

The Manifestation of Gerontophobic Stereotypes in Russian Television

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Abstract

Global demographic age-related changes make it increasingly relevant to ensure the harmonious integration of the elderly into social life. This process is complicated by the inadequate perception of senior citizens by other members of society. The media is a primary means of creating a specific social perception of the elderly. Addressing the situation in Russia, we examine the nature of the gerontophobic stereotypes spread through television. Based on the TV program's content analysis results, the author proposes a rating of the most widespread stereotypes, such as distorted perceptions based on financial standing, external social evaluation of behavior, education and professional-labor abilities, opportunities for recreation and leisure, and family social roles. In the present study, we juxtapose the obtained empirical data from the publications on senior citizens' problems in Russia, analyze whether the revealed stereotypes correlate to the real situation, and establish their sources. The paper highlights the significant role of television in forming a negative social image of the elderly and the older generation's falling social status in Russia. The media's negative image hinders senior citizens' reintegration into all spheres of social life and hampers their potential.

Keywords: Population aging, stereotypes, gerontophobia, television, mass media, social role, social structure

Introduction

Population aging is the central problem of today's society. The elderly population is steadily growing, especially in developed countries (Trofimov, 2017). The current trend gives rise to gloomy demographic and economic forecasts. The situation in Russia is no exception. With the country's total population of 146.8 million people in 2019, about 37.4 million (25.4%) were over the working age, and about 31.2 million (21.0%) were aged 60+ years (Russia in Figures, 2019). By 2030, the population share over 60 years of age is expected to increase to 26.0% (Denisenko et al., 2018). The figures are confirmed by the World Bank (Levina, 2015). By 2025, there will be around 18.0% of the elderly in the country, and every sixth of them will need long-term care. This will entail substantial costs of 4.0% of GDP, which is comparable to national defense spending and will imply the working-age population's involvement to care for the elderly (Ramensky, Ramenskaya & Ramenskaya, 2008). The negative consequences of demographic aging are already having a noticeable impact on the functioning of the pension, social security, and health care systems (Eakin & Witten, 2018).

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Under such conditions, effective response to new demographic challenges is impossible without using the social, cultural, and economic potential of the growing cohort of the elderly. This makes it possible to take a fresh look at the role of senior citizens in society. However, we have to admit that Russian society is not yet ready to meet its old age with dignity. The older generation still enjoys minor social roles. Old age acts as a factor predisposing to downward social mobility. The problems of discrimination against older people, leading to their exclusion, are still quite relevant. Modern Russian society perceives its senior members through the prism of stereotypes. Social institutions interact with seniors mainly as protection subjects, thereby supporting the prevailing opinion about the elderly as dependents unable to benefit society and forming attitudes among the older generation towards passive and dependent living.

The media, and particularly television, are the primary sources of gerontophobic stereotypes. Having analyzed the Russian mass media, Petrova (2009) concludes that they rarely cover any aspects of the older generation's living. In the case, if such issues are anyhow discussed, senior citizens are treated as an object of assistance, care, and supervision, or positioned as poor, sickly, and helpless individuals being at the lowest rung of the social ladder and counting on mercy and compassion and, primarily, on financial aid. According to Petrova, the mass media create an image of people whose interests are limited to caring for their families, grandchildren, and country house and, on rare occasions, doing age-appropriate sports.

The current article presents the results of a study of Russian television in stereotyping an older person's image in the public mind of Russians. The purpose of the research is to identify TV-produced stereotypes about the elderly and correlate such stereotyped perceptions with the actual socio-demographic, physiological, economic, and other characteristics of older people.

Literature Review

A detailed analysis of global demographic aging and its socio-economic consequences is presented in the works by Eakin and Witten (2018), Denisenko et al. (2018), and Taziev (2015). The researchers conclude that demographic aging is irreversible, and at the same time, there is a need to develop mechanisms for adapting society to a new reality. Chahrak and Ugryniuk (2016), Savinov, Bistyaykina, and Soloviova (2018), and Gelman (2019) assess the effectiveness of governments' measures around the globe to counter the negative consequences of population aging. They agree on the critical importance of realizing the older population's potential to overcome new demographic challenges.

In sociology and psychology, the term 'stereotype' traditionally applies to a particular set of relatively stable, simplified generalizations about a group or class of people or abstract mental representations of social groups, i.e., group schemes and group prototypes (Reber, 1995; Manstead, Hewstone, 1996). Stereotypes perform an important social function as they help individuals to navigate through a rapidly changing environment. Previous experience and information are transformed into the most convenient and traditional patterns, i.e., stereotypes. Nevertheless, stereotypes can be a good thing for an individual, but they often turn out to be a source of severe problems for the entire society. Nowadays, gerontophobic stereotypes of the public mind are a significant obstacle for senior citizens wishing to integrate into all spheres of society. Deep-seated in the collective consciousness, stereotypes create the image of the elderly according to a particular negative template dominating in Russia: seniors are regarded as lonely, dependent (including financially), unable to deliver tangible benefits, physically and mentally disabled

members of society. Kite, Deaux, and Miele (1993) found that stereotypes about older people were more substantial than those about gender differences. The widespread age-related discriminatory practices, gerontophobic attitudes, and stereotypes have introduced a new ageism concept. According to Butler (1969), “ageism can be seen as a process of systematic stereotyping and discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this with skin color and gender.”

Kocherova and Chutcheva (2019), Shakurova (2018) bear compelling evidence of the mass media’s growing importance as a source of the stereotypes rooted in the collective consciousness. The media’s influential role in resolving socialization, cultural-educational development, and maintaining national traditions is demonstrated in (Yessenbekova, 2015, 2016, 2018a,b; Yessenbekova et al., 2020). Novikova (2019) and Petrova (2009) prove that the media are the primary agents of gerontophobic stereotypes in today’s Russian society. We address this issue below using the case study of Russian television.

Methodology

The empirical base of the research was formed using the content analysis of TV programs. The study focused on the central Russian TV channel – Channel One – which is a free federal round-the-clock TV channel targeted at a broad audience and broadcasting TV programs of different categories and movies (news and analytical programs, children’s, entertainment programs, sports, fiction films, and documentaries, etc.). According to the National Media Group (NMG, n.d.), Channel One has more than 140 million viewers and the most massive audience in Russia (98.8% of the country’s population). The TV channel’s given characteristics indicate sufficient representativeness of the empirical sample, making it possible to extrapolate the findings to all TV channels in Russia.

Content analysis was carried out in a snapshot format over several days – one weekend and two working days (Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday) from June to July 2020. According to the research procedure, a group of five viewers watched the content of Channel One from 8.00 am to 11.00 pm and recorded direct or indirect demonstration of negative stereotypes about the elderly. Within the study’s scope, the context in which this kind’s stereotype was mentioned was not critical. No distinction was made between showing disrespect for age-related “weaknesses,” showing concern for sick older people, and ridiculing age-related changes in comedy shows. The very fact of gerontophobic stereotypes manifestation was paramount.

The distribution of Channel One airtime by TV categories is presented in Table 1. Within the current study, TV commercials are regarded as an individual category of the channel’s content. Often, TV advertisements feature gerontophobic stereotypes, which appear in an exaggerated form (mainly advertising of drugs and health products) (Novikova, 2019). This effect is highlighted by Chernova, Tretyakova, and Vlasov (2018).

Table 1. Distribution of Channel One airtime for the research period (in minutes)

Day of week	TV category					
	News	Movies	TV shows	Leisure	Sports	Children’s
Sunday	90	290	35	180	50	50
Monday	475	260	130	260	0	0
Tuesday	490	335	215	210	0	0
Total	1055	885	380	650	50	50

Having summarized the collected data, we identified the stereotypes about the image of the elderly dominating on Russian television and develop a ranking of the stereotypes according to the frequency of their occurrence on television. The data obtained were supplemented and compared with other studies on the problem of ageism in Russian society.

Results and Discussion

In the study, the viewers recorded 188 occurrences of stereotyped thinking about the elderly on Channel One. The initial results of the content analysis are given in Table 2.

Typically, stereotypes about the elderly are broadcast on television through commercials, TV series, and fiction films. Even news programs may sometimes transmit gerontophobic attitudes. There were no gerontophobic stereotypes detected in children's and sports programs during the research period; therefore, these TV content categories were excluded.

Table 2. The number of occurrences of gerontophobic stereotypes on Channel One

Day of week	TV category				
	News	Movies	TV shows	Leisure	Commercials
Sunday	3	5	12	8	52
Monday	1	6	19	4	24
Tuesday	1	9	11	4	29
Total	5	20	42	16	105

No social stereotype exists by itself, and it always has a particular basis (cultural, public, economic, etc.). Stereotypes are mostly far from giving adequate characteristics of a specific social group. Look at the gerontophobic stereotype ranking based on content analysis results (in descending order of frequency on television). The reasons behind the singled out stereotypes and the extent to which they reflect the real situation in Russian society are explored below.

Older people are poor and confronted with permanent financial problems. Old age is characterized by a range of factors that adversely affect the material well-being of an individual. In particular, the costs incurred in purchasing medicines and medical services are increasing. Such a resource as "useful personal contacts" is gradually receding. The primary source of income for senior citizens in Russia is the state pension. According to the Russian Federation (PFRF, 2018) Pension Fund, in 2017, the average old-age pension amounted to 14,163 rubles, while pensioners' subsistence level was 8,726 rubles. In modern Russia, pensions seem to be a relatively limited income source that can provide only the basic needs of the elderly. However, it is worth noting that the statement about the older generation's plight is grossly exaggerated. It is based on official statistical data on pension payments. It does not consider that pensioners can receive additional income, including unofficial ones (side jobs, capitalizing on private land plots, their children's financial support, renting, etc.). According to Gritsuk (2010), pensioners in Russia are at a lower risk of poverty than the working population. Russian marketing experts record an increase in people's consumer activity over 50 years of age and a growing share of middle-income and well-off people among elderly Russians. An increase in economic activity has a significant impact on the indicators of material well-being of the elderly. According to the Federal State Statistics Service (Rosstat, 2018), 20.8% of old-age pensioners are still employed. The reasons for such a high economic activity of pensioners are debated in (Trofimov, Aris & Bin Rosli, 2018; Makreshanska-Mladenovska & Petrevski, 2017; Watanabe, Miyake & Yasuoka, 2018).

Older people are insensitive to other people's views, stubborn, and tend to fight for their opinions blindly, often contrary to common sense. Several researchers support the assumption about negative age-related personality changes (conservatism, unmotivated touchiness, egocentrism, hypochondria). As Kryukova, Lysak, and Fursa (2003) put it; this is due to the weakening control over mental reactions: possibly, personal traits, previously masked as unattractive, came to the surface. Even agreeing that not all older people experience negative changes in their personality and, if so, to a varying degree, we should admit that such changes are quite common. The stereotype under the review is also reflected in the production-economic field. In the public mind, older people are potential initiators of conflicts in the work team since they lost their flexibility in tackling challenging situations, and their mobility is significantly reduced. Moreover, they can become an obstacle to any innovation in the production process as they categorically reject everything new, causing financial loss to the company (Elyutina, Teyn, & Velikiy, 2007).

Older people are incapable of learning. Kryukova, Lysak, and Fursa (2003) note that, with age, the human higher nervous activity changes significantly, and the strength, mobility, and balance of the main nervous processes decrease. This results in emotional instability, decreased vigilance, memory weakness, cognitive impairment, and slower mental performance. In the intellectual sphere, there appear difficulties in acquiring new ideas and adapting to unforeseen circumstances. Simultaneously, an age-related slowdown in cognitive processes, as a rule, is not directly related to aging but mostly depends on unfavorable social factors and a deficit in somatic health (Kryukova, Lysak, and Fursa, 2003). These changes hurt information and cognitive processes necessary for learning activity (perception, thinking, memorization, etc.). Different generations exhibit different educational and social mobility (Driouchi & Gamar, 2017).

Lapp (1993) highlights the following peculiarities of learning in advanced age: slow reactions and lack of stamina; degraded perception; a narrow field of attention; short attention span; insufficient divided attention and attention switch; lack of concentration and focus; hypersensitivity to interference; faulty memory; inability to organize new knowledge automatically; difficulties with retrieving information.

However, a significant number of researchers are optimistic about the capability of older people to learn. Studies performed in the 1970s demonstrate that the learning ability of adults aged from 20 to 60 years does not change significantly, while this ability in people of mental work preserves even longer (Huberman, 1974). Also, psychologists and gerontologists pay attention to the effectiveness of learning in old age as a means of preventing negative age-related changes in mental health (Smith, 1995). The successful experience of educational institutions for the elderly indicates that the older generation's learning activity can be beneficial if the learning process is organized concerning the specifics of the physiological, psychological, and other age-related characteristics of the contingent (Sorokin, 2019).

Third age is associated with deterioration in professional abilities and decreased professional function performance effectiveness. In the literature, one can find numerous examples confirming that older workers' labor efficiency in some cases can remain high, despite the weakening of some functions necessary to perform professional duties (Frolkis, 1991). In this case, various compensatory mechanisms serve to aid older people. For example, a slower speed of mental reactions is compensated by professional expertise and skills. The presence of such mechanisms is often regarded by researchers in favor of using the labor of older workers (Rymashevskaya, Malysheva & Pisklakova-Parker, 2017). At the same time, such compensation is not always acceptable. In the modern world, the speed of resolving

a problem is often as important as the final result since even a slight delay can negatively influence the outcome. Some experts are quite pessimistic about the dynamics of the professional abilities to age employees. Zeer (1997) states that one should not deny the obvious fact: aging deforms a person's professional profile and adversely affects professional excellence.

Older people have limited leisure opportunities. It should be admitted that opportunities for recreation, education, and spiritual development of the elderly are very restricted. This largely determines the structure and content of the senior citizens' free time. Surveys of the older generation indicate that most of them are dissatisfied with their social circle. The main leisure activities are watching TV, receiving guests, visiting friends, and walking (Bogdanov, 2010). In the summertime, working in the garden adds variety to the list of pursuits. Only an insignificant part of citizens is engaged in various projects and institutions to organize the leisure of the elderly.

Elderly Russians rarely turn to various cultural leisure forms, even if they used to be active consumers of cultural events. There are two significant factors in a declining socio-cultural activity – health impairment and income drop. Shmerlina (2013) reveals that older people (especially women) choose to be less social and culturally active because they have a negative perception of their appearance and are ashamed of their changed look. The researcher also emphasizes that the activity of the elderly in terms of meeting cultural needs (for example, tourist trips) is beyond “a specific socio-cultural scheme of organizing life in Russia.” Many Russian pensioners become less socially and culturally involved because they fear being disapproved by their family members and friends. There are also gender differences in the behavior of older people (Ghosh, 2016).

The social functions of older people are limited to their family roles and raising grandchildren. Elderly Russians are more devoted to their grandchildren and take a more active part in their upbringing than grandparents in Europe and the US. The image of ‘grandmother-mother’ typical of Russia even gave rise to the concept of ‘Russian babushka’ (‘Russian grandmother’) in sociology. This term is used to describe older women who have selfless devotion to their grandchildren. The close contact between grandmothers and their grandchildren has a substantial educational impact on youngsters. For European and American grandmothers, close communication with their grandchildren is the exception rather than the rule (Semenova, 1996).

In sociology, the phenomenon of ‘Russian babushka’ sometimes has a negative connotation. This concept denotes a significant dependence of older women in Russia on their families and the desire to compensate for this dependence by caring for loved ones and society. Moreover, society exhibiting this phenomenon is considered backward. For instance, the emergence of grandmothers' institutions in the USSR is often viewed as a result of the insufficient number and soft comfort of preschool and out-of-school educational institutions. Nevertheless, the overwhelming majority of researchers assess this phenomenon as socially essential and note its unique role in the younger generation's education.

The current study's findings show that this is an informed decision of the older people in Russia to perform the grandparents' social role. It does not imply that they are incompetent in other social spheres (Sorokin, 2014). This is a typical situation for Russian society, where an older person refuses a professional career to devote themselves to raising grandchildren and helping their children. Often, pensioners keep working to support their families financially. Thus, Russian senior citizens' focus on taking care of their loved ones by no means indicates their worthlessness in fields other than family. This appears to be more of a national mentality feature.

As we can see, even having some rationale behind them, stereotypes generally exaggerate and distort the state of things. However, they exert a significant impact on society, including its older members. Gerontophobic stereotypes dominate the lifestyle of the elderly in Russia. People who are still healthy and active quit their jobs. Hence, as to “not to be in young people’s road,” limit their interests to only age-appropriate activities to keep a low profile and stop learning to question their cognitive abilities. Television has the primary role in spreading age-related stereotypes. That is television. Therefore, that should take the most active part in creating an adequate image of the elderly who wish and be useful to society.

Conclusion

Modern demographic trends justify the older generation’s involvement in overcoming the negative consequences of transforming the Russian population’s age structure. It was initially apparent that Russian society perceives its senior members through the prism of stereotypes at the current development stage. The present study has clarified the degree of stereotypical perception of older people’s social roles. The research results have indicated that age-related stereotypes transmitted in television programs and commercials significantly distorted and exaggerated older people’s fundamental characteristics. We have identified six widespread stereotypes about the elderly: older people are poor and confronted with permanent financial problems; older people are insensitive to other people’s views, stubborn and tend to blindly fight for their opinion, often contrary to common sense; older people are incapable of learning; third age is associated with deterioration in professional abilities and a decrease in the effectiveness of professional functions performance; older people have limited leisure opportunities; social functions of older people are limited to their family roles and raising grandchildren. The negative image of the older generation created by the media prevents senior citizens from reintegrating into all spheres of public life and makes it harder for them to realize their potential. Considering the influence of modern television on the collective consciousness, this type of media should play the central part in creating an adequate image of the elderly.

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