The Media's Portrayal of Aging Society in Thailand

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Abstract

In Thailand, life expectancy has been increasing. This means that more people are living longer than before, and the country is gearing towards an aging society. As the number of aging population is growing, ironically, images of senior citizens in the media is still underrepresented. This paper aims to analysis the way popular media such as television dramas, news programs, and advertising convey the message about older adults in Thailand. The study suggests that while in popular media like television – and drama programs in particular – elderly actors are generally employed in supporting roles and portrayed in flat, two-dimensional good or bad character types, social media, on the other hand, which has gained popularity among the Thai elderly, has provided them a space through which to express their identities and project their own selves. A pertinent example is that of the recent emergence of elderly female bloggers sharing their own backpacking-style journeys via social media platforms: this has prompted constructive discussions among the public, allowing social media to be considered as a venue to reflect positive cultural attitudes towards old age in Thailand.

Keywords: Media, Elderly, Aging, Thailand, Television, Advertising, News, Social Media

Introduction

Thailand, like many countries, is moving toward an aging society. Ministry of Social Development and Human Security of Thailand statistics show that by the next decade people aged over 60 will make up 20 percent of the population, while people aged 65 and above will account for 14 percent. Although these numbers might initially appear worrying, much research around attitudes of Thai senior citizens and people's perception of an aging population have shown optimistic views towards the future of an aging Thai society. Nonetheless, the media representation of the elderly in Thailand is still problematic. This paper, through an analysis of popular media texts, aims to explore the role of the media in portraying an image of Thai senior citizens.

The paper is organized into three main parts. It starts with an introductory background of aging in Thailand, followed by textual analysis and discussion of image and representation of older people in the mainstream media (MSM), such as television dramas, news, and advertising. The last part of the paper will discuss the role of social media as a platform for older adults to express their own self-identity.

An Introductory Background of Aging in Thailand

In Thailand, the number of older adults is growing. A report from 'Thailand Age Watch' has revealed that the country is now ranked as having the third most rapidly ageing population in the world. By 2040, it is expected that the aging population will account for 25 percent of the population: this means that one in every four people in Thailand will be a senior citizen.

In terms of government policies regarding older people, the Thai government has established the 'National Committee of Senior Citizens' as an organization body responsible for promoting the health and well-being of senior citizens in Thailand. The government's policy and program to support older people also goes in line with the direction of the United Nations Assembly's elderly rights, with respect to autonomy, involvement, care, self-satisfaction and self-esteem.

The Second National Plan for Older Persons (2002-2021) has been implemented. The plan focuses on promoting a positive attitude toward elderly persons, promoting health for the elderly, and social protection for the elderly. In order for this plan to be a success, cooperation from all social sectors including the media is needed. This study is conducted within the premise that the media is a main contributor of people's perception and attitudes toward older people. The message that media send to the society about aging is a preliminary source for an understanding of aging issues in the society. The next part of this paper will discuss the representation of the aging population as portrayed in the Thai mainstream media.

Mainstream Media and Representation of Older Adults in Thailand

This textual analysis of popular media texts aims to explore the role of the media in portraying an image and representation of Thai elderly. It is derived from part of my current research project entitled 'Challenging Aging Society: media and its role in supporting 'successful aging' in Thailand.'

The analysis focuses on the portrayal of older adults in three areas of mainstream media: namely television drama, news, and advertising. Dimensions used to measure adult portrayal in media include personality traits/characteristics, cognitive ability, physical features, social context, and cultural values.

The Portrayal of Older Characters in Thai Television Drama

Like elsewhere, older characters in Thai television drama are under-represented. That is, in television drama, older people are seldom featured and/or are often placed in a supporting role with a one dimensional characteristic. Generally, older actors are portrayed through two fundamental stereotypes of either 'the good' (positive), or 'the bad' (negative), while the neutral characters are rarely seen.

To illustrate this, in terms of personality traits or characteristics, 'the good' is kind, fun and loving – often presented as a supporting parent or a kindly grandparent. On the other hand, 'the bad' is shown as a grumpy old man, a strict parent or a traditionalist grandparent.

One particular character type worth considering is that of an older female acting as a jealous and strict mother in law. This typical character, which appears in the majority of Thai soap operas, is most frequently portrayed as an upper-class mother who has a prejudice towards her son's lover because she comes from a lower class. From the beginning of the story, the mother in law will try every way to obstruct her son's relationship with his loved one. As the storyline develops, the son is torn between the mother and his love. But by the end of the story, the mother surrenders to the good deeds of her daughter-in-law, with the magically rosy and happy ending forming the story's resolution.

A similar prevailing negativity can be seen in the way that cognitive ability is expressed in television drama, with older characters generally presented as having declining cognitive ability, such as general memory loss, forgetting people's names, and endlessly repeating themselves. In the story, this declining cognitive ability is often used as a means of allowing other characters to make fun of the elderly in an endearing way.

Considering physical features, older characters are often portrayed as frail and struggling. However, their state of health is largely conditioned by the socio-economic status of the characters, with lower-income status characters being portrayed as weak and in poor health while those with higher-incomes and social status are presented as more glamourous and healthy.

In terms of social context, older characters are generally placed at home with other family members. In television dramas, older adults are rarely depicted at the work place, and if they are, it is usually in the role of business owners.

With respect to cultural values, older characters are associated with traditional values and nostalgic feelings of 'the good old days', and represented as a reminder of social customs and norms. Most of the popular older actors in Thai television drama have their heydays in the past and are still widely respected by the younger actors. One cultural specificity of Thai television drama regarding seniority can be seen in the title

of the television drama program. It is a tradition for the production team to honor the senior characters staring in the show by addressing their names at the beginning of the program titles and introducing them with the title of honorable actors.

Figure 1: Older characters in a drama program representing Thai tradition and cultural values. In this picture the grandmother, the elderly female actress second from left, was preparing a Buddhist ritual of almsgiving. The drama conveys the message of the tradition being passed from the older to the younger generation of the family.

To sum up this part, although older characters in Thai television drama tend to play roles which lack significance, with older people often presented as having declining health and waning authority, older characters are still respected and portrayed as a symbolic representation of Thai traditional values and a reminder of Thai social values.

The Representation of Older People in the News

The elderly are also under-represented in the news. However, compared with the glossy portrayal in television drama, the news shows the personality traits of senior citizens in a more neutral way. While television shows usually dramatize older characters as 'the good' and 'the bad', news reports present the elderly as real-life people.

In terms of cognitive condition, news programs often show older people with declining cognitive ability. For physical features, older people are portrayed as weak and inactive. Generally, they are represented as physically incompetent, with declining health.

From the social perspective older people in the news are generally placed at home with family members, with their peers, and with multiple age groups. In terms of cultural values presented in the news, the media basically feature older adults as it is the responsibility of society to care for the elderly.

An example of this argument can be seen in the news reports built around Thailand's first National Elderly Games. As shown in the picture below, the government initiated the event to promote the health of the elderly by organizing Thailand's first National Elderly Games in April this year (2018). The older participants were portrayed as passive agents who needed social care and support to boost their health rather than active agents who keep themselves fit and strong.

Figure 2: Thailand's first National Elderly Games held in April 2018(Photo credit: https://www.theguardian.com/world/gallery/2018/apr/26/thailand-elderly-games-in-pictures)

In the picture above, 98-year-old Mr. Sawang Janpram, the star of Thailand's first national Elderly Games, receives a medal after his victory in the 100 meters' sprint. During the interview with the media, he said, 'I saw many people of my age ailing in bed and I didn't want to be like that, so I began to exercise.'

Figure 3: Thailand's first National Elderly Games held in April 2018. The news reported that the government organized this event with the aim of boosting healthcare among seniors, with the added social draw of competitors enjoying the opportunity to meet friends. (Photo credit: https://www.theguardian.com/world/gallery/2018/apr/26/thailand-elderly-games-in-pictures)

Figure 4: Women in the 80-85 age category running the 400 meters race. (Photo credit: https://www.theguardian.com/world/gallery/2018/apr/26/thailand-elderly-games-in-pictures)

Figure 5: The event's staff looking after the elderly athletes after the race. (Photo credit: https://www.theguardian.com/world/gallery/2018/apr/26/thailand-elderly-games-in-pictures)

The picture above shows the staff team caring for Ms. Duangpee Sansing, the 81-year-old winner of a 400 meters race. In her interview with the media, Ms. Duangpee said, 'It doesn't matter if I get a medal or not, I feel happy to see friends competing together. I am not that tired because I am happy'.

To sum up, the representation of elderly in the news is still limited in terms of the roles within which they are placed. The news reports often show images of older adults within the society surrounded by family and care-takers, and project the idea of society's role of responsibility towards the elderly, with the reports on Thailand's first National Elderly Games being a pertinent case in point. The news agenda is also focused on reporting about the government's role in promoting the health and active life-style of the elderly, rather than emphasizing the value of elderly participants keeping themselves strong and healthy and performing well in the events.

The Portrayal of Older Adults in Advertising

Compared to their portrayal in television dramas, in advertising, older adults are presented much more as real-life people. Advertising targeting seniors is, for the large part, positive: for personality traits and characteristics, older people tend to look happy and active. This can be explained by the nature of advertising in which advertisements are trying to sell products and services.

Older adults are portrayed physically strong and active, glamorous, healthy and happy. In terms of cognitive ability, they are presented as lucid, mentally competent and even desirable. Socially, they are placed in the house or home setting with family members.

Increasingly, older celebrities are seen endorsing products such as health products, food, drinks, financial services, household items and home improvement services. Advertising which makes use of the grandparenting relationship to sell products, along with an active 'golden ager' stereotype is also burgeoning.

Figure 6: Advertising often portrays older adults in a positive light. This insurance ad shows a happy and active Golden Ager stereotype using the product and services.

Figure 7: More senior celebrities are seen endorsing health products on adverts.
Discussion: Images and Representation of Older Adults on MSM

Hummert and colleagues (1994) examined the portrayal of the elderly in Television adverts and classified two stereotypes, namely the *Perfect Grandparent* who is kind, loving, and family oriented, and the *Golden Ager* who is lively, adventurous and alert. Later, Williams (2010) applied these stereotypes as a coding system to study UK magazine adverts. His study came up with the six stereotypes of elderly, labelled as: *Golden-ager, Perfect Grandparent, Legacy/Mentor Themes, Coper, Comedic, Celebrity Endorser*.

It may be helpful at this point to illustrate each stereotype. *Golden Ager* can be described as older people full of zest, often having glamorous and luxurious lifestyles. *Perfect Grandparents* are mostly shown with grandchildren and other generations of family members, typically in close-ups of smiling and happy families. *Legacy/Mentor Themes* refers to older persons portrayed with gravitas and status, and typically upper-class status. The *Coper*, on the other hand, has a problem such as a minor disability but is coping with it because of the product being sold. *Comedic* are those depicted in a humorous situation. Lastly, *Celebrity Endorsers* are well known older adults in the public eye endorsing products, typically acting as positive role models.

Applying Williams' six stereotypes to help elaborate an understanding of portrayals of older people in Thai media, it can be seen that television dramas depict four types of older adults, *Perfect Grandparent*, *Legacy/mentor*, *Comedic*, and *Coper*. While the news generally shows two types - the *Perfect Grandparent* and the *Coper*. In advertising, the four types of *Perfect Grandparent*, *Golden Ager*, *Celebrity Endorser*, and *Coper* predominate.

TV Drama	News	Advertising
Perfect grandparent Legacy/ mentor Comedic Coper	Perfect grandparent Coper	Perfect grandparent Golden ager Celebrity endorser Coper

Figure 8: A comparison of the potrayals of older people.

As shown in the above table, the *Perfect Grandparent* and the *Coper* stereotypes can be seen in all three media: television drama, news and advertising. This finding seems to reflect how older people are perceived in Thai society. The *Perfect Grandparent* stereotype supports the values of the elderly as one of the supporting pillars of family and society. This stereotype also reflects the vision of the Second National Plan for Older Persons in Thailand which directly addresses the assertion that '[the] Elderly are a foundation pillar of the society'. At the same time the *Coper* stereotype shown in the media shows that in Thai society people still believe that it is the responsibility of society to look after the senior citizens. In this way, older adults are still perceived as passive agents in need of care.

In summary, the reflection of the aging society in Thailand is still ambiguous in the Thai media. Television dramas commonly feature stereotypes that show older adults through a lens of decline and diminished capacities, emphasizing the burdens of growing old. On the other hand, advertising featuring older adults increasingly present a 'golden ager' stereotype.

These stereotypes cannot, however, correlate with positive or negatives images in a straightforward way. But to some extent, the media's portrayal of the aging can influence society's views and responses to population aging. How the media's

portrayals can contribute to people's perception of aging and senior citizens in Thai society still requires further research.

Social media as a platform for older adults' self and identity expression

In the new media ecology, stereotypes and social identity are more complex. The stereotypes mentioned before might not be adequate to explain the characteristics and representation of older people in the present Thai society. In the digital media scenery, more and more older adults are online and on social media as prosumers and user generated content (UGC) creators.

Older adults and UGCs on social media

Statistic revealed by the Electronic Transaction Development Agency of Thailand showed that on average older people use online media 31.8 hours per week. Line application is the most popular social media site used by 91.5% of the Thai elderly, followed by YouTube (89.3%), and Facebook (86.5%). Social media has not only gained popularity among the Thai elderly, it has also provided them a space through which to express their identities and project their own selves. A pertinent example is that of the recent emergence of elderly female bloggers sharing their own backpacking-style journeys via social media platforms. This has prompted constructive discussions among the public, allowing social media to be considered as a venue to reflect positive cultural attitudes towards old age in Thailand.
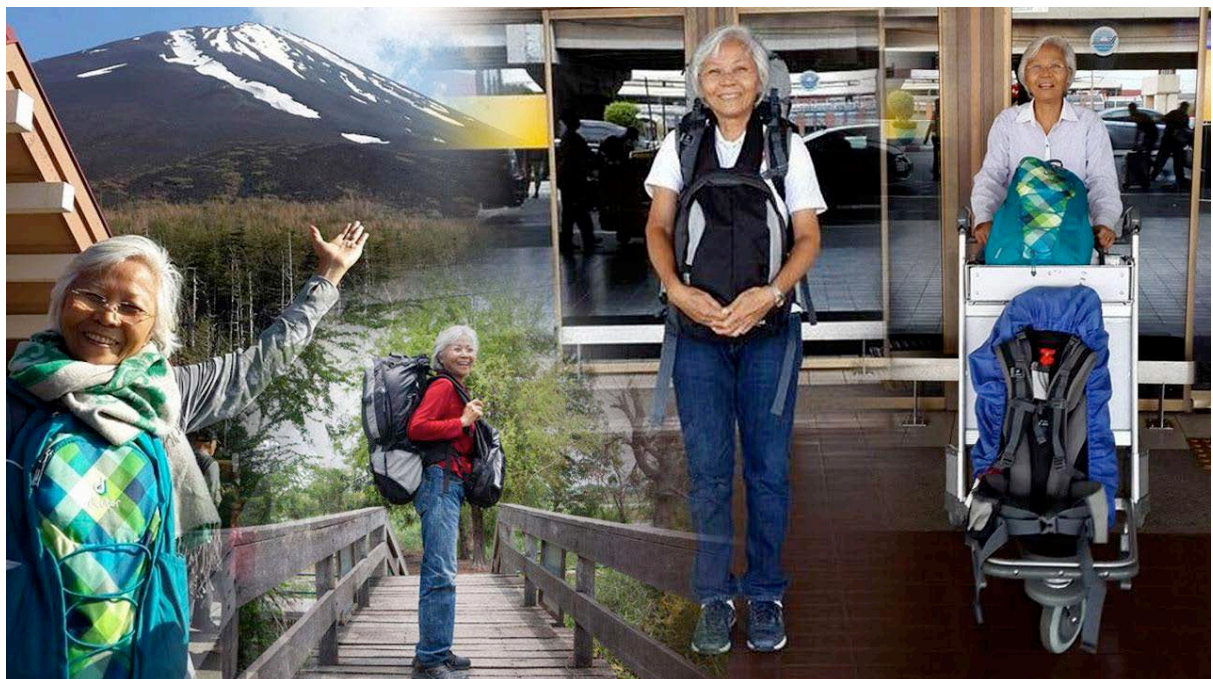

Figure 9: Older adult as UGC creator
(Photo Credit: https://www.thairath.co.th/content/636194)

Ms. Kanchana Pundhutecha, shown in the figure 9, is one of the well-known elderly female traveler bloggers in Thailand. Ms. Kanchana retired from her work as senior public health technical officer at the Ministry of Health in 2014. The following year, she chose a life of backpacking in her retirement and shared her story on her Facebook fan page titled 'Paa Backpack' meaning 'Aunty Backpack', which has won

a big number of fans. Her story has been shared, liked, and talked about among the public on social media. The mainstream media such as television programs, news, and magazines have also shown their interest in her anti-traditionalist lifestyle. Ms. Kanchana has given several interviews with the media which have inspired people from different age groups about the idea of modern aging and the retirement lifestyle.

In her interview with the website 'Brand Inside Asia', Ms. Kanchana said that in her first year of retirement she spent her time leading a normal routine life, but this seemed boring to her. She felt that life was so uninteresting, and that she needed to do something about it. She started to search for information about travelling and embarked on her first solo trip around Thailand for a whole week. Ms. Kanchana said she chose to travel by bus because she's scared of flying. After escaping from her comfort zone, she started backpacking-style international trips and this has given her meaningful life experiences.

"After retirement I have more time to prepare for travelling. Most of my days are spent on reaching for information about the trips, this is the thing that I didn't get a chance to do while I was still working. Travelling gives me a meaningful life. I have a goal for each year. I know what to prepare and I always plan for it."

(Ms. Kanchana's interview with the website 'Brand Inside Asia')

In her Facebook fan page, Ms Kanchana shares her own story and some tips from her personal experience as an elderly female travelling alone as a backpacker. When asked about how her family, a husband and son, feel about her travelling lifestyle, Ms. Kanchana said that they have overcome the fear and worry of her solo journeying. They always give her support and consider the advantage of Facebook as a social network site that helps them keep up with where and how she is during the trips.

Regarding age and travelling, Ms. Kanchana described travelling in the later years of life as a joyful moment. In her view, age doesn't matter in travelling. Travelling at a younger age might be fun and adventurous, but travelling at this time of life can bring equally as much happiness.

'Travelling at this age is a happiness for me, it's a worry-free journey. My kid is a grown up, and I have no worry about the family and work now, I have more freedom to travel.'

(Ms. Kanchana's interview with the website 'Brand Inside Asia')

Figure 10: Older adults on social media, Facebook profile picture of Ms. Kanchana Pundhutecha, a 65-year-old travelling blogger. (Photo Credit: https://th-th.facebook.com/hipsterpaew/)

Evident in Figure 10, Ms. Kanchana's beaming smile and spirit have captured the public's hearts. People in all age groups have shared her user created content and stories from her page. Also, on the Facebook fan page, people write comments of admiration for her inspiration and courage. Below are some excerpts from the users' comments:

"So inspiring!"
"Love her adventurous heart, she is my inspiration."
"Her path of life is lovely and interesting."
"Thank you for your story, it gave me courage to fulfill my dream to travel on my own."

The story of Ms. Kanchana is one of an example of older adults expressing self and identity through user-generated content. On a social level, her story has inspired people's positive perception towards aging in Thailand. At the same time, on an academic level, it has ignited the role of social network sites as a space for older adult's self-expression and representation. This finding suggests that, in social media, senior citizens are considered as active agents who play a role in the portrayal of their image which can contribute to a better understanding of an aging society in Thailand.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Increased life expectancy is one of the key successes of human resource development in Thai society. However, underrepresentation and stereotypes of older people in media doesn't reflect the reality of the aging society's image in Thailand.

How the media portray older people is crucial because it affects how the different age groups think about and interact with each other. The media's selection and representation of older people is not simply a reflection of reality; rather it is the result

of a framing process. The media can create distorted views of aging. Stereotypes of older adults are increasingly more complex, and social and cultural identity is more individualistic and fragmented.

This study is an attempt to acknowledge the importance of the media in shaping the perceptions of aging. Findings from this study propose that the messages the media send to society about the later years of life should be taken into serious consideration. This can provide a rich resource for cultural gerontology and policy management towards a successful-aging society in Thailand. The Second National Plan for Older Persons in Thailand has been implemented and has progressed at many levels toward building an aging-friendly society. The plan addresses the elderly as a foundation pillar of the society, with one of the visions focusing on building a positive attitude toward elderly persons. In this way, media can play an important role in promoting the future of the aging society in Thailand.

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