

A Sharp Drop or a Gentle Slope? Aging, the Elderly, and Mass Media Consumption

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Our society puts a premium on youthfulness, and nowhere is this more evident than in mass media and in marketing. But with the so-called longevity revolution and the increasing awareness of social gerontology, not to mention the vast improvement in health care, is there a possibility that the Filipino elderly may yet be the embodiment of Deepak Chopra's "ageless body, timeless mind"? Or will the images of the helpless, unproductive, and senile individual persist? This study takes a look at the Filipino elderly's characteristics and their perceptions of aging. It also seeks to find out their patterns of mass media consumption and how the mass media can possibly contribute to the formation of their self-concepts.

Introduction

Rapid social and economic changes as well as great improvements in health care have led to an increase in the elderly population all over the world. The United Nations estimates that by 2050, there will be more people 60 years old and above than those who are aged 15 years and below. And majority of them will be living in Asia (ILO 2000).

Better health care has not only increased life expectancies. It has also improved the quality of life of the elderly. A recent (December 6, 2004: 44) *Newsweek* special report on the elderly quotes the president of the International Association of Gerontology, "We're used to thinking of a 60-year old who looks like *Whistler's Mother*, but we should be thinking about someone who looks like Tina Turner." Undoubtedly, the elderly in developing countries fare better than their counterparts in the developing world. The gap between senior citizens in wealthy and poor countries is most pronounced in their differential access to social security and specialized medical care. But in both developed and developing countries, the family plays a "decisive role [in] the well being of the elderly" (International Association of Gerontology n.d.). Hence, there is great need to educate existing families and non-familial groups or institutions who are involved in the care of the elderly on the implications of aging as well as the benefits of long life. In this aspect, the mass media play a vital role.

However, despite the growing presence of the elderly in society, myths and stereotypes about aging and old people persist. Canfield (2004) identified these myths as follows: the universality myth, which suggests that the aging process is uniform in all cultures; the chronology myth, which defines the aging process

solely by chronological age; the terminal drop myth, which points to a peak of activity, followed by a sudden drop or stop in one's activities; the genetic miracles myth, which rests on solving the genetic riddle; and the Methuselah myth, which suggests that man may be able to live for several hundred years when the key to the aging process is discovered.

These myths have led to some of the stereotypes about the elderly: An old person is sickly, loses control of his or her bodily functions, and loses interest in intimacy. S/he becomes senile and enters the phase referred to as second childhood. An old person cannot understand new technology and is unwilling to try anything new. He or she has no social life, cannot function in the workplace, and cannot make his or her own decisions. And the list goes on.

The prevalence of these myths does not mean that gerontology, or the study of aging, is devoid of theories. In truth, a multitude of theoretical ideas has informed the study and understanding of gerontology, particularly the social aspect of aging, over the years. Powell (2001) classified these theoretical ideas as follows: functionalism, Marxism, feminism, and postmodernism.

Under the functionalist umbrella are two opposing theories: disengagement and activity. The disengagement theory poses that "gradual withdrawal of older people from work roles and social relationships is both an inevitable and natural process" (Powell 2001:1). Disengagement by the older people, according to this theory, actually works for the efficient functioning of the society since it allows for the smooth transition from retirement to death. Activity theory is the counterpoint of disengagement and posits that even in old age, people can still be productive and assume new roles (Powell 2001).

Marxist political economy of old age uses the structure of society and its capitalist orientation to explain the position of the elderly in society. According to this perspective, the social structure and relations results in the marginalization of certain sectors in society, one of which is the elderly¹. Critical feminism is more pointed in saying that the material conditions and social position of elderly women are even more peripheral.²

The postmodern perspective of Featherstone (1995) argues that because of better lifestyles, age should be viewed as fluid, and not constrained by the medical model discourses of decline.

These various theoretical ideas highlight the diversity and complexity of the study of the elderly. As Bengtson et al. (2000) pointed out, it may be impossible to arrive at a "single grand theory to explain aging" (16) but these theories, nevertheless, serve to enlighten attempts, such as this present study, at understanding the elderly.

Mass media portrayal of the elderly

The mass media's portrayals of the elderly is said to be one of the reasons why myths about aging persist. Studies on the representations of the elderly in the mass media paint different, if not confusing, pictures of the elderly.

With the tremendous popularity enjoyed in the 1980s by American television series *Golden Girls* and *Murder, She Wrote*, both of which starred elderly women, television for a time seemed to present a positive picture of the elderly: vibrant, healthy, and mentally sharp. There were also a few movies and television commercials that put the elderly in a positive light as well. A study by Tupper (1995), for instance, concluded that "the image of the elderly people in primetime television commercials is less negative than previously thought" and avoided "perpetuating the sick, weak, old person stereotype" (12).

However, there seems to be more studies that point to a negative portrayal of perception of the elderly. Matcha (1997) identified the characteristics usually ascribed to the elderly: face is blank and expressionless, body is bent over and infirm, clothing is ill-fitting, speech is halting and high-pitched. The elderly are also characterized as stubborn, rigid, and forgetful. Delloff (1987) likewise highlighted the negative character traits of the elderly. Sontag (in Blaikie 1999) said that older women are, in fact, victims not only of ageism, but of sexism as well, because unlike in men where advanced age may be equated with wisdom, advanced age in women can only mean deterioration, and even loss of one's value.

These conflicting images of the elderly give credence to Featherstone's observations that there are two "sets of images" in popular cultural representations of old age. One is called "heroes of aging", which generally shows a positive attitude on aging; and the other one, "mask of aging", where the inner self is masked, misrepresented or even imprisoned in the bodily decline of the elderly (Featherstone 1995).

In the Philippines, there has not really been a lack of research interest in the elderly. However, these efforts have focused mostly on the social and economic aspects of aging. These studies look into the conditions of the elderly in society, including economic support and living arrangements (Domingo & Casterline 1988) and functional problems (Natividad n.d.).

In the area of communication, research pertaining to the elderly has looked at issues like the generation gap and the images of the elderly in the media. For one, Cristobal (1999) studied communication between the adolescents and the elderly. This study reinforced what has often been perceived as a generation

gap between the elderly and the youth, as well as the perception that the elderly are old-fashioned or ultra-conservative. Cristobal found that “majority of the young respondents encounter problems communicating with the elderly” (79) primarily because of the youth’s difficulty in explaining new concepts to the aged.

There has also been a sprinkling of local studies on the images and representations of the elderly in the mass media. For example, Cargo (1996) studied how the Filipino aged is portrayed in primetime television commercials. She analyzed 20 commercials and found that the elderly were represented in all but one of these commercials. In 13 cases, they were represented positively.

This study hopes to add to the literature on the elderly in the Philippines by looking at their views about aging and the aged like themselves. It also looks into their views on how the mass media possibly influences these self-concepts. It addresses the following questions: How do the elderly population of Metro Manila see themselves? What is their level of exposure to mass media and to other forms of communication technology?

Methodology

A survey was conducted to determine the elderly’s perceptions of themselves and of aging. Their exposure to and perceptions of the mass media, including mass media’s portrayal of the elderly, were likewise determined. A four-page interview schedule was designed for this purpose.

Respondents for this survey were 200 respondents aged 60 years and over. They were selected from eight cities in Metro Manila using systematic sampling technique. Twenty five respondents were chosen from each of the following cities: Valenzuela, Quezon City, Manila, Makati, Marikina, San Juan, Taguig, and Pasig. Frequency and percentage distributions were used in analyzing the findings of the survey.

Discussion of Findings

The elderly are not a monolithic group. Gender, class, ethnicity, and other social, cultural, and political factors may account for the differences in the aging process. Even exposure to the mass media and its various images of aging are said to have an impact on the elderly’s perceptions of aging. The discussion that follows looks into the characteristics and perceptions of the elderly, arguably the least studied group in Philippine society.

Profile of the elderly respondents

Among this sample of 200 respondents, there are more females (53.5%) than males (46.5%) and the younger elderly outnumber the older ones (i.e., 68% are in their 60s while 25% are in their 70s and only 7% are 80 years old and over). More than three-fourths (78%) of the respondents are no longer employed. Among the currently employed elderly respondents, the most common jobs are business-related, i.e., vendors and entrepreneurs.

Respondents had differing levels of education, although the biggest percentage (24%) did not finish elementary. This may explain why a number of respondents who were still employed were unskilled workers. Nearly one-fourth are high school graduates, while 17% finished college (see Table 1).

Table 1. Respondents' profile

Sex	Frequency	Percentage
Male	93.0	46.5
Female	107.0	53.5
Age	Frequency	Percentage
60-69	136.0	68.0
70-74	50.0	25.0
80 and above	14.0	7.0
Employment	Frequency	Percentage
Currently employed	43.0	21.5
Not employed/retired	157.0	78.5
Current Occupation (n=43)	Frequency	Percentage
Vendor	18.0	41.9
Entrepreneur/Businessman	11.0	25.6
Unskilled/semi-skilled worker	10.0	23.2
Others	2.0	4.7
No response	2.0	4.7
Education	Frequency	Percentage
Some elementary	48.0	24.0
Elementary graduate	20.0	10.0
Some high school	24.0	12.0
High school graduate	38.0	19.0
Some college	26.0	13.0
College graduate	34.0	17.0
Vocational	1.0	0.5
Post-graduate	2.0	1.0
No schooling at all	2.0	1.0
No answer	2.0	1.0

Living arrangements of the respondents

As in most Asian societies, the Filipino family has always been an important source of support. This is verified in the survey results which showed that the elderly can still count on their respective families. In particular, majority (60.5%) of the elderly respondents are still living with family members – either with their spouse and children, or with the families of their married children. Sixteen percent live with their children only, while 11% live with their spouse only. Not one of the respondents reported living alone (see Table 2).

Table 2. Household companion

Household companion	Frequency	Percentage
Children and their respective families	65	32.5
Spouse and children	56	28.0
Children only	32	16.0
Spouse only	23	11.5
Other relatives	19	9.5
Others	4	2.0
No answer	1	0.5
TOTAL	200	100.0

Activities engaged in during free time

With the largest part of the elderly respondents not active members of the labor force anymore, free time activities are mostly home-based and indoor – with tending the house and doing household chores (28%), and watching television (19.5%) being the most common. Not surprisingly, taking care of their grandchildren/other family members (11%) and plain resting (10%) are included among the top free-time activities (see Table 3).

Despite the prevalence of home-based activities, a number of them (12%) profess to tending their business during their free time. While some elderly reported engaging in other activities such as social interactions, outdoor physical activities, and gambling, these are rather seldom.

Mobility is often considered a problem for the elderly. It is therefore not surprising that only a little over a third of these elderly (89 out of 200) respondents engage in activities outside their homes. Most common of these out-of-home activities are socio-civic work (38.2%). Church activities, at 32.6%, are a close second, while sports and other recreation, at 28.1%, are third (see Table 4).

Table 3. Activities engaged in during free time*

Activities	Frequency	Percentage
<i>Home-based/Indoor activities</i>		
Take care of house, household chores	56	28.0
Watch television	39	19.5
Take care of grandchildren and other family members	22	11.0
Rest	21	10.5
Sleep	15	7.5
Stay at home	10	5.0
Eat	3	1.5
Drinking	2	1.0
SMS/Texting	1	0.5
Listen to radio	1	0.5
Play musical instrument	1	0.5
<i>Business-related</i>		
Tend business	24	12.0
<i>Social Interactions</i>		
Converse with other elderly people	10	5.0
Visit friends and relatives	4	2.0
Go to Church	7	3.5
<i>Outdoor physical activities</i>		
Malling/Strolling	8	4.0
Gardening	5	2.5
Work-out/exercise	4	2.0
Ballroom dancing	1	0.5
<i>Gambling-related</i>		
Gambling	8	4.0
Take care of roosters for gambling	6	3.0

*N=200

Table 4. Activities engaged in outside home

Activities engaged in outside home	Frequency	Percentage
Socio-civic work	34	38.2
Church activities	29	32.6
Sports/recreation	25	28.1
Others	1	1.1
TOTAL	89	100.0

Perceptions about growing old

A big majority (126 or 63%) of the respondents feel that they are indeed aging. The respondents’ primary basis for this perception is their chronological age. More than one-fourth (27%), however, cited their decreased physiological capacity, while almost one-fifth (19%) said that they are now more susceptible to illnesses (see Table 5).

Table 5. Reason for respondent’s perception that s/he is aging*

Reason	Frequency	Percentage
Because of advanced age	52	41.3
Decreased physiological capacity	34	27.0
More susceptible to illnesses	24	19.0
Number of grandchildren	12	9.5
Tires easily	3	2.4
Lack of employment opportunities	2	1.6
Retirement	1	0.8
Many experiences	1	0.8

*n = 126

On the contrary, those who do not feel that they are already old, use as basis their good state of health (59.5%) and the feeling of being “young at heart” (29.7%) (see Table 6).

Table 6. Respondent’s reason for saying that s/he is not aging*

Reason why s/he is not aging	Frequency	Percentage
Still in good health condition	44	59.5
“Young at heart”	22	29.7
Can still work	10	13.5
Still single	4	5.4
No grandchildren yet	2	2.7
No Answer	6	8.1

*n = 74

Signs of aging

Old age has always been associated with sickness, senility, and a host of other things, none of which is positive. How do the elderly themselves feel about these? What do they acknowledge as the signs of aging?

The results of the survey show that for many of the respondents, aging is manifested in the weakening of their stamina or physiological capacity (34%), the changes in their physical appearance (24%), and susceptibility to illnesses (17.5%). A few link aging with mental and emotional conditions, primarily forgetfulness

(10%). Fewer still are those respondents who reckon aging with changes in their social roles both in their respective families and in the society in general. (see Table 7)

Quite clearly, what the elderly recognize are the signs of what is termed as biological and physiological aging, and not social aging. Biological aging “refers to progressive anatomical and physiological changes in the body,” while psychological aging “refers to age-related changes in behavior which reflect the level of maturity and ability to cope with the stresses of life” (Newhaus in Medina 1991: 218).

Table 7. Respondent's perceived signs of aging*

Signs of Aging	Frequency	Percentage
Biological		
Weakening of stamina/physiological capacity	150	75.0
Changes in physical appearance	48	24.0
Greater susceptibility to illnesses	35	17.5
Loss of appetite/food choices	5	2.5
Unable to make love	1	0.5
Psychological		
Forgetfulness	20	10.0
Oversensitivity	13	6.5
Irritability	11	5.5
Social signs		
Advanced years/chronological age	12	6.0
Growing number of grandchildren	7	3.5
Changed role in family and society	2	1.0
Unable to work	2	1.0
Wisdom and experience	3	1.5

*N=200

Perceptions of aging and the elderly

While there are myths associated with aging, it is also true that there are realities that the elderly have to contend with. In terms of physical activities, nearly two-thirds (66%) of the elderly respondents agree that being old means having limited physical activities. Decreased stamina and physiological capacity also discourage them from trying new things, especially physically-demanding activities. Thus, it comes as no surprise that majority (51%) of the elderly respondents disagree with the statement that old people are willing to try new activities.

But while the elderly respondents acknowledge that being old limits their physiological and physical capabilities, they believe that the other aspects of their lives, including fulfilling their societal roles and functions, remain unchanged despite

their advanced years. Thus, almost all of the respondents (96%) agree with the statement that older people like themselves are capable of making important and logical decisions. Likewise, they believe that old age should not be a hindrance to being productive. Hence, most of the respondents (82%) agree that it is important for old people to learn new things. Some respondents comment that learning new things would not only make them productive, but would also keep their minds active.

Sociability is also not adversely affected by age, as results of the survey show that more than seven out of 10 respondents (72%) agree that the elderly are eager to interact with others and meet new friends. Respondents also do not entertain the possibility of the so-called generation gap as 75% agreed that older people are capable of interacting with the youth, thus enabling them to bridge the past and the future.

Respect for the elders is one of the core values of the Filipinos, who take pride in taking good care of their parents and grandparents. This probably explains why 71% of the respondents still agree that the Philippine society holds the elders in high esteem. But the respect notwithstanding, nearly three-fourths (73.5%) of the respondents acknowledge that there are limited opportunities for older people like them (see Table 8).

Table 8. Perceptions on aging and the elderly

Attitude Statement	Agree		Disagree	
	No.	%	No.	%
If respondent's physical activities are limited due to age	132	66.0	64	32.0
If respondent is eager to try new activities	98	49.0	101	50.5
If older people are capable of making important and logical decisions	192	96.0	5	2.5
If older people are capable of being productive	186	93.0	12	6.0
If it is important for older people to learn new things	164	82.0	29	14.5
If respondent is eager to interact with others and meet new friends	144	72.0	50	25.0
If older people are capable of interacting with the youth	150	75.0	37	18.5
If Philippine society holds elders in high esteem	142	71.0	35	17.5
If respondents believes that there are limited opportunities for older people	147	73.5	37	18.5

Priorities of the elderly

Family, health and faith – these are the top three priorities of the elderly respondents for this survey (see Table 9). It comes as no surprise that the respondents' top priority is their family. The family has always been the main source of support of the individual. When the individual is no longer part of the work force, the role of the family becomes even more prominent as it is to the family that the elderly turn. The elderly depend on the family for emotional, and in most cases, financial support as well. Also, the family serves as an anchor while the elderly try to find new meanings in other areas of their lives.

Health is, likewise, a natural concern. When bones start creaking, when eyesight gets poorer, and there are unexplainable aches and pains every now and then, health becomes a truly important concern. The respondents recognize that one of the most infallible signs of being old is diminished physiological and physical capacity, and that for them to continue functioning actively in society, they have to be healthy.

Faith, on the other hand, has always been considered a refuge. It is not uncommon that when an individual retires from work, s/he becomes more involved in religious activities.

Table 9. Priorities of the elderly

Priority	Mean Rating
Family	62.3
Health	36.0
Faith/religion	31.6

Technology and the elderly

One of the enduring myths about the elderly is that they are afraid of trying new things. With newer and newer communication and media technologies becoming part of the Filipino lifestyle, have the elderly avoided these entirely or have they integrated such technologies into their own daily routine? This study looks into the elderly respondents' perceptions of new communication technology – specifically the mobile phone and the computer – and the mass media, which have become staples in Philippine society.

Use of new communication technologies

Despite the respondents' belief that they can still be mentally active, productive, and capable of learning new things, they are willing to admit to certain limitations. One of the areas where majority of the respondents (51.5%) feel inadequate is in understanding new technology (see Table 10).

Table 10. If older people have difficulty understanding new technology

Whether respondent views that older people have difficulty understanding new technology	Frequency	Percentage
Agree	103	51.5
Disagree	77	38.5
Don't know	20	10.0
TOTAL	200	100.0

The elderly's "fear" of the new technology becomes apparent in the findings below. The mobile phone and the computer are undoubtedly the most popular and the most pervasive forms of new communication technology. How are the elderly adapting to these?

Few (only 44 or 22%) of the respondents own mobile phones. Among them, the most common reason for owning and using it is to communicate with family members and friends (see Table 11). Both the elderly non-owners and non-users of mobile phones agree that the mobile phone is important to get/stay in touch with other people, primarily with family members (see Table 12).

Table 11. Reason for buying/owning a mobile phone*

Reason	Frequency	Percentage
To communicate with family and friends	20	10.0
Needed for work	6	3.0
Given by other family members	6	3.0
It is a necessity	5	2.5
It's the trend nowadays	3	1.5
For oneself and one's family	2	1.0
Was just forced to own one	1	0.5

*n=44

Table 12. Important uses of mobile phones*

Use	Frequency	Percentage
Communicating/keeping in touch with family and friends	138	69.0
Reaching others through text messages	37	18.5
Useful in emergency situations	17	8.5
Taking pictures	3	1.5
Getting information	3	1.5
Don't know/no response	14	7.0

*n=44

An even smaller number of respondents use the computer, i.e., only 19 or 9.5% say that they are computer-literate. Lack of knowledge (39.8%) and non-ownership (24.9%) are the main reasons for these elderly’s non-use of a computer (see Table 13). Most possibly, these reasons reflect a lack of interest in, and need for, the technology. This sentiment is verified by the fact that when asked if they would like to use a computer, majority declined, noting that they are too old for this technology.

Table 13. Reasons for not using a computer

Reason	Frequency	Percentage
Not knowledgeable with computers	72	39.8
Doesn't own a computer	45	24.9
Lack of resources (money and time)	12	6.6
Difficulty in understanding the workings of the computer	11	6.1
Fear of damaging the computer	3	1.7
Poor eyesight	3	1.7
No answer	20	11.0
TOTAL	181	100.1*

* Total does not equal to 100.0 due to rounding

The respondents’ attitude towards new technology appears ambivalent. As shown earlier, the majority admits that old people like them find it difficult to learn new technology. Nonetheless, they acknowledge that people of their age would benefit from the use of new technology (see Table 14). This is most likely borne out of their knowledge that new technology is a fact of life, something that they see around them, and may have to learn to live with. However, not many are interested in learning the new technology.

Table 14. Whether the elderly benefit from the use of new technology

Opinion	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	128	64.0
No	60	30.0
Don't know	12	6.0
TOTAL	200	100.0

Mass media consumption

In terms of exposure to the mass media, the elderly are no different from the rest of the Philippine population. They have generally high exposure to the mass media. Exposure to television is highest at 90.5%, a figure that is even higher than the national average. Print and radio exposure are similarly high, i.e., 71% are

newspaper readers while 69.5% are radio listeners. Only 15% claim to be regular movie goers (see Table 15).

Table 15. Mass media exposure of the elderly*

Mass medium	Frequency	Percentage
Television	181	90.5
Newspaper	142	71.0
Radio	139	69.5
Movie	30	15.0

*N=200

Television viewership

Respondents watch television primarily to be entertained (37%). But a considerable percentage (23.5%) do so to keep themselves updated with what is happening around them. Some (18.5%), however, turn to television for a more passive purpose, i.e. to relax and while away their time (see Table 16).

Table 16. Reason for watching television

Reason	Frequency	Percentage
To be entertained	74	40.9
To be informed about news and current	47	25.9
To relax and pass the time	43	23.8
To spend quality time with family	13	7.2
To bring oneself closer to God	3	1.7
No answer	1	0.5
TOTAL	181	100.0

While entertainment is the top reason cited by respondents for watching television, news programs (50.5%) topped the list of TV programs that they watch. The entertainment programs that they mainly watch are the soap operas and *telenovelas* (34%) (see Table 17).

Table 17. TV programs frequently watched*

Program type	Frequency	Percentage
News	101	55.8
Soap operas/telenovelas	68	37.6
Variety shows	32	17.7
Sports show	21	11.6
Movies	20	11.0
Talk shows	18	9.9
Educational channels	9	5.0
Children's show	8	4.4
Religious program	8	4.4
Reality shows	6	3.3
No answer	1	0.5

*n=181

In terms of number of hours spent watching TV, respondents have moderate exposure, with 34.9% spending between one hour and three hours in front of the television daily (see Table 18).

Table 18. Number of hours spent watching TV in a day

Number of hours	Frequency	Percentage
30 minutes	9	4.5
30 minutes – 1 hour	55	27.5
More than 1 hour – 3 hours	66	33.0
More than 3 hour – 6 hours	27	13.5
More than 6 hours	7	3.5
Don't know	6	3.0
Not applicable	11	5.5
TOTAL	200	100.0

Newspaper readership

While television is primarily considered an entertainment medium, the newspaper is seen as information provider. Among the respondents, most (83.8%) read the newspapers to learn about news and current events. A few (16.2%) read the newspapers for entertainment (see Table 19).

Table 19. Reasons for reading newspaper*

Reason	Frequency	Percentage
To be informed about news and current events	119	83.8
To be entertained	20	16.2
To relax and pass the time	18	12.7
To stimulate thinking/the mind	2	1.4
Unable to watch television	2	1.4

*n=142

Respondents mentioned both broadsheets and tabloids when asked for the newspapers that they read (see Table 20). The *Philippine Daily Inquirer* is the most read newspaper (27.5%), followed by *Bulgar* (19.7%), and *Philippine Star* (18.3%).

Table 20. Newspapers respondents read

Newspaper	Frequency	Percentage
Broadsheets		
Philippine Daily Inquirer	39	19.5
Philippine Star	26	13.0
Manila Bulletin	18	9.0
Manila Times	4	2.0
Malaya	3	1.5
Today	2	1.0
Tabloids		
Bulgar	28	14.0
Abante	18	9.0
People's Journal	14	7.0
Tempo	13	6.5
People's Tonight	13	6.5
Balita	10	5.0
Remate	5	2.5
Taliba	4	2.0
Any/No particular newspaper	14	7.0
No answer	2	1.0

Daily newspaper exposure is considerably less than TV viewership (see Tables 21 and 22). While majority (53.5%) of the elderly respondents say they read newspapers daily, time spent reading the newspaper is only 30 minutes or less for the largest number (47.9%).

Table 21. Newspaper readership per week

Number of days per week	Frequency	Percentage
Once a week	8	5.6
Twice a week	11	7.7
Thrice a week	20	14.1
Four times a week	16	11.3
Five times a week	11	7.7
Daily	76	53.5
TOTAL	142	100.0

Table 22. Number of hours in a day spent reading the newspaper

Number of hours spent reading	Frequency	Percentage
30 minutes or less	68	47.9
30 minutes – 1 hour	50	35.2
More than 1 hour – 2 hours	11	7.7
Until respondent finishes reading	12	8.5
No answer	1	0.7
TOTAL	142	100.0

Radio listenership

Just like the newspaper, radio is seen by the biggest percentage of respondents (38.1%) as an information medium, although to a lesser extent. More than one-fourth (27.3%) turn to radio also for entertainment (see Table 23). As such, news programs (53.9%) topped the list of programs listened to by respondents, followed by musical programs (38.8%) (see Table 24).

Table 23. Reason for listening to the radio

Reason	Frequency	Percentage
To be informed about news and current events	53	38.1
To be entertained	38	27.3
To relax and pass the time	29	20.9
Fondness in listening to radio since childhood	14	10.1
Other household members are also listening	5	3.6
TOTAL	139	100.0

Table 24. Radio programs frequently listened to*

Program type	Frequency	Percentage
News	75	54.0
Music	54	38.8
Drama	14	10.1
Educational programs	8	5.8
Showbiz news	2	1.4
Religious programs	1	0.7
Any	4	2.9

*n=139

Majority (56.8%) listen to radio in the morning (see Table 25) presumably to get the news in the early hours of the day, and stay tuned for about an hour each day (see Table 26).

Table 25. Time of the day frequently spent listening to the radio*

Time	Frequency	Percentage
Morning	79	56.8
Noontime	22	15.8
Afternoon	26	18.7
Evening	24	17.3

*n = 139

Table 26. Number of hours in a day spent listening to the radio

Number of hours spent listening	Frequency	Percentage
30 minutes	35	25.2
30 minutes – 1 hour	42	30.2
More than 1 hour – 3 hours	39	28.1
More than 3 hour – 6 hours	10	7.2
More than 6 hours	13	9.3
TOTAL	200	100.0

Movieviewership

As mentioned earlier, few (15%) respondents watch movies in theaters or movie houses (see Table 27). The reasons for not going to movie houses are varied, the most common being their lack of interest (21.8%) in watching movies, lack of money (15.9%), and time constraints (11.8%). For another 11.8%, going to movie theaters is tiring.

Table 27. Reason for not watching movies in the cinema

Reason	Frequency	Percentage
No interest	37	21.8
No money	27	15.9
No time	20	11.8
Tiring	20	11.8
Difficulty in walking	18	10.6
Prefers watching through VCDs, DVDs, TV	12	7.1
Too lazy to go to movie house	8	4.7
Has no companion	7	4.1
No answer	7	4.1
Cannot comprehend movie stories anymore	5	2.9
Poor eyesight	5	2.9
Dislikes sexual content of many films	4	2.5
TOTAL	170	100.0

Mass media's influence on perceptions of aging

Majority of the respondents (56.5%) feel that the mass media influences their over-all perception of their condition (see Table 28). More than one-fourth of the respondents (25.7%) reason out that the images they see on television, as well as those that they see in the newspapers and hear from the radio, serve as their bases on how they regard life in general and growing old in particular (see Table 29). In addition, some (20.4%) say that the mass media inspires them to reflect and assess themselves. A few others acknowledge that the mass media likewise serves as an important source of information (17.7%), and an influence on one's way of thinking (15.9%).

Table 28. Whether mass media influences respondent's overall perception of his/her state/condition

Opinion	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	113	56.5
No	77	38.5
Don't know	4	2.0
No answer	6	3.0
TOTAL	200	100.0

Table 29. Reason for saying that mass media influences the respondent's perception of his/her condition

Reason	Frequency	Percentage
Media images serve as bases for one's perception of life and aging	29	25.7
Inspires self-assessment	23	20.4
Media serves as venue for learning about goings on in society	20	17.7
Influences way of thinking	18	15.9
Brings about self-awareness	17	15.0
Media usually reflects reality	4	3.5
Helps in understanding my faith	2	1.8
TOTAL	113	100.0

Meanwhile, those who disagree that the mass media is influential on their perceptions of aging simply refuse to be influenced by what they see, hear, or read (39%). Some opine that the media is just a source of entertainment (20.8%) and should not be taken seriously as it is primarily a business undertaking. There are also a few (7.8%) respondents who recognize media's negative influences, particularly on their perceptions on growing old (see Table 30).

Table 30. Reason for saying that mass media does not influence the respondent's perception of his/her condition*

Reason	Frequency	Percentage
Refuses to be influenced	30	39.0
Media is solely for entertainment	16	20.8
Media is inconsequential	14	18.2
Media negatively affect one's perception of life and aging	6	7.8
Media's only goal is profit	2	2.7
Not interested in the mass media	2	2.6
Only God should influence man	1	1.3
No answer	15	19.5

*n = 77

Conclusion

Aging begins the moment a person is born. Everyone ages with every passing moment. However, the elderly are in a much more disadvantaged position. Studies have consistently shown that the effects of aging vary, depending on gender, ethnicity, education, and other socio-demographic factors. But while the negative effects of aging on the physical and mental functioning are said to be modest, the elderly continue to be discriminated against.

The elderly themselves, as this study shows, have generally positive perceptions of themselves. They believe that they still can contribute to society, learn new things, and make new friends. They likewise believe that the Philippine society holds them in high esteem. However, they are also aware of the realities of old age. They recognize that their physical capacity to do things has diminished.

The findings of this study show partial support to two popular theories on aging from the structuralist-functionalist school: the disengagement theory and the activity theory.

The disengagement theory posits that “as people get older, their abilities decline and hence, they seek to decrease their activities, assume more passive roles, and interact less frequently with others” (Ravanera & Fernando 2001: 1). The data from this study show that most of the elderly respondents have partly “disengaged” from society since they have retired from their full-time jobs. Findings on the usage of new communication technology among the elderly reflect their hesitance and lack of interest to learn new technology and new gadgets, and to gain new skills. But while some data from this study support this theory, it does not account for the generally positive self-concepts of the elderly.

The activity theory, on the other hand, is almost the opposite of disengagement theory, and claims that “a successful old age can be achieved by maintaining roles and relationships” (Powell 2001: 3). While this augurs well for positive aging, this does not account for the fact that some people choose to retire from work after reaching a certain age and enjoy a slower-paced life. And since retirement is inevitable, it is likewise inevitable that some roles are relinquished and some activities are discontinued. Findings of this study indeed show that many of the respondents maintain positive outlooks, despite having retired from work, and despite acknowledging the limitations that came with their advanced age.

But what of the role of mass media in the lives of the elderly? Increased consumption of certain media seems like a natural consequence of aging. After retirement, the elderly find themselves with more time in their hands. Closed paths and career cuts, as well as health problems, are just some of the realities that the elderly have to contend with. Given this situation, the mass media – especially television to which the elderly have greatest exposure – may play a significant role. The mass media may actually replace the social contacts that may have been severed after retirement. The media do not only keep them attuned with the world, they may also compensate for the losses that they experience after retirement.

Whether increased media use is seen as disengagement from the real world, or an attempt to continue to keep in touch with what they used to enjoy, the fact remains that the mass media play an important role in the lives of the elderly. The mass media help the elderly develop a new balance in their personal meanings, and may even help them construct satisfying lives and selves. Thus, the challenge to the mass media is for them to manifest greater interest in aging and on the elderly. It may be true that gerontology has attracted attention in the last couple of years. Advertisers have realized that the elderly comprise a rich market of consumer products. However, just like the other age groups, the elderly are also consumers of mass media products. And while articles and features on the subject of the elderly are not exactly hard to come by, due concern should be given to their focus, i.e., whether they give the proper information that would help the elderly, and the people around them, understand better the phenomenon of aging.

This study only grazed the surface on the subject of aging and the mass media, and a lot of questions still need be addressed. First, considering that the elderly have equal, if not higher, exposure than the average mass media consumer, how visible are the elderly in the mass media? With improved health care, the

elderly is a fast-growing age group. But is this reflected in the presence of the elderly in the mass media? In television, how many shows revolve around senior citizens? In the newspapers, other than health care, pension, and social security, what stories do the elderly figure in? In advertising, what products other than adult diapers, memory-enhancers, and special formula milk target the elderly?

Secondly, do these media portrayals help the elderly cope with aging? Do negative stereotypes persist in the characterizations of the elderly? Researches have shown that older people with positive perceptions of themselves actually live longer than those who see themselves in a negative light (Ramirez 2002).

These questions may be addressed by future researches on social gerontology to determine if the gerontology enterprise is successful in creating more realistic images of the elderly. After all, the media portrayals of the elderly as either assets or burdens to society may yet contribute in the promotion of self-concepts that match these portrayals.

Notes

- ¹ Marxist political economists note that public discourses and policies treat the growing elderly population as competition for material resources. For example, economic fluctuations and financial crises endanger social programs for the elderly, such as retirement and pension plans, subsidies for healthcare.
- ² Critical feminism calls attention to gender and class inequalities that are oppressive for women, and even doubly oppressive for elderly women. It is tragic that elderly women - because they live longer than men - may end up alone and impoverished, burdened with expensive care needs

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