

Objective/brief

The Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) aims, through its *Age Positive* project, to expose prevailing stereotypes of older people in the media and raise awareness of age discrimination in the Australian community, as well as to change the nation's attitudes and behaviours towards older people for the better (see **Appendix A, Background**).

Research Partners

AHRC

Research owner

Urbis

Fact or Fiction? report author

Market research

Focus groups

Quantitative survey

iSentia

Editorial research

Social media research

Advertising research with Ebiquty

The AHRC commissioned Urbis to provide it with evidence about age stereotyping and discriminatory attitudes in the media and the wider community, and to help it devise effective strategies to address these stereotypes and attitudes. Urbis engaged iSentia to research the representation of older Australians in editorial news media, radio and television talk programming, advertising and social media, and then used this research to inform its role in the project.

Urbis therefore commissioned iSentia to conduct research in order to comprehensively understand:

- > The proportion of editorial media coverage and advertising (across radio, television, newspapers, magazines and digital media) that features older people, to allow for an assessment of the "invisibility" of older people in the Australian media relative to their presence in the Australian population; and
- > How older people are portrayed in the media – the kinds of stories and advertising they appear in; the messages that are conveyed about them; and the extent to which this content creates and perpetuates stereotypes about older people.

Strategy

AHRC's media research brief was complex; there is no single research firm in the Australian market that works across editorial news media, social media and advertising.

The research therefore required a collaborative approach, and researchers from two organisations – iSentia (editorial and social media) and Ebiquty (advertising) – worked on their respective areas of expertise across three different datasets.

Analysts from iSentia managed the project to ensure the results of each analysis could be validly compared, and synthesised the results from the three different datasets.



Urbis

Research into Age Discrimination, Age Stereotyping and Ageism

Category: Best use of Communication
Management: Public
Sector/Innovation/Integrated

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Highlights

- > Three different research firms worked collaboratively across methodologies and datasets to meet an ambitious brief.
- > A first-of-its-kind analysis across editorial news content, advertising and social media, in terms of the range and quantity of media covered, and the depth of the analysis.
- > Clear evidence that older people are underrepresented and portrayed in stereotypical ways in the media.
- > Newsworthy findings that the AHRC could use as a media hook, which resulted in high-reach media coverage of the study.
- > Comprehensive and detailed findings that Urbis and the AHRC could use in their lobbying with media stakeholders.
- > The study underpinned a media roundtable and the AHRC's strategy for an awareness campaign that aims to reshape community attitudes to older people.



Execution/implementation

Editorial Media

For the purposes of this analysis, “older people” were defined as any individual or group of individuals aged 55 or more.

From the outset it was recognised that iSentia’s usual approach of collecting content through keyword matching was not appropriate for the brief. To get around this, we devised a bespoke approach for the project that drew a sample of coverage from the highest-rating and highest-circulating publications and programs across daily newspapers, monthly magazines, radio and television programming, and online news sources. Analysts examined each publication cover-to-cover, each broadcast report from beginning to end, and each online news site’s home page from top to bottom, in order to identify the total number of stories each day, and how many of these mentioned older people. Because older people are not always explicitly highlighted as “older” in editorial news reporting, a range of other signifiers were considered as part of this classification process, including

- > Explicit references to chronological age (for example, “A 55-year-old man was hit by a car yesterday”).
- > Use of age-specific adjective and nouns (for example, “older people”, “the elderly”, “retirees”, “grandparents”, “baby boomers”);
- > Use of images featuring people who are older (researchers were conservative with attributing age to such photographs, and so numbers in this category were conservative); and
- > References to public figures who are aged 55 or older, where their age is easily identifiable through a simple online search. This included politicians, cultural leaders, celebrities, sporting professionals, and senior executives in business and industry.

Advertising

The outlets and programs sampled for the analysis of advertising were consistent with the sample for editorial content. A replicable approach was taken, with analysts auditing all advertising from the sample in order to identify the total number of ads, and within the total number, the volume that included older people. The only point of difference was that, due to budgetary constraints, “older people” for the advertising component were defined as an individual or group of individuals aged 65 or more. To enable sound

comparisons across all media types, the editorial media content was categorised into 55–64 and 65+. Advertisements that featured older people were identified through:

- > The visual or auditory inclusion of an older person as talent;
- > A verbal reference to an older person in the copy; or
- > Direct targeting of older people.

Social

We took two approaches in the analysis of social media:

- > We undertook channel discovery to identify social media channels that focus on issues related to older people, and then categorised these under general themes (for example health, aged care, retirement, work, etc.); and
- > We conducted retrospective keyword searching across social media more generally, to identify the frequency and main themes of social media conversations *about* older people. This covered the same period as did the analysis of the editorial and advertising content.

Once analysts had identified the articles, reports and examples of advertising that *did* include a reference to older people, this content was subjected to an in-depth qualitative media analysis. Working closely with Urbis and the AHRC, we developed a coding framework that included all potential topics and messages that would help us test the hypothesis that older people are stereotyped in the media.

Client Testimonial

“This is a great piece of primary research which will have an impact – the findings from the Older People in the Media report laid the foundations to improve the understanding of how the media influences Australians’ view of older people. Critically from my perspective, it provided us with the insight we needed to undertake robust primary research and provides the Australian Human Rights Commission with benchmark findings on which to assess change over time and the impact of initiatives. Ultimately, it is hoped that the information will improve the lives of older people in Australia by promoting greater awareness of the damaging effects of negative stereotypes on the lives of older people and encouraging decision makers to begin to change the way they present older Australians across a range of contexts.”

Ashley Moore, Associate Director, Urbis



Ebiquity and iSentia collaborated on a list of traits to be identified in the editorial media coverage as well as in the advertisements (are they portrayed as strong, weak, optimistic, pessimistic, financially savvy, wise, flexible loving, grumpy, active or passive?). Analysts tracked each trait assigned to older people in each execution, and analysed other features including:

- > The main contexts in which older people are referred to (ie, which sectors in advertising and which kinds of stories [financial, crime, health] in editorial media are likely to mention older people)
- > The ways older people are visually represented (in domestic, social or public settings); and
- > The messages conveyed about older people.

Conclusions

The research provided clear evidence that older people are underrepresented in the media:

- > People aged 65+ appeared in 4.7% of the advertising content (see **Appendix B, Example 1**);
- > People aged 65+ were mentioned in 6.6% of the editorial media content see **Appendix B, Example 2**); and
- > People aged 55+ were referred to in 11.5% of the editorial media content (see **Appendix B, Example 2**).

In comparison, in 2012, people aged 65 or more made up 14.2% of the Australian population, and people aged 55 or more made up 25.6%.

Moreover, the analysis confirmed that the media indeed portrayed older people in stereotypical ways. Specifically:

- > Mainstream news media content most often presented older people as passive, vulnerable and frail. These traits were frequently associated with older people in the contexts of crime, ill health and financial stress (see **Appendix B, Example 3**).
- > Peaks in social media discussion of older people were similarly focused around reports of older people as the victims of crime, or as otherwise physically vulnerable or at risk of illness (see **Appendix B, Example 4**).

Due to its very nature, advertising tended to highlight positive traits, while also reinforcing negative characteristics; older people were often portrayed as vulnerable (emotionally, physically or financially) or unwell, particularly in advertisements for finance and professional services (including a range of legal and medical services) (see **Appendix B, Example 5**).

Actions

On the basis of these findings and Urbis' subsequent research, the AHRC issued a press release entitled "Fact or fiction? Stereotypes of older Australians", and published an article on its *Age Positive* website (<https://www.humanrights.gov.au/fact-or-fiction-stereotypes-older-australians>).

- > The release prompted significant coverage of the research in a wide range of national, metropolitan and regional broadcast, press and online outlets. This coverage noted the research findings that confirmed the prevalence of negative stereotypes, as well as the underrepresentation of older people in media and advertising.
- > Age Discrimination Commissioner Susan Ryan was widely quoted in the media highlighting that older people are underrepresented and stereotyped in the media.

The insights from the study underpinned:

- > A roundtable session held by AHRC with media executives in June 2013, which aimed to encourage media outlets to portray older Australians in an accurate, balanced and diverse manner – and in a way that reflects their value, capability and experience; and
- > A communication strategy and awareness campaign planned by the AHRC for 2013–2015 that aims to reshape attitudes in the community to support older Australians to realise their potential and maximise their contribution to workplaces and the community.

