s perceptions of older persons are strongly influenced by the positive and negative images of older people in advertisements. These perceptions affect the way young people live and the way they prepare for their own old age.

The portrayal of older persons in the media has significant social consequences, and research findings can indicate whether advertisers are socially responsible – whether advertising gives adequate coverage to the older community and whether it perpetuates positive as well as negative age stereotypes (Robinson, Gustafson & Popovich, 2008). Zhang et al. (2006) believe that the increase in the number of older persons in the past two decades and concern for their social, psychological and physical well-being calls for research that specifically targets media depictions of older persons.

Studies have shown that negative images of ageing can have a powerful psychological and physiological impact on older persons. For older individuals who make use of the media, these images may shape the conception of the ideal male and female body (Robinson & Callister, 2008). Previous research has revealed that when older individuals are exposed to negative media sources, they tend to internalize and believe them. Health researchers have also investigated how misconceptions about the ageing process can have a detrimental effect on healthy ageing (Robinson & Callister, 2008). Research on older persons’ perceptions of media portrayals of their physical health, mental health and

personality is therefore needed to maintain and improve their overall physical and mental functioning.

Also, the changing composition of the ageing population is creating new opportunities for mature consumer markets whose needs have been largely unmet up till now. Such opportunities include those for businesses (e.g. banks) that serve consumer markets (Pieterse, 2008). In other words, consumer markets may benefit financially and otherwise if they include older persons in their target audience for advertisements.

Much of the literature that focuses on older persons centers on physical disabilities, cognitive decline and harmful stereotypes that accompany old age (Robinson et al., 2008). This research was prompted by the relatively small body of knowledge on the use of the media by older persons in South Africa. More specifically, little is known about older persons' perceptions of the media portrayal of the elderly. Witham and McMurdo (2007) claim that older people are too often excluded from study protocols and publications. The focus of this research was therefore on how older persons perceive the portrayal of their age group in the print media.

### **Research Method**

The study followed a qualitative, exploratory, inductive design. Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2007) describe qualitative research as a naturalistic, contextual and holistic approach to understanding human beings. Qualitative research was used to obtain in-depth knowledge of how older persons perceive the portrayal of their age group in the print media. Because most studies on older persons and the media employ traditional quantitative research methods (e.g. Gilbert & Ricketts, 2008; Horton & Baker, 2008; Kessler et al., 2004), the use of a qualitative approach enabled the researcher to explore more incisively the perceptions of older persons of their portrayal in the print media.

### **Research Design**

A phenomenological method was used (Maree, 2007). It was an especially useful method as older persons were purposively chosen as participants on the basis of their ability to reflect on the topic and to contribute meaningfully in focus group discussions and individual interviews.

### **Research Context and Participants**

The residential care facility where the research was conducted in is a contemporary environment. Since mobility is a problem for many older persons, churches regularly provide services for older persons at the residential care facility. Various activities are also provided by the facility such as the teaching of skills and crafts, gardening activities, weekly bingo sessions and jigsaw puzzle building. Community members sometimes bring residents library books and magazines. Old age home residents were used in the study who could provide an in-depth understanding of how their age group was portrayed in the print media and who could articulate their opinions clearly.

The residential care facility accommodates 132 residents of varying ages. The proportion of men and women is approximately 30:70. The very frail residents are looked after in the frail care unit. Other residents, who are more self-sufficient, rent cottages in the facility. It was these individuals who participated in the study since they were mobile and could take part meaningfully in the focus group discussions and personal interviews. The participants for the study consisted of nine male and twelve female residents in the old age home. The participants ranged between 60 and 85 years of age – the age group generally considered to constitute old age (Asagba, 2005). Residents between 60 and 85 were purposively chosen on the basis that they could contribute insightful information on how they perceived their portrayal in the media. The participants were fluent in English and Afrikaans, and, in order to meet the criteria for the purposeful sampling for the individual interviews, they had to have participated actively and shown a genuine interest in the topic during the focus group discussions. **Data gathering**

Data were gathered by means of focus group discussions and individual interviews.

**Focus group discussions.** Maree (2007) defines a focus group strategy as a socially orientated research method based on the assumption that group interactions will be dynamic resulting in the production of rich, detailed information – in this case regarding older persons' perceptions of how they are portrayed in the print media. Three focus group discussions were held – the first group consisting of five men, the second group consisting of five women and the third group consisting of three women and two men.

The following open-ended instruction was given to the participants.

*Please tell me how you perceive the portrayal of older persons in the print media.*

In order to facilitate the discussion, the words “old age” and “media” were written on a chart. The following instruction was then given to the participants: *Please tell me what the first image is that comes into your mind when you see these words.* The participants were afforded the opportunity to discuss the different images that came into their minds.

The participants were also requested to bring magazines that they commonly read to the focus group sessions. Five random advertisements from the magazines were used to stimulate the discussions, which centered on how the participants perceived the portrayal of older individuals in the advertisements. In order to fully explore the participants’ perceptions of the portrayal of older persons in the media, the researcher often asked clarifying questions such as: *When you say the lady is negatively portrayed, what do you mean?* or *Please tell me more about that.* The discussions were recorded with a digital voice recorder and transcribed verbatim onto a computer diskette.

**Individual in-depth interviews.** Further information was obtained by means of semi-structured individual interviews in order to clarify initial findings. According to Struwig and Stead (2007), this type of interview is classified as semi-structured because open-ended as well as closed-ended questions are asked. Once data from the focus groups were obtained, the six participants were interviewed individually. Face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted to expand on the focus group data and to generate detailed views and opinions on the participants’ perceptions of the portrayal of older persons in the media. The focus group findings helped guide the individual interviews. A set of predetermined open-ended and closed-ended questions was used during the interviews, and the participants were encouraged to share their views on the portrayal of older persons in the media. The individual interviews helped the researcher establish rapport with the participants, which, in turn, promoted detailed accounts of participant’s perceptions (Maree, 2007). The interviews were recorded with a digital voice recorder and transcribed verbatim onto a computer diskette. A central request was made: *Please tell me how you perceive the portrayal of older persons in the print media.* This request was followed by questions such as: *What is your perception of how you are portrayed in advertisements? Do you find your portrayal in the print media as offensive or non-offensive?*

## **Procedure**

Consent was obtained from the North-West University to conduct the research. A letter from the university was taken to the residential care facility setting out the planned research. Informed consent was requested and obtained from the matron as the person in charge of the facility. Informed consent was also obtained from the purposively selected participants. Arrangements were then made to conduct the focus group discussions and the individual interviews on the premises of the residential care facility. After the data had been collected, they were analyzed, and the report was written.

### **Data analysis**

**Thematic content analysis.** Salkind (2000) defines data analysis as the process of giving order, structure and meaning to collected data. Thematic content analysis is a systematic approach to qualitative data analysis that identifies and summarizes message content (Shaughnessy & Zechmeister, 1997). An inductive approach was thus employed in the study, and the themes were coded. The following phases of thematic content analysis served as a guide during the data analysis process (Maree, 2007): (1) Becoming familiar with the data: according to Struwig and Stead (2007), the initial step in qualitative data analysis is characterized by the immersion of the researcher in the data to familiarize himself or herself with the information. Thus, during this phase, all the collected data, including the focus group notes and interview transcripts, were reviewed to gain a clearer understanding of the information. (2) Generating initial codes: Salkind (2000) refers to coding as the process of reading carefully through the transcribed data, line by line, and separating the data into meaningful analytical units. During this phase of the study, segments of the data were marked with symbols or descriptive words. (3) Searching for themes: during this phase, each category was assigned a label or identifying name (Struwig & Stead, 2007). (4) Reviewing themes: important themes were grouped together, and less important themes were discarded. In this phase, the data were read again to make sure that the themes accurately reflected the data. (5) Defining and naming themes: during this stage, every theme was identified and explained in detail. (6) Producing the report: the report identifies the emergent themes and relates the analysis of the themes to the research questions and literature review.

**Keywords-in-context analysis.** This second form of data analysis was used in order to ensure credibility. This particular data analysis reveals how participants use words

in context by comparing words that appear before and after “key words” (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). In other words, this type of analysis allows the researcher to identify how words are used in context. This type of analysis was useful in the present study as specific words and phrases were often of interest to the researcher. The researcher could identify underlying connections implied by the different participants through the expressions they used. In order to make the keyword-in-context analysis more effective, the researcher read through the data and then identified keywords and phrases that were interlinked or similar. These keywords and phrases were used either frequently or in a curious manner. The keywords were chosen based on existing literature on the topic at hand as well as on their frequency throughout the data set.

### **Verification and trustworthiness**

The guidelines suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were followed to ensure trustworthiness during the research process. The guidelines were credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability (Shank, 2006). Credibility refers to the assurance that the researcher’s conclusions stem from the collected data (Maree, 2007). Credibility was established by applying triangulation to the methods of data gathering and data analysis to determine if there were discrepancies in the findings. The researcher established good rapport with the participants so that they would feel comfortable in expressing their opinions in the individual interviews as well as during the focus group discussions. The interviews were recorded to ensure that the researcher did not misinterpret what was said. Furthermore, two methods of data analysis were employed so that common themes could be identified and deeper understanding gained of the phenomenon under consideration.

Shank (2006) describes transferability as the degree to which generalizations can be made from the data and context of a research study to the wider population and settings. Rich, thick descriptions of the participants and context were achieved through the provision of detailed information on the older persons’ perceptions of their portrayal in the media. The findings were also accompanied by appropriate quotations to enhance transferability.

Dependability refers to the extent to which the reader believes that the findings were obtained as the researcher says they were (Maree, 2007). The same starting question was used in all the interviews in the study, but the follow-up questions differed in each interview to ensure that rich data would emerge. Dependability was also ensured by

employing the member checking strategy. Identified themes were discussed with the participants to make sure they were accurate and dependable.

Conformability refers to the transparency of the methodologies employed (Shank, 2006). In order to establish conformability, the data collection and data analysis methods in the present research were discussed in detail.

### **Ethical issues**

Ethical permission was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the North-West University, Potchefstroom Campus. The project title is “An exploration of enabling contexts”, and the project approval number is 05K14. Following the presentation of a letter from the North-West University confirming the purpose of the research study, informed consent was obtained from the authorities at the Residential Care Facility to conduct the research with the residents on the facility’s premises. Informed consent was also obtained from the residents to participate in the research process. This consent was in accordance with the guidelines of the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA, 2009) including the assurance that the participants’ information would be treated confidentially throughout the research process. All collected data were entered into and stored on a computer with a safety code. The participants were told that participation in the study was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time if they so wished.

### **Findings**

The themes are supported by quotations from the data. Table 1 shows the themes and subthemes that emerged from the data.

Table 1

*Themes and subthemes of older persons’ perceptions regarding how they are portrayed in the media*

<b>Main themes</b>	<b>Subthemes</b>
Extent of media portrayal of older persons	Minimal portrayal Seclusion of older persons Stereotypical images of older persons
Implications of media portrayal	
Preferred portrayal of older persons	Older persons as contributors Positive ageing
Limitations to accessing media	Financial limitations Physical limitations

## **Theme 1: Extent of media portrayal of older persons**

Older persons seldom feature in the media. The media tends to neglect the portrayal of older persons. It seems as if older persons are minimally portrayed and younger persons seem to dominate media images and content.

**Minimal portrayal of older persons.** Minimal portrayal of older persons refers to the absence of older persons in the print media. The older persons in the study were aware that although the older population was growing, older persons rarely featured in the media. One older participant compared this to a crime:

*It's one of the big crimes in South Africa at the moment, is how we are going to manage all the elderly people, because we get older and older, but the media hardly portrays us. (Participant 3, male)*

*If you read the Cosmopolitan, you don't see pictures of old people. (Participant 10, female)*

*There is actually nothing in newspapers about elderly people. (Participant 1, male)*

*I don't think that we get too much portrayal, you know. On the odd occasion, when somebody does something like old people overseas that stole their money. (Participant 8, female)*

The ignoring of older persons is also evident in their absence on cover pages as well as in the minimal exposure that older celebrities receive. The following quotations indicate the participants' growing awareness of the media's treatment of older persons.

*Yes, you will never find an elderly lady on the outside page. Never, no. They will be inside perhaps. (Participant 13, female)*

*You know, all the celebrities that I know, like Kirk Douglas and those people, the older they get, the lesser they are portrayed. And the younger they get, they will be the lead role. When they get older, they get lesser roles. (Participant 15, male)*

**Seclusion of older persons.** Seclusion of older persons refers to the impression that older persons are cast aside, excluded from the world and regarded as a separate group. The participants believed that they were depicted in the media as an isolated population separated from younger persons:

*It's like actually they are trying to push the old people out of the ... how can I say it?*

*They actually try and put us aside. That's what I think. (Participant 2, male)*

*Sometimes I think they put us in a corner. (Participant 10, female)*

*Well, they should actually not describe us as different as we are people, because we are old that we are divided from the young people. They should also see us as part of them ... because age doesn't count. (Participant 7, female)*

Older persons are also excluded in terms of their specific age-appropriate needs.

Two of the female participants said that certain content excluded them:

*And magazines today are mostly clothes and make-up. There might be one story and if you are lucky, in the Afrikaans magazines like Sarie, its normally got a story for old people. The rest is for the younger ones. (Participant 8, female)*

*It's for the young, because even if you watch on the TV, you see if you want to get rid of your wrinkles. I don't believe that you can get rid of your wrinkles with cream ... And you put this on and that on and then you've got no wrinkles. It's not for old people. It's for the middle aged people. (Participant 11, female)*

**Stereotypical images of older persons.** Images of older persons in the media were perceived by the participants as stereotypical in that older persons are often portrayed as sick, inactive, weak and fragile. The participants believed that this portrayal of older persons was not always accurate and that being old did not automatically mean that you had lost your physical and mental capabilities.

When older persons appear in advertisements, on the rare occasions that they do, they tend to be associated with ill health and a lack of energy, and they are often linked to some or other ailment or illness:

*Look, along with old age I do know there is a sad side where people are wheelchair driven, where they are walking on walking rings. There is a sad side, but I mean, there is also a positive side ... but it's not shown in the media. (Participant 6, female)*

*Well all the advertisements, it's for all the incontinence products. (Participant 9, female)*

The participants felt that these portrayals had a negative effect on consumers of such advertisements:

*You know, everything has got to do with tablets and old age and, you know, it's not actually uplifting. (Participant 12, female)*

Older persons are also often portrayed in the print media as being helpless victims who are unable to fight or fend for themselves; or, just because they are old, people no longer have any value:

*Alright, if you get in the newspaper sometimes, it's just that there have been elderly people murdered and things like that. That's all you hear about elderly people. These people were shot and things like that, killed on the farms and things like that. (Participant 14, male)*

*I do think that's the way that they are portrayed. You know, now you are old, you can do nothing, you are stupid, you are useless. (Participant 5, male)*

The participants believed that articles often reinforced the negative, stereotypical images of older persons. One participant said that although there were articles about older people, “then it's about retiring”. (Participant 4, male)

## **Theme 2: Implications of media portrayal**

The media are a tool that can shape people's attitudes, beliefs and values about the world and life in general. The participants believed that the difference in the media portrayal of people in terms of their age played a significant role in younger persons' attitudes towards older persons and the ageing process. In other words, the media have the ability to influence intergenerational relationships:

*The younger people of today, it's not like when we were young. It's completely different, because I see it, that the younger people of today, they grow up in a completely different way than when we were young people. It's completely different. There is a big change in life. The younger people of today, I don't know, how can I say it? I don't know how to say to you, because they ... there is actually sometimes no respect for elderly people. And it's the media who force them, because this is how people learn about other things, by reading magazines. (Participant 5, male)*

The media can play a key role in preparing younger persons for old age as well as in breaking down stereotypical assumptions about older persons:

*Yes its important for younger people, I think so, because it will also prepare them for when they get old. (Participant 12, female)*

*I don't believe children should be scared of growing old. It's a process. We've got to go there. So, they must now, alright, now I'm becoming 70, I can't knit anymore, I*

*can't crochet, and so forth. (Participant 10, female)*

### **Theme 3: Preferred portrayal of older persons**

According to the participants, older persons prefer to be portrayed as people who can still contribute.

**Older persons as contributors.** The unheard or untold stories of older persons' contributions to society play a role in their invisibility. Despite their age, some older persons still make valuable contributions to various spheres of life, such as business, and in relation to their peers:

*There are so many elderly people who still have the brains to help people in the business line, but because they are old, they are just ignored. (Participant 8, female)*

*Well, there are old people that do remarkable things. They come here. They entertain the old people here. They are old themselves, bring cake and tea, make the most beautiful jerseys, you name it ... but they are not shown in the media. Or they are just not getting the coverage that they should get. I mean, they are old, they are talented. They are still sharing their talent with other people. (Participant 12, female)*

*I think there are wonderful old people out there that we don't know about. I mean, old age does bring its illnesses, but not everybody gets ill. Or people get ill and they learn to cope with it. (Participant 10, female)*

Many of the participants also believed that their years of practical knowledge and experience could be of value to those with less experience:

*They (the media) should sometimes consult elderly people about certain things in life, because why there is something what we've gone through in the past that the young people don't know about. (Participant 5, male)*

*Alright, maybe by knowledge there might be things that we as older or elderly people know more about things than the new generation. (Participant 15, male)*

**Positive ageing.** Positive ageing means that many older persons are fit and well and need to be motivated to approach old age positively:

*By putting positive things, by making suggestions, like in an institution like this what we can do here, how we can build the self-confidence. You know, there must be something positive done, I feel. (Participant 8, female)*

*And this is what the old people need, especially here, is something positive. You*

*know, they are old and they need to be motivated to do something. (Participant 12, female)*

Positive ageing also refers to the stimulation of interest in hobbies and the promotion of healthy living:

*Yes, like the things I'd like to do is like the recipes, anything to do with health. When they say certain things is helping for, to help you with your health, what you can eat to keep away cancer and things like that. But there is not enough of this for older people. (Participant 7, female)*

#### **Theme 4: Limitations to media access**

The participants reported that they enjoyed reading magazines and newspapers since it was a good way of occupying their time. However, certain factors prevented older persons from having full access to the print media. Two limitations were mentioned specifically, namely financial and physical limitations.

**Financial limitations.** Despite their love of the print media, the purchasing of magazines and newspapers was sometimes unaffordable to older persons living on an average pension:

*Magazines and newspapers, alright ... because mostly today newspapers are costly and the old people like to read it.*

*I love it, but unfortunately most magazines like Cosmopolitan and Mary Clair and all that, they are so expensive. Some of them are 29. My son bought me one. I can't remember. It was R29.00. Now an elderly person can't afford that. (Participant 8, female)*

*And unfortunately most elderly people don't have a lot of money. (Participant, 11, female)*

**Physical limitations.** Physical limitations refer to older persons' poor eyesight, blindness or the loss of an eye. The print in magazines is also often too small for older persons to read for long periods of time:

*I was a bloke that used to read books and magazines and things when I was younger, but later on I didn't read much. Because now with my blindness in my one eye, I read very, very little. (Participant 5, male)*

*She's only got one eye ... although she would like to read. But the words are too small*

*anyway. (Participant 13, female).*

## **Discussion**

The findings are based on the participants' perceptions regarding how they perceive their portrayal in the print media. The findings in the present study are consistent with other research that has shown that the portrayal of older persons in the mass media is largely minimal and often negative (Harwood, 2000). The perceptions of the participants in the study of how their age group is portrayed in the media are consistent with the literature, which states that portrayals of older persons are less favorable than those of younger persons in magazines and related media (Robinson et al., 2003). Another perception that the participants had of the media nowadays is that magazines and newspapers are full of advertisements for various tablets, potions and even surgery claiming to make one look younger. This is also consistent with the current literature, which states that such claims for anti-ageing medicine are actually forms of ageism (Palmore, 2007). Firstly, they imply that ageing is a "disease" that can be "cured". Secondly, they imply that the normal signs of old age, such as wrinkles and grey hair, are shameful and ugly rather than conditions to be expected and accepted as a natural part of the ageing process. Such advertising, because of its ability to influence and shape attitudes, can play a major role in the socialization of older persons and in influencing younger persons' views of older persons. Such depictions can also reinforce the image that older persons have of themselves.

The findings reveal that the participants in the study are concerned about the extent of offensive and harmful stereotypes used to portray their generation. Participants in the study believe that the use of language and humor and various other forms of the print media provide younger persons with information about ageing and the older generation (Williams, Wadliegh & Ylanne, 2006). This is confirmed by other research findings, which reveal that younger adults tend to avoid media in which older persons are given wide coverage (Gilbert & Ricketts, 2008; Harwood, 2000). This type of media coverage may have an influence on younger persons' attitudes towards their elders and on older persons' expectations for themselves (Harwood, 2000). The participants in the study tend to believe that negative stereotypes are dangerous not only for themselves but also for younger

persons. Participants in the study also generally believe that if they are not shown respect in the print media, it is hard to expect younger persons to treat them with respect.

The findings in this study reveal a growing awareness and concern among participants in the study about how they are portrayed in the print media. Stereotypes of ageing may have a powerful impact on the psychological well-being of older persons. According to Robinson et al. (2003), when older individuals perceive themselves as negatively stereotyped in the media, they tend to internalize these images and messages. Such portrayals may make them feel vulnerable, insecure, misunderstood, exploited and powerless.

The participants in the study generally appreciate media that promote positive and active images of their generation. Advertisers and journalists may well achieve greater success in the elderly marketplace if they present more positive images of older persons as opposed to focusing solely on younger persons. Some publishers have started dedicating a section of their newspapers to seniors and have launched new magazines for the senior market (Vesperi, 2001). However, such publications may not be a good idea as the participants in the present study complained that such specialty sections tended to stereotype and segregate older persons even more. This is consistent with other findings that report that older persons do not relate positively to categories that reflect their chronological age (Zhang et al., 2006). Many older persons see this as segregation and as being cast aside.

Consideration of media portrayals in terms of stereotypes is essential when attempting to understand the nature of any potential attitude change informed by the media (Harwood, 2000). Older as well as younger persons generally entertain well-defined stereotypes of older and younger people (Hummert, Gartska, Ryan & Bonnesen, 2004). Although some research has revealed the existence of multiple stereotypes of older persons, negative stereotypes still predominate (Harwood, 2000). Older persons are too often depicted in the print media as inactive, unhealthy and mentally deficient, and such stereotypes have a negative impact on intergeneration communication. According to Hall and Batey (2008), stereotypes portraying older persons as unproductive are often perpetuated in books and other forms of print media. The findings in this study confirm those in the study of Williams et al. (2006), which revealed that older persons often

perceive themselves to be stereotyped in the media as slow thinking, incompetent, feeble, depressed, sad, complaining and ill tempered. Previous studies, like the present study, also found that most older persons perceive themselves as being portrayed negatively in the media as weak or sickly (Gilbert & Ricketts, 2008; Williams et al., 2006).

Older persons are often not well represented in the print media in relation to their demographic proportion of the population and in relation to their achievements and the contributions they can still make (Hummert et al., 2004). Older persons generally want to make contributions and add value to society despite their age (Harwood, 2000). However, such aspirations receive little coverage in the media. Media coverage could, for instance, help set up forums for older persons and suggest activities that residential care facilities could implement in order to keep residents busy (Webster, 2006). The findings in the present study show clearly that older persons are attracted to positive and more active images of their generation. However, they believe that such images are seriously lacking in the media. Advertisers could achieve greater success in the senior market place if they projected more positive images of older persons.

Older persons spend a great deal of time in leisure activities such as “consuming” media (Chen, 2008). They also rely on the media for news and for the latest available products. However, older persons generally report that they do not make as much use of the media as they did when they were younger largely because of factors such as disabilities and limited finances. Also, according to Bartel and Kline (2002), changes in the optical properties of the human eye contribute to an age-related dilapidation of retinal image quality.

Another factor limiting the participants in this study’s access to the media is their socio-economic status. Contrary to much of the literature, which states that older persons are financially well-off, the findings in this study suggest that this may not always be the case (Pieterse, 2008). Participants generally believe that many media sources are out of their financial reach thus preventing them from being as frequent media consumers as they would like to be. Such considerations concerning older persons’ access to the media seem to have been overlooked in earlier research perhaps because of the exclusion of older persons in the media in general.

### **Limitations and Recommendations**

The findings of this study cannot be generalized to other populations. Future research should perhaps employ a mixed-method design to improve on the generalisability of the current findings.

The information provided in this report may also be valuable in developing other future studies. Given that the media is a powerful tool of influence, younger persons' perceptions regarding the accuracy with which older persons are portrayed should be investigated. Future research should explore gender differences in the coverage of older persons in the media as well as the effect this may have on the respective genders and the older population as a whole. Future research needs also to look at the availability of and access to media sources for older persons as well as how the media can be adapted to older persons needs and research needs to explore how journalists can include older persons in magazines and other print media in ways that emphasize the breadth of their lives while at the same time maintaining awareness among readers that becoming old is an honored process.

### **Conclusion**

The perceptions of older persons in this study of their portrayal in the media are that they are portrayed in a minimal, stereotypical manner that has negative implications for intergenerational relationships. The findings also offer alternatives for advertisers and journalists who wish to appeal to older persons in terms of their contributions by focusing on positive ageing as well as providing accessible readable and affordable print media. As marketers begin to realize the size of the senior market segment, they ought to pay greater attention to how their advertising depicts older persons.

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## INTENDED GUIDELINES FOR AUTHORS

This dissertation will be submitted to the *Journal of Ecology and Consumer Sciences* to be considered for publication.