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The Age of Discrimination

America has a collective fear of getting old. This fear manifests itself in the way people desperately live their lives while they are young. As Adele sings in her song “When We Were Young”: “we were sad of getting old, it made us restless. It was just like a movie, it was just like a song”. Indeed, mainstream media like movies and songs do promote this fear of aging among women. Older women are almost never presented as strong, positive role models. Hollywood casting directors hire the ideal actor for the part, which, due to society’s fixation on youth, is the young, popular actress. Older women rarely get cast, and those who do are hired to play minor roles that promote stereotypical views of aging. This phenomenon does not occur with men to the same extent; they are portrayed as young for many years. This age discrimination against women in Hollywood causes older women to become irrelevant in society. They are not able to contribute to or exist in society in a meaningful way. Hollywood ageism prompts their decline by creating a standard that leads to bad treatment of elderly women, an unhealthy fear of aging among the population, and discrimination against older women in the workforce. When a woman reaches middle age, this is the worst case scenario for her. She is at the pinnacle of dread, because she is close to being considered old and experiencing discrimination, as well as her own negative views. Meanwhile, she also might have children to worry about, whose minds, bodies and relationships are affected by the bad examples set by media.

The marginalization of older characters in movies causes people to interact with older women in a negative, disrespectful way. A study by professors Mark Callister, Dawn Magoffin and Tom Robinson published in *Educational Gerontology* explores how movies encourage this behavior through the analysis of several films from the 1980's to early 2000's. In the limited films that contained older characters, they tended to be portrayed stereotypically and be insignificant to the plot (Callister et al. 687). They also often have a lack of depth. As described by film critic Guy Lodge in an interview in The Guardian newspaper: "studio execs seem reluctant to play up the sexuality of such stars." This reveals how older women are constrained in movies. They lack the variety and interest that other characters in movies are allowed, and that real people have. These ways of limiting the parts for older women create stereotypes that persist in movies, and by extension, society. "As actors, ageing through your roles should be rewarding, not insulting. Yet the stingy allocation of roles in mainstream Hollywood determines otherwise" (Lodge). Hollywood is unfairly limiting older women, even the most successful, in terms of parts. This limits the actresses' options, but more importantly it limits society's viewpoint of older women, and the actual diversity and depth present. "After years of exposure to media that negatively depict older adults, adolescents have been cultivated to stereotype older people. This has the potential to influence the quality of their interactions with older people, and also influence the way they come to view the prospect of getting old" (Callister et al. 688). As the authors discuss, children receive the majority of their opinions about older people from the media. "Cultivation theory (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002) posits that the more someone attends to the media, the more likely he or she will come to accept the attitudes and beliefs portrayed within the media" (Callister et al. 691). Therefore, teens, who

view media as a common practice, will shift their actions to match with the stereotypes presented in movies. When they encounter an older person, their interactions will be unpleasant because they treat them in this conditioned manner.

These representations are ingrained in society, and have historical influence over people. Helene Moglen PhD wrote a paper about misogynistic ageism, discussing the causes of this construct: “I see the mythic female figures that haunt our culture—the witch, the hag, the gorgon, and the crone—as representing the antipathy that ageing women both encounter and internalize” (Moglen 323). The culture promotes this representation of older women in all media encounters. Due to this ingrained notion of older women being negative figures, people treat them with a level of distance and disgust. As Moglen says, society “bestow[s] on old women its most withering expressions of contempt” because of the existing “phobic representations of women’s ageing bodies” (Moglen 324). Society shies away, and older women receive the loss of dignity and self worth. Hollywood needs to promote better values to make the public reverse this attitude about older women. It is ingrained into children, and continues into old age, creating an unhealthy view of oneself.

An adverse effect of the values promoted by Hollywood is the fear of aging that Americans develop, which impairs the way they live in the present. Although many fads like YOLO, “you only live once”, seem to indicate that youth are already living in the moment, they actually reveal a desperate opposition to getting old. It indicates an obsession with the future, not the present. In Hollywood, this inordinate focus on youth causes a “narrative of decline”, as described by historian Heather Addison. Jan and Cora Gordon said: “Hollywood stars work ‘under the constant threat of time’” (Addison 32). The dread of aging is intensified in this

situation, to the point that dying young is almost a desire for actors: “In Hollywood, the ‘luckiest’ stars are those who die young. Their fame and eternal youth are assured, since they will never experience the portion of the human life cycle that represents progressive deterioration” (Addison 44). It is viewed as a positive to avoid the end, declining portion of one’s life. However, this is the inevitable process of aging. Worrying about being eternally young wastes time that could be spent actually living in youth.

Hollywood acts as an example and an ideal for America, which explains the root of the “doctrine of youth’s perfection” that lies at the heart of our society (Thomas). As defined by Dr. Bill Thomas in the documentary *Aging Matters*: “that very brief moment somewhere in your 20’s when you were perfect. And ever since then you’ve been going downhill. That’s the media narrative. And so our society holds up very young and inexperienced people as being the paragons of virtue and strength and idealizes them, while setting aside real elders with real life experience, making them virtually invisible in the media.” Thomas affirms that the media values directly affect people’s perceptions of age, causing them to believe youth are perfect, and aging is simply deterioration. The actions of these youth, who are displayed as the ideal, are influenced by their desire to remain young and “perfect”, which can lead to some poor decisions. As Thomas said, they have little life experience compared to the true elders. Elders, ironically, could probably be better role models due to their life experience, which is the reason they are not the ideal.

This ingrained fear that comes with passing the ideal age can actually damage one’s health. The article *Can Negative Age Stereotypes Predict Dementia?* from Psychology Today explains that “pessimism about old age” can lead to health conditions (Vitelli). Author Romeo

Vitelli Ph.D. discusses the study conducted at Yale University that “investigat[ed] age stereotypes in healthy adults and how they can trigger brain abnormalities associated with Alzheimer’s disease over time.” The article includes other studies that found specific health problems that could occur from having this fearful viewpoint. Part of the problems come from excessive stress, which indicates that people are not able to live their lives in the carefree manner that they wish to. That causes them to have health problems later in life, when they are the age they worried about becoming. If they had not been so afraid of aging, they would be healthier and happier when they actually reached that point in their lives. In this way, Hollywood causes more diseases to occur, and negatively affects people’s psyches while they are still in the process of aging. Along with producing diseases, Hollywood harms older women by limiting their professional opportunities.

Hollywood ageism promotes age discrimination in hiring practices in companies throughout the country, leading women to have a lack of opportunity to work. There is blatant age discrimination in Hollywood, not only in hiring actors, but also writers. In the documentary *Ageism in Hollywood*, interviews reveal that even the most experienced “old” writers are rejected due to a belief that they are unable to connect with a young audience. For example, “67 year old [writer] John McGreevy has won multiple Emmy’s, but he’s been told that he’s too old to be hip” (Shaw). This is not the only case of ageism against previously successful writers, as many writers for the show *I Love Lucy* have claimed that they have experienced ageism in recent years (Shaw). Michael Russnow of an Age Discrimination committee poses the question: “how is it coincidentally that we have people that did have such great success 10 years ago, 5 years ago, 15 years ago. Other than age discrimination what other reason not to hire them if they are

ready and willing?” Hollywood clearly extends its ageism past the onscreen talent, which suggests that the practice is about more than just providing the public with what casting directors think that they want. It is another way of limiting those who work, and make significant contributions to this business, to those who are young. The reasoning that these people are more qualified to know what this age group wants, and that this is more important than experience and skills at the job, is indicative of the idealization of this group of people. Their good qualities are seen as sufficient to exceed the benefits of those more qualified and experienced. Thus, when young people of this age group continue to be hired exclusively, the older writers, even the most successful, are unable to do their work and make a difference in the business. It is a problem that has progressed past the volatile acting business to create a deeper problem in Hollywood.

Hollywood has transmitted the discrimination in all portions of movie casting to other businesses across the country. A report by the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) with information from the Bureau of Labor Statistics reveals that “64% of workers say that they have seen or experienced age discrimination in the workplace”, even though there is a law, the Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA), prohibiting workplace discrimination against people 40 or older (AARP). The fact of this age discrimination makes it difficult for people to achieve what they want to. As described by Helene Moglen in her scholarly journal, “women seek to claim identities outside the bounds of families. But, as women find, there is no world elsewhere. In the workplace, failure confirms misogynistic expectations while success is likely to arouse envy, competition, and resentment. All yield finally to the painful denigrations of ageism, which equalizes achievement and deficiency” (Moglen 324). Women in the workforce have the expectation of failure, promoted by the misogynistic, ageist culture. Therefore, their young

counterparts feel resentment when the women succeed, because they feel superior. These strong expectations are felt and internalized by the women who receive them. This in turn makes it difficult to complete work effectively, for those of them who are able to be hired while these stereotypes persist.

The atmosphere of dismissal and animosity distracts from work and may lead to active interference and sabotage. A satirical video series by Drew Barrington demonstrates this point. The main character, a young male employee at a company, hears about a new recruit who is a slightly older woman, at around age 50. Before she arrives, he complains to his boss that she will be slow to catch on, in a manner that demonstrates his cockiness. He does a rap about age: “You’re 44, there’s the door, you’re 45, barely alive, you’re 46, time to call it quits, 47.” Then, she arrives and does a good job, revealing a calm demeanor and knowledge that exceeds that of the main character (Barrington). The satirical nature of the video demonstrates that its creator realizes that ageism in the workplace is a serious problem, that is based on unfounded stereotypes. However, the comments in the video represent true opinions that exist in the population. The belief that women in their 40s are no longer viable employees affects the actions of those surrounding them, so women have no escape from the judgment and disapproval for their act of growing older. The video’s counterexample clarifies that the stereotypes are the interfering factor against productivity, not the workers. While ageism may seem more pronounced in some industries than others, it is a societal practice based on the stereotypes people learn through media that persists throughout the workforce.

Many people hold the opinion that Hollywood is immune from discrimination laws, and should have the freedom to hire whichever actors they want. For instance, author Todd Bishop

argues that "it's common and widely accepted for casting directors to seek people who match specific demographics -- age, gender, etc. -- when filling roles in television, advertisements and film. But when someone tries to fill a professional position using those kinds of criteria, it's cause for a case of discrimination." He argues that this is an accepted practice, that creates a double standard in other industries. Bishop believes that other businesses should have the ability to create similar calls for demographics, however this practice should be halted everywhere. While Hollywood is excepted from portions of the law due to the requirements for parts in movies, it is not completely exempt from the legal obligations. Likewise, it is not exempt from the moral obligations of hiring. There are situations where parts can be played by older actors, and depth improved, but casting directors fail to do so. UCLA law professor Russell Robinson says "casting directors take into account race and sex in a way that would be blatantly illegal in any other industry. Many actors accept this as normal, but depending on the facts of the case, lawsuits can be filed." Not only is this practice of age discrimination in Hollywood illegal, despite contrary opinions, but it is immoral, as it promotes the unfair treatment of older women in society.

Thus, the problem continues to affect all aspects of life. Ageist Hollywood hiring practices harm the whole population by invalidating older women as members of society, so they are unable to contribute or enjoy to the same extent as their younger counterparts. Not only do these practices lead people to treat older women in a prejudicial manner, but they also cause people to develop a fear of aging that harms them both physically and mentally throughout their lives. Additionally, women are viewed as illegitimate in the workforce at a much younger age due to Hollywood's example, and consequently lack respect from their coworkers and superiors,

and receive fewer jobs. In order to have a balanced life, people need to be able to interact effectively with others, work, and live happily in the moment. All of these requirements are taken away from women by an ageist society. Soon, baby boomers will reach this age, creating a far greater population of older people in America. A contradiction will arise between the views of age in society and the actual age of the majority of the population. Having so many people who are unable to contribute meaningfully to society will impair society's productivity, along with the well-being of the people. Therefore, we need to make a significant change in societal ideals to include everyone as viable in the workings of everyday life. In order to achieve this, we need to stop Hollywood ageism by speaking up on the topic, and boycotting movies that refuse to cast older female stars. In this way, we can influence the media, and thus the culture of our country.

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