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Uncovering the hidden bias: A study on ageism in Hollywood's portrayal of ageing femininities in romantic comedies (2000-2021)

Femke De Sutter

Center for Cinema and Media Studies (CIMS), Ghent University
Femke.DeSutter@UGent.be

Sofie Van Bauwel

Center for Cinema and Media Studies (CIMS), Ghent University
Sofie.VanBauwel@UGent.be

Abstract

Recently, the media has been highlighting the increasing presence of older women on screen. However, it is important to examine whether this is the case and how exactly older women are being portrayed. This research examined the representations of older women in Hollywood romantic comedies released from 2000 to 2021. To assess diversity and stereotypes, forty-four popular films were analysed. Here we identified, in twenty of the forty-four films, one or more characters aged 60 and over. Results indicate that, while the number of older female characters was high compared to other studies, their diversity was rather limited. Most characters were in their early sixties, white, middle-class, able-bodied, and heterosexual. Characters from ethnic minorities, sexual minorities and with disabilities were almost absent. Stereotypes, such as the *Golden Ager* and the *Shrew*, were frequently used. This confirms the dominant discourse on older women, which leads to negative attitudes towards ageing.

Keywords

Hollywood romantic comedies, Quantitative content analysis, Age stereotypes, Representation, Gendered ageism

Introduction

“Women not only bear the brunt of the equation of beauty with youth, we perpetuate it – every time we dye our hair to cover the gray or lie about our age, not to mention have plastic surgery to cover the signs of aging.”

– Ashton Applewhite (2019, p.89)

Although the average age is increasing within society, this trend is not always represented in Western popular media. Additionally, popular media often represent age negatively as a process of decline, as the loss of youth. These negative representations are a major concern for both society and older adults (Roanova, 2010; Woodward, 2006), as those media depictions of ageing have a significant influence on the construction of public perceptions and attitudes towards ageing, as noted by Gravagne (2013), and Loos and Ivan (2018). Gravagne (2013) argues that narratives and images influence both our understanding and our lived experiences of what it means to grow older. Negative representations of age contribute to the development of prejudicial attitudes and stereotypical beliefs, a phenomenon that is defined within the field of ageing studies as ageism. The concept of ageism was coined and conceptualised by Butler in 1969 as a “prejudice of one age group against another age group” (p. 243). For this study we find the definition of Ayalon and Tesch-Römer (2017) very useful because it stresses the effects of stereotyping. They define ageism as “stereotypes, prejudices, or discrimination against or in favour of an age group” (2017, p.1). Some media studies on ageing focus on celebrities (e.g., Jerslev & Peterson, 2018; Raisborough, et al., 2021), others on representation in media, and some even on the intersection of age with gender, class, and race (e.g., Edström, 2018; Cecil, 2021; Richardson, 2019). As previous studies have mainly focused on specific films, titles, advertisements, or TV series, this study analyses multiple Hollywood romantic comedies over two decades – 2000 to 2021 – to uncover the evolution of gendered representations in film. The aim of this research is to understand the intersection of gender and age representations, and how they shape visibility. This study uses a quantitative content analysis to identify broader dynamics and trends within the portrayals of older women in Hollywood romantic comedies. By doing so, the study facilitates further qualitative analysis of how age and gender diversity are represented. The key research question, and following subquestions are thus:

- RQ: How are female ageing actors represented in Hollywood romantic comedy films from 2000 to 2021?
- a. Is there diversity in the representations of older female adults?
 - b. What age stereotypes are used in the representations of ageing female characters in romantic comedies?
 - c. How do the age stereotypes relate to the ageing characters' roles, age, gender, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, and disability status?

Studying older characters in Hollywood romantic comedies

The representation of ageing in media and its intersection with gender has been a topic of discussion for several decades. Previous studies (e.g., Kline, et al., 2023; Lauzen et al., 2007; Markov & Yoon, 2020; Signorielli, 2004; Venon et al., 1991) have shown that the representation of ageing in media is strongly linked to gender, with women being more likely to be portrayed negatively. The United States still holds a major market share in Europe, responsible for no less than 58.2% of admissions in 2021, suggesting that much of the representation of ageing, including stereotypes and discourses, is portrayed through a US perspective (Blázquez et al., 2023). While there is a considerable body of research focusing on specific cases, a longitudinal study that looks at the representation of older characters and discourses across multiple cases is still absent.

Although the representation of ageing in media has evolved over time, debates about its gendering of beauty standards and its privileging of patriarchy continue to be relevant. The stereotypes and narratives surrounding ageing are strongly linked to gender, and this is

particularly evident in the most recurring representations of ageing women, which include depictions of them as witched, passive, and bossy. Previous studies of ageism in media (e.g., De Vuyst, 2022; Van Bauwel, 2021) show that women are often invisible in popular media culture and are thus symbolically annihilated. While men gain visibility when they grow older, the opposite is true for women. Recent studies focusing on ageing in advertisements and TV series show the presence of positive representations such as ‘the perfect grandparent’ and ‘the golden ager’ (P.N. Miller et al., 1999; Bai, 2014). However, even those representations of ‘successful ageing’ can be problematic, as successful ageing places the responsibility for unsuccessful ageing on the individual (Katz, 2001; Lundgren & Ljuslinder, 2011; Tortajada, Dhaenens, & Willem, 2018; Woodward, 2006). In fact, a large part of the population cannot meet these expectations, making it in se also ageist (Liang & Luo, 2012).

Hollywood has played a significant role in shaping the representation of ageing and romance in media. Films produced by major Hollywood studios typically have the widest distribution and, as a result, attract the largest viewing numbers (Johnson & Holmes, 2009). Hollywood’s depiction of elderly characters and romance has undergone significant changes over the years, as has the romantic comedy genre. The genre is often described according to the boy meets girl formula. However, McDonnald (2007, p. 8) refers to the romantic comedy as ‘a film which has as its central narrative motor a quest for love, which portrays this quest in a light-hearted way and almost always to a successful conclusion’.

In the early 20th century, Hollywood produced romantic films that often featured an older woman being hypnotized by a younger suitor to murder her husband for his money (Shary & McVitte, 2016, p. 139). In those films, elderly were often ridiculed for their perceived gullibility towards threats to their wealth, and for their vulnerability to the feigned affections of younger individuals (Shary & McVitte, 2016). Such portrayals suggested that the younger were undeserving of their wealth. Furthermore, the media at the time largely avoided depicting romantic relationships between older individuals, reflecting an underlying anxiety within the industry and culture towards this concept. However, over time, Hollywood began to adopt a more sensitive approach towards portraying older characters, particularly in the 1930s. By the 1940s, depictions of elder romance had become more commonplace and were typically presented in one of two styles: as pre-existing relationships with younger characters or as nostalgic reminiscences of past love (Shary & McVitte, 2016). This gradual shift in the media’s representation of older characters suggests a changing attitude towards the elderly in society. After World War II, May-December romances became more common. This is linked to social changes, with women becoming more independent and the growing senior population thanks to various developments in healthcare (Shary & McVitte, 2016). In the 1950s, there was a decline in elderly romance, as Hollywood studios gave more attention to comedies. In the 1960s, films became more radical in style and themes, as Hollywood went beyond the May-December romance. For instance, certain films depicted a pregnancy at age 50. The 1970s was an austere decade for elder romance, this while there were significant changes about older characters in other genres such as comedy and action films. Only in the 1980s do we really get representations of romance between older characters. The 1990s saw modest progress in the representation of older romance outside the dominant hits. Hollywood films slowly introduced audiences to the reality of older people with queer identities and sex lives beyond their sixties (Shary & McVitte, 2016). By the mid-2000s, film studios were making few films about older characters. Often, the older characters were shown in a supporting role opposite the younger stars. Even though representations of older people in romantic films have changed over time, they have also raised relevant debates about the gendering of beauty standards and the privileged perversity of patriarchy (Shary & McVitte, 2016, p. 143).

Gender ageing stereotypes used in films

Assuming that age-related stereotypes are not uniform, studies suggest that multiple subcategories of age-related stereotypes exist (Hummert et al., 1994). Research has identified

four negative stereotypes on the one hand: severely impaired, despondent, shrew/villain, and recluse, and three positive stereotypes on the other: perfect grandparent, golden ager, and John Wayne conservative (Hummert et al., 1994). The severely impaired stereotype portrays older adults as frail, physically and/or mentally limited, and/or dependent on others (e.g., Margaret Thatcher in *The Iron Lady*). This stereotype characterizes older adults according to their deteriorating health, mobility, or cognitive abilities. Similarly, the despondent stereotype (e.g., Anthony in *The Father*) represents older adults as sad, lonely, and hopeless, and as characterized by declining health, loss of independence, and sense of isolation. The shrew stereotype (e.g., Viola Fields in the film *Monster-in-Law*) portrays older adults as difficult, argumentative, or bossy, often caricatured by their rigid adherence to rules and tendency to criticize others. The last negative stereotype is the recluse (e.g., Howard Howe in *Tusk*), which depicts older adults as lonely and disconnected from the world around them, characterized by their lack of engagement with others and tendency to withdraw from social activities. In contrast, the positive stereotypes within the second subcategory include the perfect grandparent stereotype (e.g., Papá Julio in *Coco*), which idealizes older adults as wise, caring, and unconditionally loving grandparents. The golden ager stereotype (e.g., Erica Barry in *Something's Gotta Give*) represents older adults as optimistic, healthy, and active, people who enjoy leisure activities, volunteering, and contributing to society. Finally, the John Wayne conservative stereotype (e.g., Earl Stone in *The Mule*) portrays older adults as conservative, robust, and stoic, characterized by their traditional values and tendency to embrace strict social norms (Hummert et al., 1994).

Only 6% of top-grossing U.S. films feature female characters aged 60 or older (Lauzen, 2021; Signorielli, 2004). Efforts to change this trend are under way, but progress towards more diverse representation remains uneven and controversial. It is clear, however that the call for more and better representation is growing. Mainstream Hollywood films, including the romantic comedy genre, are criticized for perpetuating the cult of youth. The subgenre typically features young, white, heterosexual characters in love. The emergence of gerontocom, a subgenre focusing on love affairs of older characters, presents a unique perspective on romantic relationships in later life. However, it lacks diversity, as the characters are typically depicted as white, middle-class, able-bodied, and heterosexual (Jermyn, 2012). This highlights the need for a more inclusive representation of ageing people in romantic comedies, especially as the genre is mostly viewed by ageing women (Casado-Gual, 2019). The study of representation of ageing in film is crucial in addressing ageism and promoting positive and negative nuanced portrayals (Medina Bañón & Zecchi, 2020). A deeper understanding of these representations can challenge and change stereotypes, promoting a more inclusive and equitable visual media landscape for all ages. Therefore, this study focuses on the portrayal of ageing in Hollywood romantic comedies produced in the last 20 years.

Counting older characters in Hollywood romantic comedies

As previously stated, the romantic comedy genre and different subgenres of the romantic comedy genre have changed and introduced older adult characters. Besides the “gerontocom”, there is the “older bird chick flick,” which explores older female characters as desirable and sexually active subjects who rediscover their sexuality in a positive and enriching way (Tally, 2008). Examples of such films include *It's Complicated* (Meyers, 2009), *Something's Gotta Give* (Meyers, 2003), *Last Chance Harvey* (Hopkins, 2008), *The Mother* (Michell, 2003), and *Good Luck to You, Leo Grande* (Hyde, 2022). The romantic comedy genre offers a form of relief from the search for meaning (Gill, 2007, p. 181). It incorporates many themes of liberal feminism (Gill, 2007, p. 185) and serves as a compelling discourse through which Western subjects are inscribed (Gill, 2007). Postfeminism, which emphasizes the connection between gender and other forms of marginalization and power, such as race, colonialism, sexuality, class, and age (Yeatman, 1994, p. 207), articulates certain discourses related to ageing, particularly ageing femininities (Van Bauwel, 2018, p.

23). However, postfeminism does not explicitly focus on ageing. Postfeminist media culture is preoccupied with the body and defines femininity as a bodily property rather than a social structural or psychological one. The female body in postfeminist media culture is presented as a source of power but is also always portrayed as unruly, requiring constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline, and remodeling to conform to narrow judgments of female attractiveness (Gill, 2007, p. 297). In postfeminist texts, the portrayal of the older feminist woman is often negative, resulting in a battle between her and the younger postfeminist girl, typically portrayed in films through the mother-daughter relation where the daughter opposes the mother (McRobbie, 2009; Richardson, 2019, p. 14).

Sampling and coding procedure

To answer the question on how female ageing actors are represented in Hollywood romantic comedy films from 2000 to 2021, a quantitative content analysis was used. For this study, we created a new codebook based on national and international literature (e.g., Markov & Yoon, 2020; Vertoont, 2017) on visual ageism. Loos and Ivan (2018, p. 164) define visual ageism as 'the social practice of visually under-representing older people or misrepresenting them in a prejudiced way'. The focus on a twenty-two-year period makes it possible to uncover any evolution in representations of femininity in relation to age.

The sampling for this study was done according to the following procedure. First, the two most popular romantic comedy films in the United States were selected for each year in the time frame, meaning that in total forty-four films were analyzed. The popularity of the films was based on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb).

Table 1. List of romantic comedy films included in the sample, by year.

Number	Year	Title
1	2000	Miss Congeniality
2		Meet The Parents
3	2001	Bridget Jones Diary
4		Legally Blonde
5	2002	Sweet Home Alabama
6		My Big Fat Greek Wedding
7	2003	Love Actually
8		How To Lose a Guy in 10 Days
9	2004	50 First Dates
10		13 Going on 30
11	2005	The 40-Year-Old Virgin
12		Hitch
13	2006	The Devil Wears Prada
14		She's The Man
15	2007	Juno
16		Knocked Up
17	2008	Made of Honour
18		27 Dresses
19	2009	The Proposal
20		The Ugly Truth
21	2010	The Bounty Hunter
22		She's Out of My League
23	2011	Crazy Stupid Love
24		Just Go with It
25	2012	Pitch Perfect
26		Silver Linings Playbook
27	2013	Warm Bodies

28		Enough Said
29	2014	Blended
30		Love Rosie
31	2015	The Duff
32		Trainwreck
33	2016	Mike and Dave need Wedding Dates
34		How to Be Single
35	2017	Home Again
36		The Layover
37	2018	Crazy Rich Asians
38		Mamma Mia Here We Go Again
39	2019	The Perfect Date
40		Long Shot
41	2020	Palm Springs
42		The Love Birds
43	2021	The French Dispatch
44		Licorice Pizza

The present study was undertaken to examine the representation of older adults in popular romantic comedy films. The research focused on individuals aged 60 years and older in a speaking role in the films under consideration. In line with previous research (Robinson et al., 2004; Vernon et al., 1991), the age of characters in the films was determined through a combination of physical appearance, role in the family, living arrangements, and other available cues. The ages of the characters were then placed into five chronological categories (60-65, 66-71, 72-77, 78-83, and over 83), as established by Markov and Yoon (2020).

The speaking roles of the characters were deemed to be of utmost significance in determining the proportion of older adult characters in popular romantic comedy films. The characters were thus classified into three categories: major, supporting, and minor. Major characters played a pivotal role in the film's plot and occupied a substantial portion of the running time. The names of the actors who portrayed the major characters were listed in the credits. Supporting characters were important to the story, typically in their relationship to the major characters, but were not the main focus of the film. Minor characters only appeared briefly on screen and were not critical to the development of the story's outcome (Robinson et al., 2004).

The gender identity of the characters was classified as 'male' or 'female' based on the presence of predominantly masculine or feminine traits. Furthermore, expressions of gender identity beyond the binary, including 'transgender', 'non-conforming', 'agender', 'genderqueer', and 'non-binary' were also considered. The ethnicity of the characters was determined based on visual and verbal characteristics, and classified into the following categories: White, African American, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, mixed, or other.

In addition to gender and ethnicity, the social class of the characters was also coded. The social class was determined based on the living conditions of the characters and classified into three categories: lower, middle, and upper class. Characters who were depicted as facing difficulties in making a living, being unemployed or engaged in low-paid manual labour, living in poor living conditions or homeless, receiving inadequate care, or failing to meet their basic needs were classified as lower class. The middle-class characters were portrayed as having the financial means to maintain a relatively decent standard of living, including adequate housing, clothing, and leisure activities. Finally, the upper-class characters were depicted as leading a luxurious lifestyle, being influential, holding prestigious positions, or being able to maintain a financially secure life without having to work.

The characters' sexual orientation was categorized as 'heterosexual', 'homosexual', 'lesbian', 'bisexual', 'other', or 'unknown'. Heterosexual characters were those in a

romantic/sexual relationship with a member of the opposite sex. Characters in a same-sex relationship were classified as lesbian (female) and homosexual (male). Bisexual characters were involved with both same and opposite sex partners. If a character's sexual orientation was not specified, it was recorded as unknown. The study also examined the characters' able-bodiedness (Saito & Ishiyama, 2005). A physical disability was defined as restricted mobility and/or senses, while cognitive impairment refers to difficulties in memory, processing, communication, and learning. Mental disability includes mental disorders like depression, schizophrenia, OCD, and PTSD.

The study employs the well-established framework of positive and negative stereotypes about older individuals in media representation, as introduced by Hummert et al. (1994). This framework comprises three positive stereotypes (i.e., golden ager, perfect grandparent, and John Wayne conservative) and four negative stereotypes (i.e., severely disabled, despondent, shrew/villain, and recluse). Previous studies have applied this framework in their examination of how older individuals have been represented in television commercials (Miller et al., 2004; Lee et al., 2007), print advertisements (Miller et al., 1999), and fiction television series (Markov & Yoon, 2020; Van Bauwel, 2018). However, the representation of older individuals in romantic comedy films remains unexamined. To determine the presence and strength of these stereotypical representations, this study evaluates the attitudes, health, living conditions, visible psychological states, and interactions of the characters. An ordinal scale was used to measure the presence and strength of the stereotypes (Miller et al., 1999). A representation was coded as "inconsistent" if it did not match most of the characteristics linked to the stereotype, and as "consistent" if it matched nearly all of them.

Representations of diversity and older female characters

Quantitative analysis does not provide you with an in-depth view of a particular group, which can lead to an incorrect idea of the group as homogenous rather than to an acknowledgment of its diversity. The consideration of older female characters as a singular group can potentially undermine the heterogeneity of the group. Nonetheless, such an approach does provide a factual basis for conducting general assessment regarding the visibility of older characters in Hollywood romantic comedies. Moreover, the analysis of their overall presence lends itself to longitudinal observations, enabling the identification of prevailing trends and tendencies. Furthermore, the examination of the collective representation of older female characters can serve as a preliminary step towards undertaking in-depth qualitative analysis. Based on the analysis of 44 popular romantic comedies from the US, it was found that only 24 films featured an older adult. We found 48 characters who were coded as older adults. Despite the growing number of older people in the general population, the proportion of older people is still under-represented in this sample. Remarkably, there was a higher proportion of older characters in the early 2000s than in the last five years. Since the issue of ageism has become more prominent in recent decades, it is odd that there are not more representations of ageing people in romantic comedies in recent years.

All characters could be coded as either male or female. Within the coding scheme, there was room to record other gender expressions outside of the binary gender classification, but in none of the films was anyone identified as non-binary, non-conforming, agender, genderqueer, or trans. In contrast to other studies (e.g., Edström, 2018; Lauzen, 2021), this research found that women outnumbered men in the characters (Men N=22; Women N=26). Women are more prevalent within romantic comedies, as they are also seen as the target audience of these films.

The findings show that 38 characters were coded under the age category 60 - 65 years (79.2%), while significantly fewer characters were coded within the age category 66 - 71 years (N=6, 12.5%), and only two (4.2%) characters were coded in the age category 78 - 83 years, as well as within the age category 'over 83 years' (4.2%). Regarding ethnicity, 93.8 percent of the older characters in our study were coded as white. The most visible minority

group was African American, with 4.2 percent of the older characters being coded as such. Asian older characters were extremely rare, only 2.1 percent of the older characters in our study were coded as Asian. The analysis of the socioeconomic status of the characters showed that most of the older characters were financially in a good position, as we found that 33.3 percent of the older characters were coded as middle-class, and 50 percent were coded as upper class. In contrast, only 4.2 percent of older adult characters were coded as lower class. For 12.5 percent of the characters, the social classes are unknown, or unclear.

Table 2. Frequency and diversity of older adult characters in Hollywood romantic comedies.

	Women		Men		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Age Category						
60 – 65 years	18	69,2	20	91,0	38	79,2
66 – 71 years	4	15,4	2	9,0	6	12,5
72 – 77 years	0	0	0	0	0	0
78 – 83 years	2	7,7	0	0	2	4,2
Older than 83 years	2	7,7	0	0	2	4,2
Ethnicity						
White	24	92,3	21	95,5	45	93,8
African American	1	3,8	1	4,5	2	4,2
Asian	1	3,8	0	0	1	2,1
Social Class						
Lower Class	1	3,8	1	4,5	2	4,2
Middle Class	8	30,8	8	36,4	16	33,3
Upper Class	14	53,8	10	45,5	24	50,0
Not Known	3	11,5	3	13,6	6	12,5
Sexual orientation						
Heterosexual	17	65,4	16	72,7	33	68,8
Not known	9	34,6	6	27,3	15	31,3
Disability						
No Disability	24	100,0	22	92,3	46	95,8
Cognitive	1	0,0	0	3,8	1	2,1
Physical	1	0,0	0	3,8	1	2,1
Role Prominence						
Supporting	7	26,9	4	18,2	11	22,9
Minor	17	65,4	16	72,7	33	68,8
Major	2	7,7	2	9,1	4	8,3
Total	26	54,2	22	45,8	48	100

Regarding the sexual orientation of the characters, the analysis showed that more than half of the representations of the older adult characters (68.8%) contained references to heterosexuality, while the rest contained no references to sexuality. No older LGBT characters were present in this sample. Finally, analysis of disabilities in older adult characters yielded almost no variation, e.g., almost all characters (95.8%) were presented as having no obvious disabilities. There was only one female character (2.1%) with a cognitive disability and one female character (2.1%) with signs of a physical disability. Even though there are a lot of older adults represented within the romantic comedies analyzed, most of the older characters were in a minor role (68.3%). Only four (8.3%) characters had a major role in the film; those characters were the antagonists or protagonist in the story. Eleven characters in the analyzed films had a supporting role. If we look at the role prominence based on gender, 26.9 percent of the women can be found in a supporting role. 65.4 percent of the ageing women had a minor role, while only 7.7 percent were represented in a major role. Ageing

men were found mostly in a minor role (72.7%). Only 9.1 per cent of men are in major roles, but still, more ageing men were represented in a major role than ageing women.

As previously mentioned, the investigated romantic comedies depict a higher representation of women compared to men. The age group of 60-65 had the highest representation for both genders. No men were portrayed in the age categories of 78-83 and above 83, whereas two women belonged to each of these categories. Despite the fact that ageing was not addressed in twenty of the forty-four films sampled, women were still more prevalent in the representations. However, the findings of this study align with those of Markov and Yoon (2020) in that there is a lack of portrayals of ageing characters with disabilities or from lower-class backgrounds. The representations also lacked in diversity for other aspects of identity. The depictions of older characters in Hollywood romantic comedies tend to align with the positive pole of the dichotomy of ageing and the dominant discourse of successful ageing.

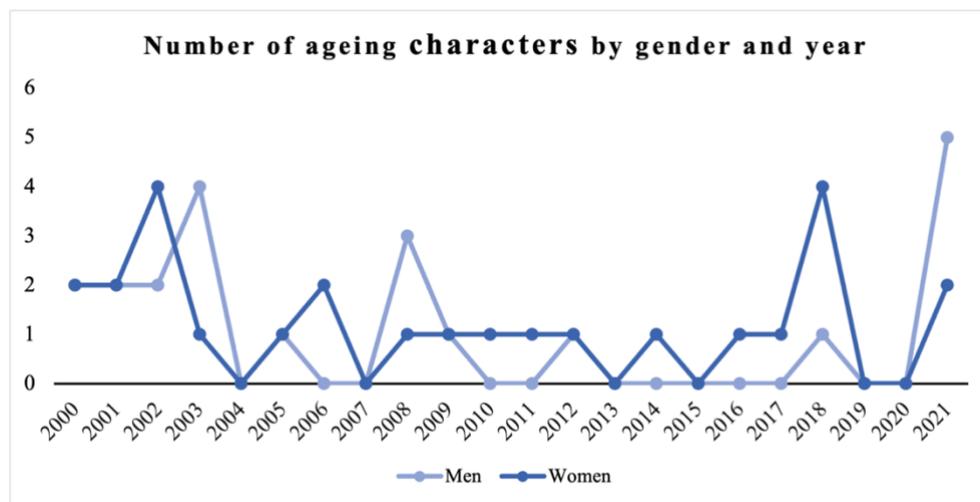


Figure 1. Number of ageing characters by gender and year.

Figure 1 shows how many films contained an older character, for both men and women. In the early 2000s it is mainly older couples who are represented, from 2006 onwards there has been an increase in the number of older women.

Age Stereotypes in Hollywood Rom-Coms

The stereotypes represented in the romantic comedies are the Golden Ager (N=20; 41.7%), Perfect Grandparent (N=16; 33.33%), Despondent (N=6; 12.5%), and Shrew (N=6; 12.5%). The John Wayne Conservative, Recluse, and Severely Impaired stereotypes are never represented. This finding can be linked to the fact that the romantic comedy genre portrays older people more often according to the successful ageing trope, whereas the John Wayne Conservative is more often linked to masculinity, and genres that are perceived as masculine (e.g., action) (Hummert et al., 1994; Markov & Yoon, 2020). The absence of the recluse and severely impaired can be explained by the genre's focus on the successful ageing trope. By means of figure two, we visualize the relationship between stereotypes and gender. Focusing on the positive stereotypes represented in the films analyzed, there were as many masculinities as femininities represented as the Golden Ager (N=10, 50%). Men were more represented as the perfect grandparent (N=9, 56.3%), whereas women were rather represented according to negative stereotypes. 60 percent (N=3) of the women in the analyzed romantic comedies were represented as the despondent, and 83.3 percent (N=4) of them as shrew, while only 40 percent (N=2) and 16.7 percent (N=1) of men were represented as the despondent and shrew respectively.

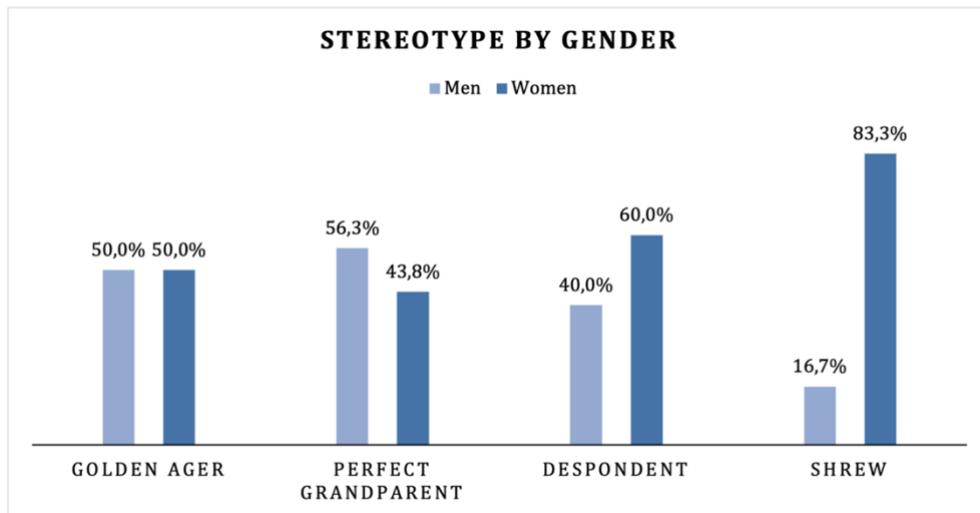


Figure 2. Representation of age stereotypes by gender.

Figure three visualizes the stereotypes used in relation to the age of the characters. Here we see that older adults within the 60-65 age group in the romantic films were mainly portrayed as Golden Ager (N=18, 90%), the Perfect Grandparent (N=14, 87.5%) or the Shrew (N=4, 80%). The 66-71 age group was mainly portrayed as the Despondent (N=2, 40%) and the Shrew (N=1, 20%). Characters aged 78-83 are represented only within the Perfect Grandparent stereotype (N=2, 6.3%). The characters within the age group older than 83 years were mostly represented as Despondent (N= 1, 20%) and Shrew (N=1, 16.7%). There were no ageing characters represented in the age group of 72-77 years.

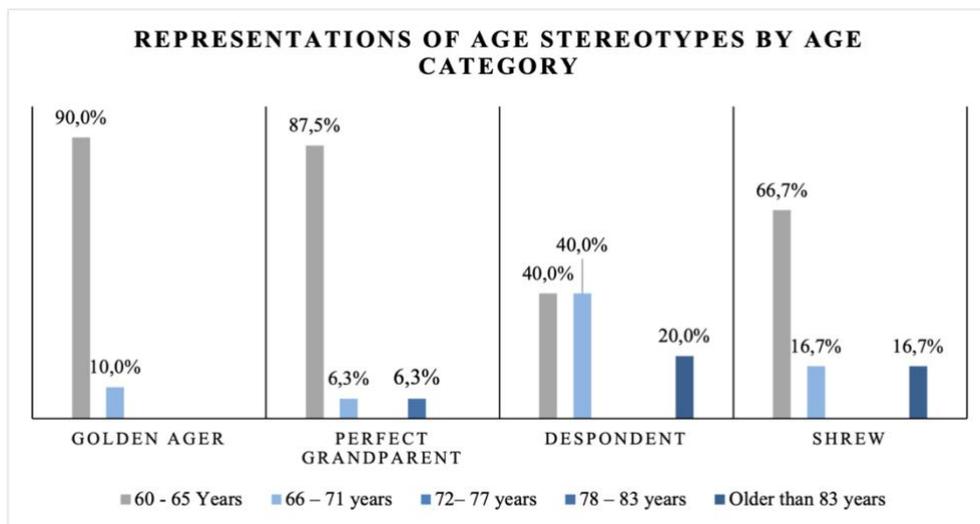


Figure 3. Representations of age stereotypes by age category.

The analysis also considered the representation of age stereotypes in relation to the socio-economic status of the characters, as well as the place where the older characters were mainly seen in the story (e.g., suburbia and rural environment). Looking closer at the representation of the age stereotypes in relation to the socio-economic status of the characters. The majority of the characters are found within the middle and upper classes. Within the middle classes,

two characters were represented as Golden Ager, and eleven of the characters were found as the perfect grandparent. Within the middle-class characters, there was one Despondent and two Shrews. Sixteen characters from the upper class were represented as a Golden Ager. In addition, we also focused on where the ageing characters were represented in the film. This refers to whether the story, that the characters are a part of, takes place in the public or private sphere. In the analyzed films, 70 percent of Golden Agers were represented in the public sphere. 43.8 percent of the characters who fall within the Perfect Grandparent are found in the private sphere. In addition, the Despondent is found mainly in the public sphere. Finally, the characters represented as the Shrew are found both in the public (50%) and the private sphere (50%).

Table 3. Representation of age stereotypes of older characters by age, gender, ethnicity, and role prominence.¹

Age Stereotypes								
	Golden Ager		Perfect Grandparent		Despondent		Shrew	
	Present	Absent	Present	Absent	Present	Absent	Present	Absent
Age								
60 - 77 years	20	24	15	29	4	40	5	39
> 77 years	0	4	1	3	1	3	0	4
Fisher's exact test	P=0.105, OR=0.545 95% IC=0.417-0.714		P=0.593, OR=0.644 95% IC=0.062-6.740		P=0.366, OR=3.333 95% IC=0.278-40.029		P=0.634, OR=0.886 95% IC=0.797-0.985	
Gender								
Women	10	16	7	19	3	23	4	22
Men	10	12	9	13	2	20	1	21
Fisher's exact test	P=0.770, OR=0.750 95% IC=0.237-2.375		P=0.237, OR=0.532 95% IC=0.158-1.791		P=0.581, OR=1.304 95% IC=0.198-8.607		P=0.230, OR=3.818 95% IC=0.394-37.010	
Ethnicity								
Caucasian	20	25	14	31	5	40	5	40
Minority	0	3	2	1	0	3	0	3
Fisher's exact test	P=0.189, OR=0.556 95% IC=0.428-0.721		P=0.254, OR=4.429 95% IC=0.370-52.990		P=0.714, OR=0.889 95% IC=0.802-0.986		P=0.714, OR=0.889 95% IC=0.802-0.986	
Role								
Major	1	3	0	4	0	4	3	1
Minor	19	25	16	28	5	39	2	42
Fisher's exact test	P=0.442, OR=2.280 95% IC=0.220-0.23.680		P=0.194, OR=1.571 95% IC=1.257-1.965		P=0.634, OR=1.128 95% IC=1.015-1.254		P=0.002, OR=0.16 95% IC=0.001-0.229 ²	

Table 3 shows how the age stereotypes in the analyzed films relate to a character's role, gender, ethnicity, and age. The distribution of age stereotypes did not vary significantly according to gender, ethnicity, and age. A significant relation was found between having a supporting role or a leading role and the assignment of the negative stereotype of the shrew (P=0.002, OR=0.16, 95% IC=0.001-0.229).

¹ The intention was to use a chi-square test, but in all cases, the conditions were not met. It was therefore opted to report the results of Fisher's exact tests.

Discussion

The findings in our study show that older women are quite frequently represented within the genre of romantic comedy films. This can be partly explained by the fact that the genre has women as its target audience. It is disappointing though that the researched romantic comedies show so little diversity in the portrayal of older characters. This is something we found in previous research by Lee, Carpenter, and Meyers (2007), and by Markov and Yoon (2020). In our study the characters were almost all represented according to a positive stereotype. This can be linked to the fact that the romantic comedy genre is known for its positive representations. Unfortunately, the majority of the films examined do not challenge stereotypes and prejudices surrounding ageing, but rather confirm them. Within the positive stereotypes, the Golden Ager and Perfect Grandparent were the most represented. As many as 41.7 percent (N=20) of older adults were portrayed as Golden Ager. The Perfect Grandparent stereotype was also frequently used, at 33.3 percent (N=16). Older adults who are stereotyped in a negative way fall within the Despondent (N=6; 12.5%) and Shrew (N=6; 12.5%). The stereotypes John Wayne conservative, Recluse and Severely Impaired were not found in the romantic comedies analyzed. This is also consistent with previous research by Markov and Yoon (2020). Despite their research focusing on primetime television programs, there are quite a few similarities to our studied romantic comedies. Further research will have to reveal whether this is a trend or rather a coincidental similarity.

Research by Van Bauwel (2018) on representations of ageing women in television fiction (Cf. *Sex and the City*, *Desperate Housewives* and *Girls*) shows a persistent underrepresentation of older adults. This underrepresentation can be linked to the widespread meaning of ageing in our western societies. Here there is a fixation on youth, as well as the rejection of old age (Van Bauwel, 2018). This has far-reaching consequences for self-confidence and opportunities in society. The same findings emerge in this study. Even though older female characters were represented in almost a third of the films analyzed, they are mainly to be found in a minor role. There is also little diversity in the older women represented. The representations consisted of mainly white, heterosexual (if mentioned at all), middle-class and able-bodied women. Most of the female characters are third agers. Those characters are active, enjoy life, and maintain a healthy lifestyle. This also corresponds to earlier research (Loos & Ivan, 2018; Marshall & Rahman, 2015) stating that mainly third agers are represented, while fourth agers are often ignored or depicted in a negative way. This can be interpreted as the idea that a woman's deserving of respect declines as she gets older. For men, this is not always the case: they are often seen as wise and receive a large share of respect, even as they get older.

Building upon previous findings (e.g., Edström, 2018; Markov & Yoon, 2020), our research sought to expand the scope by incorporating identity features other than age. The aim was to gain a deeper understanding of the diversity of representations of ageing individuals. It is crucial to acknowledge that minority groups are not homogenous, and that therefore a diverse representation of these groups is necessary. Recent research (e.g., Edström, 2018; Jerslev, 2018; Lauzen, 2021; Lewis et al., 2011; P. N. Miller et al., 1999) shows that increasing the representations of minority groups in media can help to counter and improve negative attitudes towards said group (Wojcieszak & Azrout, 2016). Thus, there is a need for a more diverse representation of older adult characters, for all genders, in popular romantic comedies, as that may have an impact on the attitudes that the majority groups have about older adults. In the films included in our sample, stereotypes were mostly confirmed and there was insufficient diversity. This also confirms earlier findings from Bazzini et al. (1997), and Markov and Yoon (2020). As a result, many people do not see themselves represented and thus remain invisible to the public. After conducting a thorough analysis of romantic comedy films, only a limited number of older characters who were over 85 years old, disabled, and of Asian or African American descent were identified. There were no representations of older adults with a non-normative sexual orientation and gender. Such patterns of representation reveal significant inequalities within the older adult population.

The most vulnerable are rendered completely invisible, and the stigma on ageing is thus perpetuated. One bright spot that stands out in the representations of older adults is that positive age stereotypes were primarily used. However, the use of positive stereotypes can certainly be criticized, as they are often stereotypes that are difficult for many older adults to realize. These stereotypes also create pitfalls, as women who deviate from these stereotypes are often invisible (Tortajada et al., 2018, p.2; Woodward, 2006). Negative stereotypes were used less frequently. However, it is striking that within the sample more women are found in negative stereotypes than men. This again confirms what previous studies already stated. Unlike previous research (Markov & Yoon, 2020), which found no significant relationship between the stereotype of the Shrew and the role, this study only found a significant relationship between the stereotype of the Shrew and the role. This contrasts with the study of Markov and Yoon (2020) who found a significant relationship between the stereotypes of the Golden Ager, the Perfect Grandparent, the John Wayne Conservative, the Despondent and the role. However, it should be noted that their research focuses on primetime television series, while this study focuses on romantic comedies.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. Firstly, the sample size of romantic comedy films analyzed was relatively small and only comprised of popular Hollywood productions, thereby excluding European or non-Western films. Secondly, the popularity of the romantic comedy genre varies globally and may not be representative of all audiences. In the future, it would be beneficial to consider the representation of ageing in national productions, as well as to consider the role that policy and funding play in film production. Additionally, the integration of streaming services that create their own content could offer a broader examination of representation. Furthermore, the age stereotype measurement used in this study was outdated and limited in scope, leading to limited representations of characters. Revising these stereotypes could improve the results of future studies. Additionally, future research should include older adults themselves and aim to conduct a qualitative analysis for a more comprehensive examination of representation and meaning.

Despite these limitations, this study offers valuable contributions to the existing literature on the representation of older adults in films. The results show a scarcity of research on the representation of ageing in romantic comedies, and a need for a more diverse representation of older adults in film.

Conclusion

Compared to other age studies, this study's results give a general and exploratory overview, with the downside that a quantitative study does not dive deep into the stereotypical portrayal of older women. Nevertheless, the study's value lies in enabling future engagements with Hollywood film production. It is crucial to note that character monitoring is a reductive and abstract undertaking, and it is unwise to claim that Hollywood romantic comedies are unfriendly towards older people solely because half portray older characters in supporting roles. The study's methodology regarding the role of older people in Hollywood romantic comedies is noteworthy, as it documents older characters over an extended period. The study highlights how looking young is still crucial, despite debates surrounding the representation of women. Additionally, the findings demonstrate that certain stereotypes, mainly linked to the successful ageing discourse, are redeployed. Therefore, the results provide a starting point for a qualitative investigation into the representation of older people in Hollywood romantic comedies. Although the study's quantitative analysis has limitations, the results indicate certain trends. Further, a broad exploratory quantitative analysis is necessary to conduct a deeper qualitative analysis. Overall, the findings serve as a necessary framework to examine the representation of older people in Hollywood romantic comedies, but they are not an endpoint. On the contrary, the study rather offers a starting point for future research that explores the portrayal of older people in Hollywood romantic comedies more thoroughly.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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