

Ageism in Cinema: A Thematic Analysis of Related Research in the World

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Abstract: *Cinema plays a significant role in shaping culture and social identities. Cinema influences people by making a highly realistic representation of the human world and the interactions within it. Ageism means resorting to stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination that are based on age. The representation of aging is a set of images created under “multilayered discourses in a society like socio-cultural, educational, economical and political”, including popular culture like -cinema. This paper reflects a domination of quantitative and gerontological studies in the present scholarly engagements. However, there is an immediate need to engage more with qualitative or mixed-method approaches, discourse analysis and ethnographic studies to capture the lived experiences of aging populations and their interactions with media. Consequently, these studies will foreground emerging trends, including the intersection of ageism with gender, race, and digital exclusion, as well as the impact of algorithmic bias and platform economies on the visibility of older voices.*

Keywords: *Ageism, Review of Literature, Cinema, Gender, Content Analysis*

Introduction

Cinema plays a significant role in shaping culture and social identities. Cinema influences people by making a highly realistic representation of human world and the interactions within it.¹ Ageism is the expression for stereotypes (how we see the world), prejudice (how we feel about others), and discrimination (how we treat people) that are based on age.² Ageism, which is defined as the stereotypical beliefs of older people that result in discriminatory attitudes, actions, and social marginalisation, affects how human rights and citizenship are articulated for

older people.³ Such viewpoints serve as a pretext for society's tolerance of elder abuse by both degrading and devaluing older persons.⁴ Everyone is affected by ageism. However, ageism is a problem that mostly affects older individuals. A WHO survey claims that half of the world's population has anti-older-people attitudes.⁵ Elder abuse is a serious social problem today.

Gerontology is the study of old age and ageing.⁶ Gerontology is the study of the social, cultural, psychological, cognitive, and biological aspects of aging. There are mainly two types of gerontology one is social gerontology and bio-gerontology. Social gerontology deals more with the social and emotional aspects of aging while bio-gerontology studies the physical and biological aspects. Old age is a very contradictory concept. Old age cannot be defined exactly because it does not have the same meaning in all countries. With the rapid growth of industrialisation, globalisation and technological advancements, the social structure of a society is changing swiftly. Such as in Indian society, the traditional joint family system has now been replaced by the modern nuclear family system. Therefore, the traditional values and institutions are gradually disintegrating and the intergenerational bonds that were the defining characteristic of the traditional family are ebbing away. Due to these reasons, the older people in the family feel isolated and suffer from a generational gap.⁷ In developed countries it often refers to individual over 65 years of age as old,⁸ and in developing country like India people over 60 years or above are considered as senior citizens or elderly, according to National Policy for Older Persons.⁹ "The perception of one's age is not necessarily defined by chronological age and can be disjunctive Age is also felt in terms of one's physical facilities functional age and the rites of passage one takes social age".¹⁰ Clarke, L. H. (2018) in her article 'Gender, (in) equality and the body in later life' described "older adults are systematically marginalised and denied resources and opportunities in the workplace, the health care system, and in everyday interactions."¹¹ According to National Policy for Older Persons 2021, "Population ageing is one of the mega trends that is affecting sustainable development. It has significant impact on economies, societies and the environment".¹²

With Gayatri Spivak's (1988), commentary on the work of the Subaltern Studies Group that questioned and exposed their patronising attitude, the idea of the "subaltern" gained greater prominence and currency.¹³ Subaltern is defined by Gayatri Spivak as "A subaltern is not merely someone who is oppressed, the other, or not a getting their piece of pie".¹⁴ Those who lack a voice, are erased from history, and are disregarded since their actions don't matter in terms of culture or structure are considered subaltern.¹⁵ As people are segregated based on gender, class, caste, area, religion, and other narratives, they are unable to speak up. They are unable to stand together due to these differences.¹⁶ Spivak "makes the point that the invisibility and silence of subaltern people are not because of any innate lack of speech ability but rather are a consequence of the refusal of others to listen".¹⁷

The representation of aging is a set of images created under “multilayered discourses in a society like socio-cultural, educational, economical and political”, including the popular culture like -cinema.¹⁸ These issues include physical, psychological as well as socio-economical factors.¹⁹

Methodology of Thematic Analysis

The data for analysis was extracted from Science Direct and Web of Science data base by using key words “AGEISM AND CINEMA”, “AGEISM AND MASS MEDIA” “AGEISM AND FILMS”. The initial result elicited of research literature was more than 5 lakhs, however only research articles and book chapters were included in the analysis. Hence, the total number of research literature available was 30,832 which were further filtered on the basis of use of term “Elderly”, “Ageism” and “older people” and language was selected only English and subject was only social sciences and the final data on only ageism and cinema was 73 research literatures (see Fig.1).

Using Systematic Literature Review (SLR) and Bibliometric Analysis, this paper draws the field of research around research themes, methods, development trends, and citation networks in the field of representation of Ageism in Mass Media like Cinema especially in the Indian context from 2013 to 2022. The literatures were then segregated based on different categories and then broad themes were generated out of them on the status of contemporary research on ageism and cinema. Consequently, this paper identifies research trends and thematic shifts in these ten years under study and highlights the specific use of narratives and fictional tropes used in representing ageism in world cinema.

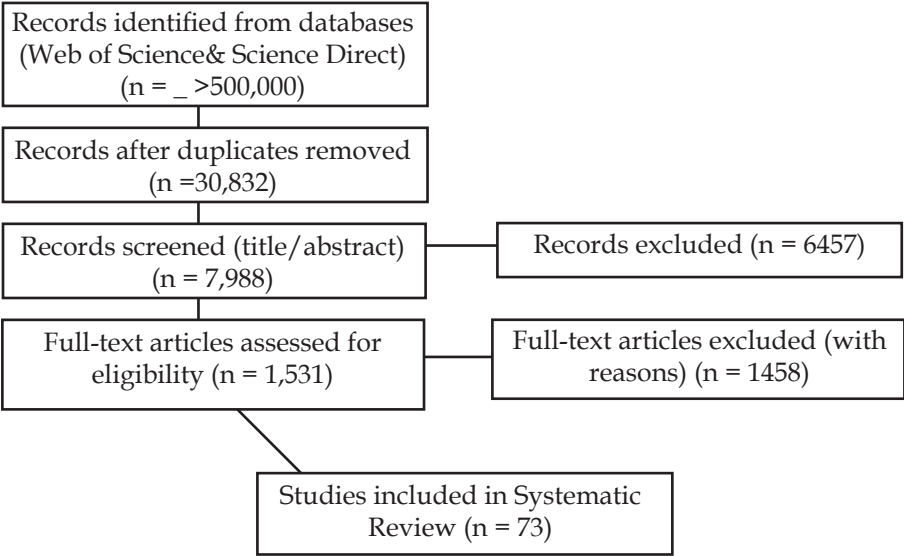


Fig 1. The PRISMA flow Diagram (Source: Authors)

The study selection process was conducted in accordance with the PRISMA guidelines (see Fig.1). A comprehensive search of electronic databases from Web of Science and ScienceDirect, initially yielded more than 500,000 records. Following the removal of duplicate entries, 30,832 unique records remained. At this stage, only studies within the social sciences domain were retained, while records from other subject areas were excluded.

A subsequent filtering process, focusing specifically on the themes of ageism and cinema, reduced the dataset to 7,988 records, which were subjected to title and abstract screening. During this phase, 6,457 records were excluded for not meeting the predefined inclusion criteria. As a result, 1,531 articles were considered potentially relevant and were retrieved for full-text assessment.

After detailed evaluation of the full-text articles, 1,458 studies were excluded due to reasons such as lack of relevance to the research objectives, inappropriate study design, or insufficient data. Finally, a total of 73 studies fulfilled all eligibility criteria and were included in the systematic review.

Theoretical Framework for studying ageism

Social Exclusion theory, Political Economy theory, and Subaltern by Gayatri Spivak may be borrowed to study ageism in films. Gerontology is increasingly concerned with social exclusion. Social exclusion reflects a combination of socioeconomic ageing patterns, ongoing economic insecurity, and the vulnerability of ageing cohorts to increasing inequalities.²⁰ The concept of social exclusion emerged as a sociological concept in Europe policy circles, particularly in the 1990s spread out through Gerontological research and public policy debates in the United Kingdom.^{21 22} According to Billette and Lavoie "social exclusion is a process of non-acknowledgement and deprivation of rights and resources of certain segments of the population (in this case, older adults) that takes the shape of power dynamics between groups with divergent visions and interests". They have discussed seven dimensions to exclusion of ageing people from the society "(1) symbolic exclusion (negative images, overrepresentations, and invisibility); (2) identity exclusion (multiple identities are dismissed and a person's identity is reduced to belonging to one singular group, for example, "old", "frail", "burdensome"); (3) socio-political exclusion (barriers to civic/political participation); (4) institutional exclusion (reduced access to services); (5) economic exclusion (lack of financial resources); (6) exclusion of significant social ties (absence/loss of social network); (7) territorial exclusion (reduced geographic living area, unsafe neighbourhood)".²³ This research will try to find out through these elements what are the Gerontological issues that are emerging in selected Bengali cinema.

Political economics is the study of the interactions between political and economic (i.e., legal, institutional, and governmental) systems. An important aspect of life course analysis looks at how profit-driven markets, such Health Policy, ageing programmes, and the medical-industrial complex, exploit the

needs of the elderly and turn them into commodities.²⁴ Smith was interested in “how humanity arranges to allocate scarce resources with a view towards fulfilling certain demands and not others” and defined political economics as the study of wealth (material commodities) or the distribution of resources.²⁵ The creation, distribution, exchange, and consumption of wealth as well as its effects on societal welfare and individual welfare were also the focus of political economics.

Political economy is the study of the power relations and social relations that mutually determine the production, circulation, and utilization of resources, as defined by Vincent Mosco in “the Political Economy of Communication”.²⁶ He also said political economics is about survival and control, or how societies are structured to generate the things they need for survival and how law and order are upheld in order to achieve social objectives.²⁷

Estes and Binney (1989) in their article ‘The Biomedicalization of Aging: Dangers and Dilemmas’ discussed about the “biomedicalization of ageing”, where society has labelled old age and ageing as a health problem needing an increasing amount of medical care.²⁸ They assert that major health care policies for the elderly are reflective of the biomedical definition of health, that views health as the absence of disease and ageing as a biologically predetermined process of inevitable decline.²⁹ Voluntary professional health associations, life and health insurance providers, the fitness and healthy food sectors, and certain employers—these are just a few examples of the private-sector organizations that actively promote health. Political Economic Theory is crucial for this research as it will examine the gerontological issues embedded in a society using a political-economic background. This research will further explore how the health policies and insurances as well as healthy food sectors are creeping into the lives of the elderly through their portrayals in films.

Cultural capital, language and symbolic power are conceptualized by French theorist Pierre Bourdieu. He developed the concept of cultural capital which refers the collection of symbolic elements like knowledge, dress, attitude, habit, taste, material belonging, degree and certificate etc. that one requires through being part of a particular society.³⁰ He further said cultural capital is the symbol of social inequality.³¹ According to Bourdieu, there are three types of cultural capital: Embodied, objectified, and institutionalised cultural capital.³² Embodied cultural capital is central to our identity as well as how we define ourselves. It is the compilation of knowledge, belief, skills, and qualities that a person develops over the course of their life.³³ This cultural capital is internalised and independent of having access to worldly possessions. It exhibits the person's propensity for learning and personal development as well as their capability to engage with their surroundings. The term “objectified cultural capital” denotes the cultural elements that may be used to one's benefit in society. Clothing, jewellery, artistic creations, books, and other tangible items having symbolic significance and social status within a particular culture fall under this category.³⁴

These things are frequently interpreted as being a reflection of the person's social position or class. Institutionalised cultural capital implies recognition or validation obtained from an organisation, most often in the form of academic degrees or certificates.³⁵

Locating ageism in cinema

Cinema is one of the powerful tools that can change the mind of a society. It is the mirror of the society and culture that reflex the past, present and future.³⁶ Cinema is an effective learning tool for promoting social and community issues.³⁷ Rogers explores that cinema questions various issues in a society like gender, race, class, religion and ethnicity.³⁸ They work as a "powerful socialising agents" and to serve as vehicles of "public information" where we can raise various issues and solve the problem in society.³⁹ The aging problem is a vital issue in society.⁴⁰ Several research works have done on the issues of aging in films. But most of the research has been done concerning Hollywood film. There has been minimal research on the representation of aging people in Bengali cinema. This study tries to find out how Bengali cinema representation of various aging issues.

Cinema played an important role in society because it has 'a powerful effect on the consciousness of the viewer'.⁴¹ The film industry in India produces 600 films per year in various regional languages movie as Bengali, Hindi, Malayalam and others.⁴² The Guardian reported: It is estimated that around a third of forthcoming Hollywood productions are being made with an eye on older audience".⁴³ Film industry in India has been produced lots of cinema on the portrayal of Aging people. But research in this field is limited.

Karasik, et al. (2014) in their research, produced a typology of cinema on ageing related issues based on content analysis, which are classified into three categories- 1. "Social relationship (ageism and stereotypes, diversity, family relationships and sexuality and intimacy) 2. Health (Cognitive impairment, health and wellness, care giving, and death and dying) and 3. Engagement with environment (work and retirement, economics and financial issues, housing and policy and programs)".⁴⁴ Most of the studies on aging people in cinema have shown on health issues. Very rare study has shown which covered the various issue on aging people. This study will focus on various Gerontological issues in Bengali cinema.

Mandal and Rai (2020) in their article, 'Gerontological issues and Bengali films: a critical study of select ageing characters' concluded that most of the Bengali cinema highlighted physical and psychological issues like isolation, abuse, depression, anxiety, deadly psychosomatic issues, and sense of jeopardy faced by the elderly people in urban areas.⁴⁵ Confidence level of elderly people decreases with time and creates a lack of self-efficiency and fear. This article has also shown how various policies are important for elderly people and suggested various policy initiatives in favour of elderly people for their healthy life.⁴⁶

Rees Jones and Hyde have shown with the advent of new capitalism, there is a considerable amount of change in workplaces for aging people. He has clearly pointed out, "In the 'new capitalism', ageing is a domain of uselessness. This presents a paradox because although people are living longer and are healthier, prejudice in the workforce of new capitalism means workers are considered 'too old' at younger ages. The paradox becomes doubly acute when one considers the length of time individuals are likely to experience in retirement".⁴⁷

Featherstone and Wernick (1995) in their book 'Images of aging: Cultural representations of later life' focused on the problem of the relationship between body of elder people and culture. And while exploring the meaning the aging and old age, this book also refers to Simone de Beauvoir's characterization of old age as 'an unrealizable' and the consideration of the elderly to be a separate species altogether".⁴⁸ Furthermore, the book mentions that most of 'Critiques have been increasingly made of what are seen as demeaning images of the elderly' and because of that the elderly people 'suffer from the imposition of negative stereotypes'.⁴⁹

Multiple changes at various levels occur as people age. Some things, like wrinkles or grey hair, stand out more than others.⁵⁰ Different arrangements of skin surface lipids may be the root cause of skin alterations brought on by ageing and ethnic variations in skin characteristics between young and old. This article discusses the role of genetics in skin ageing and focuses in particular on the variations seen in both genders and different ethnic populations.⁵¹ However, the way that hair is portrayed as it grows, recedes, gets tangled, greasy, split, or becomes brittle indicates that it is not just an essential component of our self-care routine but also a crucial component of an ongoing, embodied biographical narrative. Over time, our relationship with ourselves can be significantly influenced by our hair. The way our hair changes, enables us to detect our own ageing. Hair can serve as a marker of time, with various trends in fashion or more personal milestones reflected in its various styles. However, it also represents the passage of time at the point where our biological and biographical ageing collide. As an example, the distinctiveness of grey hair as a marker of ageing has received attention in the UK, as well as in other parts of Europe and North America.⁵²

Despite several considerable efforts on discussing the positive discourses of aging, previous pieces of literature lack to highlight that presentation of aging and aged people on screens. Debbie Laliberte Rudman (2015) focused on the issue of reconstruction and individual negotiation in the context of retirement in Canada, informed by Foucauldian-informed governmentality theory. It has been emphasized how participants' discussions about their bodies, which were important components of their accounts of planning for and living in retirement, were placed about discourses on "positive" aging. It is intriguing how aged people talked about their "desired and undesired bodies".⁵³ Old people tend to reject the term 'old' as a negative connotation created by ageist attitude while

approaching a positive discourse towards body and aging. The literature focused mainly on the physical aspects of the body which should be maintained well (as being said by informants) to pretend the "old" ageist attitude and also to feel positive about oneself as ending in a nursing home's bed scared them which is shown in the literature.⁵⁴

Hori argues that the representation of aging and the aged is socially constructed and circulated. She further stresses that the image of aging in popular culture is gendered and there are certain double standards for aging like women are typically considered to be aging sooner, weaker than their male counterparts, and less attractive at the older ages.⁵⁵ But on the other hand certain positive aspects of aging such as "sacred, possessing wisdom, solemnity, and serenity are associated with older men in Japanese Classics".⁵⁶

In the article, "Images of Positive Aging: A Case Study of Retirement Choice Magazine" the researchers assert that we live in an ageist society, where the attitude toward the elderly is mostly characterised by a negative concoction of sympathy, fear, disrespect, condescension, and neglect. Additionally, the earlier initiatives of Retirement Choice to support an active and positive image for individuals approaching retirement find their expression in a variety of pursuits, including gardening, painting, sewing, photography, watching sports, owning pets, and building and collecting model soldiers. However, portrayals of this sort are incredibly uncommon in popular culture.⁵⁷

Ageing has diverse effects on men and women, reflecting their different roles throughout life and resulting in diverse experiences and requirements as they age. Many of these inequalities stem from unequal power dynamics. Varied countries and cultures have different approaches to gender-related issues. In most societies, women have relatively low social position than men, that further places them at risk for physical and sexual abuse, poorer diets, and limited access to education. They are also excluded from decision-making. From a news report on Elder Abuse published by WHO, we can discern that elder abuse is an act of inappropriate behaviour or action towards the elderly people that has a detrimental effect on them. This actually "violates the human rights and includes physical, sexual, psychological and emotional abuse; financial and material abuse; abandonment; neglect; and serious loss of dignity and respect".⁵⁸

However, Rubinstein and Medeiros draw attention to the lack of information and the evaluation gaps in the book 'Successful Aging'.⁵⁹ The literature argued that the shift to a locus of responsibility for successful aging that emphasizes the individual precisely mirrors the transition in political economic theory that took place simultaneously on a national and international level, such as the transition to a neoliberal assessment of human motivations and social and economic behaviour. The literature showed how key elements of the Successful Aging paradigm, particularly its emphasis on (a) the individual as the identifier to collective action; (b) its implicit formation of a class of unsatisfactory adults, about whom little discourse has been made; and (c) an inability to offer any

interpretive notion, apart from the independent initiative, are representative of the advancement of the neoliberal socioeconomic theory and implementation since the 1980s.⁶⁰

Neoliberalism seems have subsumed globalisation as an explanation for contemporary forms of economic restructuring. "The process of opening up national economies to global actors such as multinational corporations and global institutions such as the IMF and World Bank was understood to be referred to as Neoliberalism".⁶¹ Neoliberal theory posits potential threats to the moral status of elderly people, especially dependent persons and policy infrastructure to support retirement security.⁶² Hence, there can be studies around cinematic representation of the different gerontological issues faced by aging people with respect to their sex, caste, economic class and location of residence (urban/rural/semi-urban) in a society. Furthermore, cinema may be analysed to look for possible identification of aged as the subaltern. The prior studies mostly concentrated on health and gerontological issues situating them with medicine and health infrastructure, while questions have not been raised around established gender power relationships and intersectionalities among the represented aged in cinema. Consequently, some analysis can also focus on flagging the representational codes used to portray the inclusionist or exclusionist attitude towards the aged in an urban society.

Possibilities of studies on Ageism and media

Content analysis may be adopted for this kind of a study with a primary focus on qualitative approach.⁶³ Qualitative content analysis plays a significant role in assessing perceived situations and the human condition in various circumstances. Data in qualitative content analysis are represented in words and themes, allowing for some findings to be interpreted.⁶⁴ Ramasubramanian, S. (2005) has examined in his research 'A Content Analysis of the Portrayal of India in Films Produced in the West' the visual aspects of western cinema in relation to its portrayal of Third world countries and its people. In his methodological approach, he has divided his research into two parts- 1. Scene Level Analysis, and 2. Character Level Analysis.⁶⁵ Similarly for this research researchers may divide their analysis of gerontological issues in select cinema into two parts- i. Analysis at the scene level and ii. Analysis at character level. At the Scene Level this research would examine the overall gerontological concerns, how does society play a role in it, and how the reaction of the people against these concerns has been portrayed. On the other hand, at the character level, this research will try to examine how both the external and internal factors like economy, social position, mental health, money affect elderly characters in a cinema. Karasik, Rona J., et al. (2014) has given a typology of cinema based on different levels like "social relationships (ageism and stereotypes, diversity, family relationships, and sexuality and intimacy); health (cognitive impairment, health and wellness, care-giving, and death and dying); and engagement with environment (work

and retirement, economics and financial issues, housing, and policy and programs)" elderly characters in a cinema.⁶⁶ Using the same typology, researchers can categorise the findings into three sections: 1. Social relationship, 2. Health, and 3. Engagement with environment. The study can borrow from social semiotic analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis. Social semiotic analysis uses a detailed and explicit method to analyse the meanings that are established by the syntactic relations between the characters, time and things and others portrayed in cinema. These meanings are described as not only figurative, but also interactive and they perceived truth value of visuals.⁶⁷

Conclusion

This study reflects that there has been a growing concern over the representation of the elderly in the recent years. While the studies are mostly concentrated around the domains of media studies, gerontology, and communication, with increasing interdisciplinary engagement in recent years, there is still scope for engaging with the theories to foreground how representational traits in media narratives construct, reinforce, or challenge age-based stereotypes.

Further, this paper also highlights how studies on mainstream media, including news, film, and advertising, has historically perpetuated reductive portrayals of older individuals, often framing them through lenses of decline, dependency, or invisibility. Consequently, it has been observed that there is ample scope for the study of representations influenced by digital media ecosystems and participatory cultures, as older adults have turned into active subjects in consuming media themselves rather than being passive subjects.

This paper also questions the disproportionate research around the older adults in media geographically, since most of the studies remain dominated by the Global North, with relatively limited contributions from the Global South. This also reflects a critical gap in analysing the association of culture, geography and representational traits in media. Although, we find a domination of quantitative and gerontological studies, there is an immediate need to engage more with qualitative or mixed-method approaches, discourse analysis and ethnographic studies to capture the lived experiences of aging populations and their interactions with media. Consequently, these studies will foreground emerging trends, including the intersection of ageism with gender, race, and digital exclusion, as well as the impact of algorithmic bias and platform economies on the visibility of older voices.

Overall, this study concludes that while media plays a pivotal role in shaping societal attitudes toward aging, the harm of misrepresentation and gendered ageism can be rectified through adequate scholarly attention to inclusive representation.

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