Women Over 50: The Right To Be Seen on Screen

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Younger characters are far more likely to have a romantic storyline than characters 50+; depending on the year, characters 49 and under are two to three times as likely to have a romantic storyline than characters 50+.

Overview

For this report, the NextFifty Initiative collaborated with the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media to survey Americans' attitudes about representations of older adults and analyze representations of women 50+ in film and television. This comprehensive study systematically examines how gender-based representation intersects with age-based representation in the minds of media consumers and in American entertainment media.

The findings from our survey show that representations of men and women 50+ are out of line with consumer demand - viewers of all ages are hungry for more balanced, diverse, and aspirational portrayals of older men and women. Our analysis of the most popular films and television shows[1] from 2010 to 2020 suggests that on-screen ageism persists and is particularly evident among on-screen women aged 50+. Just 1 in 4 characters who are 50+ are women, a serious inequality in the representation of older adults in film and television. Moreover, 50+ women who are on-screen are commonly cast in supporting and minor roles and are less likely to be developed as characters in interesting ways.

Given the lack of equitable and authentic representation of older adults in popular American film and television (especially women 50+), and the public's desire for change, we encourage entertainment media to actively seek out and invest in stories that fully capture the diversity of older Americans and better illustrate the full scope of their lived experiences. The data presented here pinpoints where the Industry falls short, but also identifies areas where significant progress has been made. But by highlighting persistent disparities, we aim to continue to push the needle forward by promoting accountability and encouraging innovation.

Introduction

Americans 50+ represent an important demographic for Hollywood. Adults 50+ watch more hours of television than any other age group[2] and their spending power is on the rise. Spending in this "silver economy" is expected to nearly double from 2020 to 2030, accounting for about 15 trillion dollars in consumer spending.[3] Adults 50+ include members of Generation X born before 1971, Baby Boomers, and The Silent Generation. Despite representing a sizable chunk of the U.S. population - about 117 million Americans[4] - our report demonstrates that this demographic lacks equitable inclusion and accurate representation in American film and television.

This report shows both men and women 50+ — but especially women — are far less likely than men and women under 50 to be shown in film and television. And their exclusion isn't the only problem. The findings of this report suggest that many films and television programs promote ageism, by relying on negative, inaccurate, and even harmful stereotypes.

These misrepresentations have negative social consequences, because entertainment media play a significant role in shaping perceptions of individuals and groups in a society. The erasure of older adults, stereotypic portrayals of older adults, and the tendency to pigeonhole older characters into a narrow set of storylines in popular entertainment media all have a profound impact on our collective understanding of what it means to age and our perceptions of the desirability of aging, both in relation to ourselves and to others.

Improved representations, however, can have a positive impact on older adults. Increased awareness and understanding of the aging process and of the experiences of older people can reduce anxiety about aging and combat ageism. Here, entertainment media can have an impact by working to capture a more nuanced picture of the lives, interests, and strengths of older Americans.

In order to support the well-being and potential of all aging adults, now and for decades to come, we need to increase, improve, and diversify portrayals of older adults in entertainment media. Seeing more older adults — and especially more older women — onscreen, in all of their diverse, dynamic, and complicated humanity, will have a powerful impact on societal perceptions of aging by reducing stigma and ultimately ensuring that we all have the opportunity to thrive as we age.

Literature Review

Ageism is an issue that pervades entertainment media and is further complicated when considering how age intersects with other identities, such as gender. For instance, women in Hollywood are considered to be "old" at a much younger age than their male counterparts. The average earnings per film of female celebrities increase until the age of 34 but decrease rapidly thereafter. In comparison, the average earnings per film for male celebrities reach their peak at age 51 and then stabilize.[5] According to one analysis by Time Magazine, early in their careers, women and men receive about the same number of film roles, but around age 30, female actors' roles start to decline, but male actors' roles continue to increase and peak at age 46[6].

Female actors are starting to push back against this phenomenon. In 2017, actor Jamie Denbo (Orange is the New Black) tweeted "I was just informed that at the age of 43, I am TOO OLD to play the wife of a 57 year old," and then sent out a second tweet clarifying, "Oh, the characters also have an 18 year-old daughter. I am TOO OLD to be the mother of an 18 year-old." Other actors over the years have also vocalized their frustration.[7] In 2015, Helen Mirren, then 70, criticized the ageism women in Hollywood face calling it, "ridiculous." She went on to say, "And 'twas ever thus. We all watched James Bond as he got more and more geriatric, and his girlfriends got younger and younger. It's so annoying."[8] And in a 2021 interview with CBS News, Geena Davis, 65, explained that, "[opportunities are] so few… There's just very few parts for people my age and older, you know? So it's just bad odds, basically."

According to a recent study of top films released in 2019[9] worldwide, older adults as a whole were grossly underrepresented relative to people under 50. Older women were further marginalized in comparison to older men — older male characters outnumbered older female characters two-to-one. This study uncovered additional differences between male and female characters 50 and older: compared with male characters ages 50+, female characters 50+ were more likely to be shown with stereotypical traits such as being senile, feeble, or frumpy. Portrayals of this nature are both sexist and ageist, and the intersection of both sets of stereotypes and discriminatory beliefs show through clearly in the characterizations outlined here.

In addition to negative depictions, narrow depictions contribute to misrepresentations of the lives and experiences of older adults. For instance, as one article notes, while more recently there has been an increase in the representations of 50+ women in entertainment media, these opportunities have mostly gone to straight, white women. Characters 50+ who are also LGBTQIA+ and/or people of color are necessary for more inclusive and authentic content.

Health Impacts of Age-Based Stereotyping and Discrimination

The impact of stereotyping and discrimination are multi-faceted, effecting individuals' personal, social, and institutional development and opportunities.[10] For instance, as we review below, numerous studies have shown that exposure to ageist messaging and programming affects aging individuals' cognition, longevity, well-being, and their psychological and physical health more broadly.

Beliefs and perceptions about aging are among the strongest factors in determining our health and well-being as we age. Negative perceptions of aging have been linked to poor physical health outcomes later in life. Conversely, individuals with more positive perceptions of aging are more likely to practice preventive health behaviors and report better functional health and a more positive self-concept later in life.

Research finds that people are malleable and respond to exposure to stereotypes about aging. For instance, being exposed to negative words related to aging can lead to diminished cognitive functioning[11], but exposure to positive stereotypes can improve physical fitness.[12] Persistent age bias in media amounts to repeated

exposure to the more pernicious stereotypes associated with aging - reinforcing these associations and their negative health outcomes.

Over the long term, negative stereotypes about older adults influence beliefs about aging, and also create a set of expectations about what is possible and appropriate later in life. These beliefs shape behaviors that influence long-term health outcomes - behaviors related to diet, exercise, and preventative health care. Older people who have more optimistic views about the aging process take better care of their physical and mental health.[13] Negative and inaccurate beliefs about aging can also influence how healthcare providers and professionals care for older patients, which can influence older adults' long term health and well-being.[14] For instance, the belief that older people are unwilling or unable to learn or try new things may discourage medical professionals from encouraging beneficial behavior change and the development of new healthy habits.

Unfortunately, ageism is widely experienced. According to one study by the University of Michigan's National Poll on Healthy Aging, 82% of older adults reported regularly experiencing at least one form of ageism in their everyday lives.[15] In spite of this, about two out of three older adults said that they agree that as they have gotten older, their feelings about aging have become more positive (67%) and that their life is better than they thought it would be (65%), indicating the inaccuracy of these stereotypes.[16] Thus, despite negative experiences with ageism, older adults are not dismayed, and as we will show below, they are hopeful that entertainment media can highlight more realistic portrayals of aging and older adults' lives.

Accurate portrayals of aging and older adulthood in entertainment media can help counter pervasive negative stereotypes about older adults, and have a positive impact on their long term health and well-being as well as their social influence and experiences. They also work to reduce negative stereotypes and beliefs more broadly, shaping the quality and strength of cross-generational friendships, working relationships, and experiences with the healthcare system.

Methodology Overview

To assess perceptions of representations of aging in entertainment media, and understand the inclusion and portrayal of characters 50+, this report relies on a mixed-method approach — a representative survey of 1,502 adults in the U.S, and a content analysis of popular film and television to understand the inclusion and portrayal of characters 50+:

Survey Analysis:

- A nationally representative opt-in survey of 1,502 U.S. adults, administered from September 9 to September 20, 2021.

Content Analysis:

- An analysis of the ten top-grossing domestic films from 2010 to 2020 (top 10, per year).

- An analysis of the most popular television shows (broadcast and streaming) from 2010 to 2020 (top 10 per year, per platform).

Findings

Survey Analysis

To understand how Americans 50+ perceive their representation in entertainment media and how this compares to adults under 50, and also to understand differences between men and women 50+, we administered a survey to 1,502 representative US adults (Table 1), fielded from September 9 to September 20, 2021.[17] This survey asked cohorts of respondents ages 18 to 49 and respondents ages 50 to 85 questions about film and television and whether characters portraying older people are accurate, representative, and/or inspirational.

Older Americans Want More Authentic and Accurate Portrayals of Aging Characters

TABLE 1
Survey Participants' Gender and Age

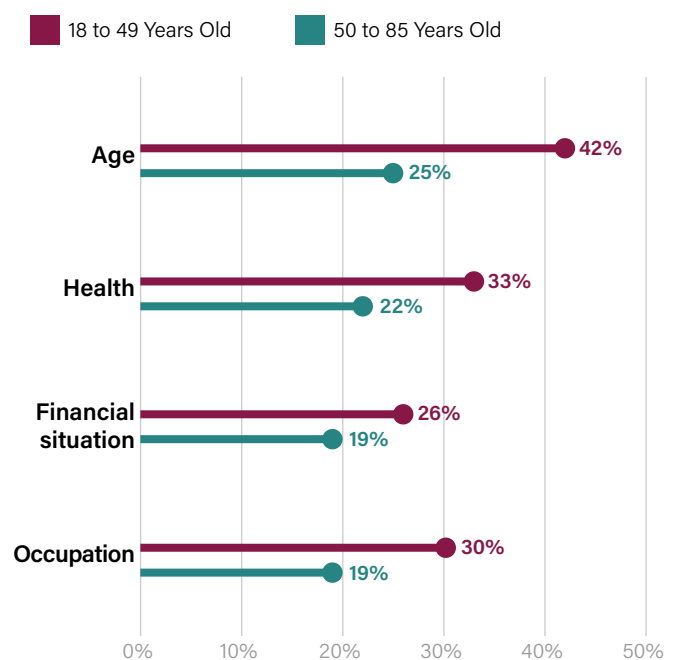|	Respondents aged 50 to 85	Respondents aged 18 to 49
Women	531	246
Men	470	251
Non-binary	-	4

Adults 50+ largely agree that there are not enough characters in film and television that are older, and the older characters that do exist are portrayed poorly. While 42% of respondents 18 to 49 said they are very satisfied with the accuracy of characters who portray their age group, only 25% of respondents 50+ agreed (26% of men 50+ and 23% of women 50+ agreed that their age group is depicted accurately).

This dissatisfaction may be related to how aspects of their everyday lives are portrayed. As displayed in Chart 1, respondents 50+ are less likely than younger respondents to agree that their health conditions, financial situations, and occupations are accurately depicted (Chart 1).

Adults 50+ also expressed that other important aspects of their daily lives are not accurately represented on screen. Of the following aspects of their lives — friendships, health, marriage/romance, reactions to

CHART 1
Percent of Respondents "Very Satisfied" with Depictions Of Their...

18 to 49 Years Old   50 to 85 Years Old

Age
- 42%
- 25%

Health
- 33%
- 22%

Financial situation
- 26%
- 19%

Occupation
- 30%
- 19%

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50%

social change, financial security, love/sex, and retirement — respondents 50+ agreed that depictions of financial security are the least accurate (Chart 2).

In addition to these factors, respondents were asked about characters' portrayals of personality traits. Respondents made selections from a list the adjectives they believe describe older adults and were then asked whether these same adjectives describe older adults in film and television today compared to film and television from the 1990s. The responses suggest that adults 50+ believe that film and television created today depicts their age group more accurately than film and television created in the 1990s, however these depictions are still not aligned with their own experiences (Chart 3).

For example, while only 17% of adults 50+ said that "grumpy" describes older adults they know, 41% said "grumpy" describes older adults personalities in films and television in the 1990s, but fewer said that "grumpy" was a common personality attribute for older characters in film and television today (26%). And 42% of adults 50+

said they know someone their age who is "confident" but only 22% agreed that "confident" described the depiction of older adults in film and television in the 90s, compared to 30% who said that this trait describes older characters in film and television today.

Adults 50+ see improvement in portrayals in film and television from the 90s to today on the following traits, as well:

- Independent (26% in the 90s, but 36% today, a 10-point difference)

- Resourceful (20% in the 90s, but 30% today, a 10-point difference)

- Strong (25% in the 90s, but 29% today, a 4-point difference)

- Elderly (36% in the 90s, but 29% today, a 7-point difference)

- Ignorant of technology (27% in the 90s, but 23% today, a 4-point difference)

CHART 2

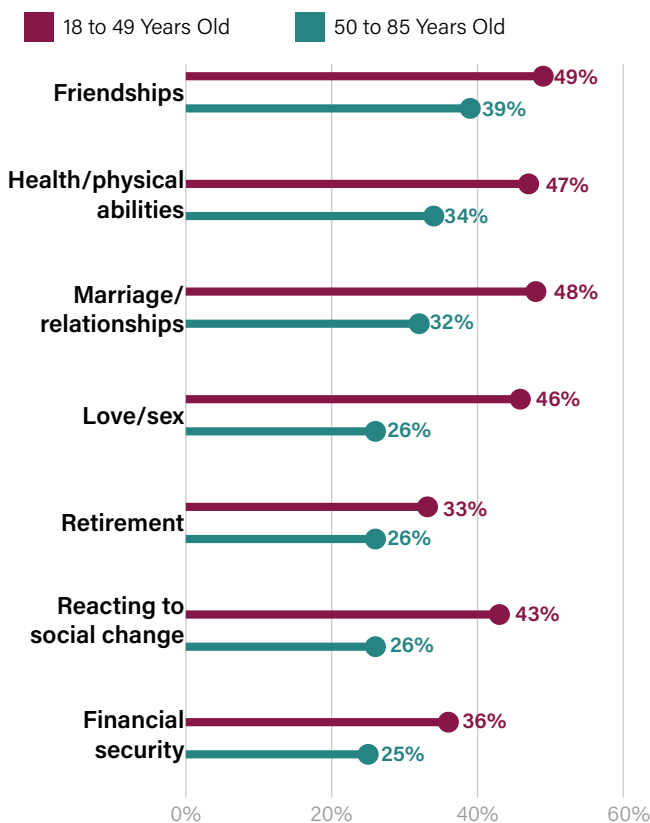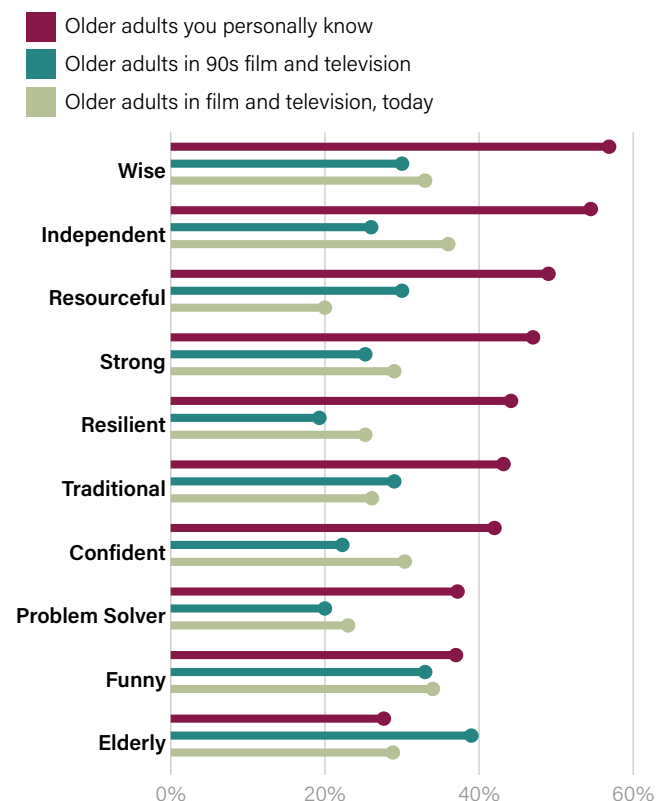### Percent of Respondents Who Agree Movies/TV Accurately Represent...

Legend: 18 to 49 Years Old / 50 to 85 Years Old

- Friendships: 49% / 39%
- Health/physical abilities: 47% / 34%
- Marriage/relationships: 48% / 32%
- Love/sex: 46% / 26%
- Retirement: 33% / 26%
- Reacting to social change: 43% / 26%
- Financial security: 36% / 25%

CHART 3

How Do Respondents Describe "Older Adults"? (Respondents 50+ Only)

Legend:
- Older adults you personally know
- Older adults in 90s film and television
- Older adults in film and television, today

Traits: Wise, Independent, Resourceful, Strong, Resilient, Traditional, Confident, Problem Solver, Funny, Elderly

Women 50+ Want to See Better Portrayals of Characters 50+ in Entertainment Media

Women 50+ are much more likely than men 50+ to seek out film and television programming that features characters who are 50+:

- 64% of women 50+ seek out film and television programming with a leading character 50+, compared to 53% of men 50+.

- 73% of women 50+ seek out film and tv programming that represents older adults positively, compared to 64% of men 50+.

- 75% of women 50+ said that they wish they saw more adults who are like them in film and tv, compared to 65% of men 50+.

Men and women 50+ slightly disagree about the value of stereotypes of older people and the importance of role models in film and television:

- 64% of men 50+ agree with the statement "I don't mind when movies/TV shows represent older characters with stereotypes" compared to 53% of women 50+, a gap of 11%.

- 77% of men 50+ agree that older adults, not just young people, need role models in film, compared to 85% of women 50+, a gap of 8%.

- 52% of men 50+ said they are turned off from film and television programming that plays into stereotypes about older adults, compared to 61% of women 50+, a gap of 9%.

However, the vast majority of both men and women 50+ — 83% — agree with the statement "sometimes I feel the media/culture doesn't realize how much they stereotype older people." Although men 50 and older are less critical of film and tv that depict older people in stereotypical ways, the survey revealed that both men and women 50+ experience ageism or are seen in stereotypical ways in their own lives. According to the survey, eight in ten adults 50+ expressed that they've experienced some form of ageism.

In Their Own Words: Differences between Life and Entertainment

When asked "what do you feel the largest difference is between your experience with aging and being older and what is portrayed in movies and TV shows?," adults 50+ mentioned physical aging, romantic and social relationship dynamics, financial realities, and their mixed feelings about social progress.

Physical Aging: Fears of Age Spots and Aging Action Heroes

Many 50+ respondents noted the inaccuracy of depictions of aging on film and television. They discussed the fact that actors are pressured to continue looking young, and so they have cosmetic procedures and routines that make them look very different from the "average" older adult. One person said, "The American producers are… afraid to show wrinkles and age spots on real people." As another respondent wrote, "people age differently in shows and movies than in reality."

Many discussed the fact that the realities of their changing health is not reflected on screen. They discussed their personal health struggles - like dialysis, dementia, HIV, and chronic pain, among other things - and how they didn't see these experiences in older characters in entertainment. They feel that the reality is that their health is difficult to manage, but entertainment media created an unrealistic view of what aging is really like. As one woman in her 70s put it, movies show aging as we would like it to be, not how it is. They don't show, "the slight memory loss and hearing loss as you age. The aches and pains don't show." Another respondent summarized the realities of these experiences and contrasted them to what we see on screen: "There are so many physical issues that come with aging. It can be very frightening and it seems to come upon you overnight. The characters my age on TV seem to all have very normal happy lives without daily physical limitations."

Beyond the glossed-over realities of aging, some older adults pointed out that roles differ by gender and that female characters are much less visible as they age. Male characters, however, continue to be portrayed in even less realistic ways. Some cited the fact that male actors in their 60s and 70s are still seen as action heroes. As one respondent said, it "seems very unrealistic that they are beating up 3 young men at one time and they [are] in their 70s."

Despite these concerns about unrealistic aging, others felt that older adults were still too stereotypically frail or inactive in film and television and not shown having the full, active, and vibrant lives they are living.

Relationships: Happy Marriages and Not Having Grandkids

Many older adults noted the differences in how the social and romantic behaviors they see on screen are unlike their own. They talked about how older characters were rarely shown as having active social lives and asserted themselves as still being vibrant, social, and active. One woman explained, "Movies need to show that older people still have a life to live."

Respondents discussed the fact that older people in entertainment are often portrayed in relation to younger people - often as grandparents or mentors. While some appreciated any depiction in which older adults are valued for their opinions and wisdom (which they felt was also underrepresented), others argued that older adults can and do have full lives independent of younger people.

Some respondents discussed the fact that their family dynamics are not generally seen on screen. For example, one woman in her 80s wrote, "We are married over 60 years and extremely happily married... This is not the case with a lot of TV shows with older couples divorced, grumpy or just living together." Another wrote, "I don't seem to be having a midlife crisis and betraying my husband like in movies and TV shows." Others talked about how aging is very different if you don't have children or grandchildren, and this is not portrayed very often. Further, the experiences of lockdown during COVID-19 have made those gaps in life experiences even more prominent, and the absence of these portrayals more glaring.

Finally, many people also discussed the difficult realities of relationships as loved ones age. They felt that the stress of watching loved ones get sick was not shown often enough, nor was the difficulty of finding and providing care for those who need it.

Finances: More Balance, Fewer Extremes

From the perspectives of respondents, older adults in film and television were shown as either rich or living in poverty - the experiences of financial struggle seen on screen were either nonexistent or unrealistic. They noted more superficial elements of wealth - such as how older adults on screen are much more fashionable and have larger houses - but several other aspects of financial life as well.

Many talked about the fact that healthcare is prohibitively expensive and that they struggle with affording the care they need for themselves or their loved ones. Indeed, some respondents noted that despite being older adults themselves, they were still in a position of having to care for their elderly parents, which is a major financial strain. They felt that these realities were not shown on screen. Beyond that, some were still providing financial support to adult children.

They also talked about the way that retirement is portrayed and how that does not match their experience. As one person said, "Life is not as easy. Retirement isn't all travel and fun. There are bills and unexpected expenses that come along. I know people who can't afford retirement these days." Similarly, several people mentioned the inefficiency of Social Security and how it is not enough for them to live off of. They talked about continuing to work into their old age. Some saw this as a sign of their own independence and vitality. However, others viewed it as a social reality that is overlooked and under-discussed.

Social Change: Too Little and Too Much

Many older adults mentioned issues of social change when discussing the differences between their own lives and what they see on screen. However, their perspectives on this varied.

Some respondents felt that older adults on screen were stereotyped as closed-minded and regressive, in contrast to their own views on social change. They described themselves as "progressive," "open-minded," "woke," and "open to diversity." However, they felt that they only see characters who are closed-minded and bitter. Further, others noted the improvements in representations of marginalized groups over time and appreciated that progress.

Although many older adults felt that their progressivism was not shown on screen, others expressed frustration with the changing social norms depicted in film and television. Some did not appreciate the prominence of LGBTQIA+ characters and stories. Others felt that there was too much concern for showing more racial groups on screen and that it meant less opportunities for older white adults. Finally, others mentioned the frequency at which sex and "immorality" are featured in film and television and felt that it was portrayed too often.

Getting it Right: Older Adults' Picks for Representation in Entertainment Media

Survey respondents were also asked to share any examples of film or television shows that they felt "portrays older adults in an accurate and positive way." While there were many various answers, a few answers were more common than others.

Golden Girls

Of over hundreds of answers provided by 50+ adults when asked to name shows that accurately and positively portray older adults, *Golden Girls* appeared in 15.0% of the responses.

When asked what it was about the show that got it right, respondents focused on their vitality and humor. They described the characters as "witty," "sexy," "funny," "smart," and as having "pep" and "spunk." They cite their independence, friendships, and relatability.

Overall, older audiences appreciated that the women in *Golden Girls* were allowed to live well-rounded lives into their older age - something that they otherwise don't see often on-screen. Further, they appreciate the realistic elements of life as an older woman. One respondent wrote that it showed, "the reality of the struggles of older women - menopause, loss of youth, being single, and the financial struggles as well. All of these things are reality. I appreciated the genuineness portrayed in this show."

Grace and Frankie

Grace and Frankie stands out as the next most popular response among older adults - mentioned by 4.2% of respondents, as an example of an accurate and positive portrayal of aging. Older adults appreciated that the characters deal with real problems and real relationships. One respondent wrote that it shows that "even at an older age your relationships can end and that friendships are important." Like *Golden Girls, Grace and Frankie* values friendship and found family later in life.

As one respondent described, "*Grace and Frankie* shows older couples enjoying life even with aches, pains, and forgetfulness." That the characters go into business for themselves was appealing for several people. They appreciated seeing older female characters thrive, take care of themselves, and still seek to try new ventures at an older age.

Blue Bloods

Another popular response was the television show *Blue Bloods,* which was mentioned in 3.5% of answers from older adults. One respondent explained that Frank Reagan (played by Tom Selleck) was knowledgeable and that he faced realistic problems. Another wrote that they appreciated the multigenerational nature of the cast of the show.

Characters 49 and Younger Vastly Outnumber Characters 50+ Across Platforms and Years

Content Analysis

This section presents the findings of the content analysis, which assesses the representation of men and women 50+ in the most popular films and television shows (broadcast and streaming) from 2010 through 2020[18]. To assess the film industry, we analyzed the ten top-grossing (domestic box office) films for each year from 2010-2020 according to reporting from Box Office Mojo,[19] resulting in a sample of 110 films and 4,140 characters - 155 leads or co-leads, 1,627 supporting characters, and 2,358 minor characters.

For television, we analyzed the top 10 broadcast television shows[20] for each season from 2010 to 2020, resulting in a sample of 110 broadcast television shows. We also analyze the top ten most popular streaming shows[21] for available years (2013 to 2020)[22]. The result is a sample of 185 television shows and 3,540 characters — 455 leads or co-leads, 1,705 supporting characters and 422 minor characters. For each show, we analyze the second episode of each season, which allows for consistency between shows in terms of storytelling (i.e.
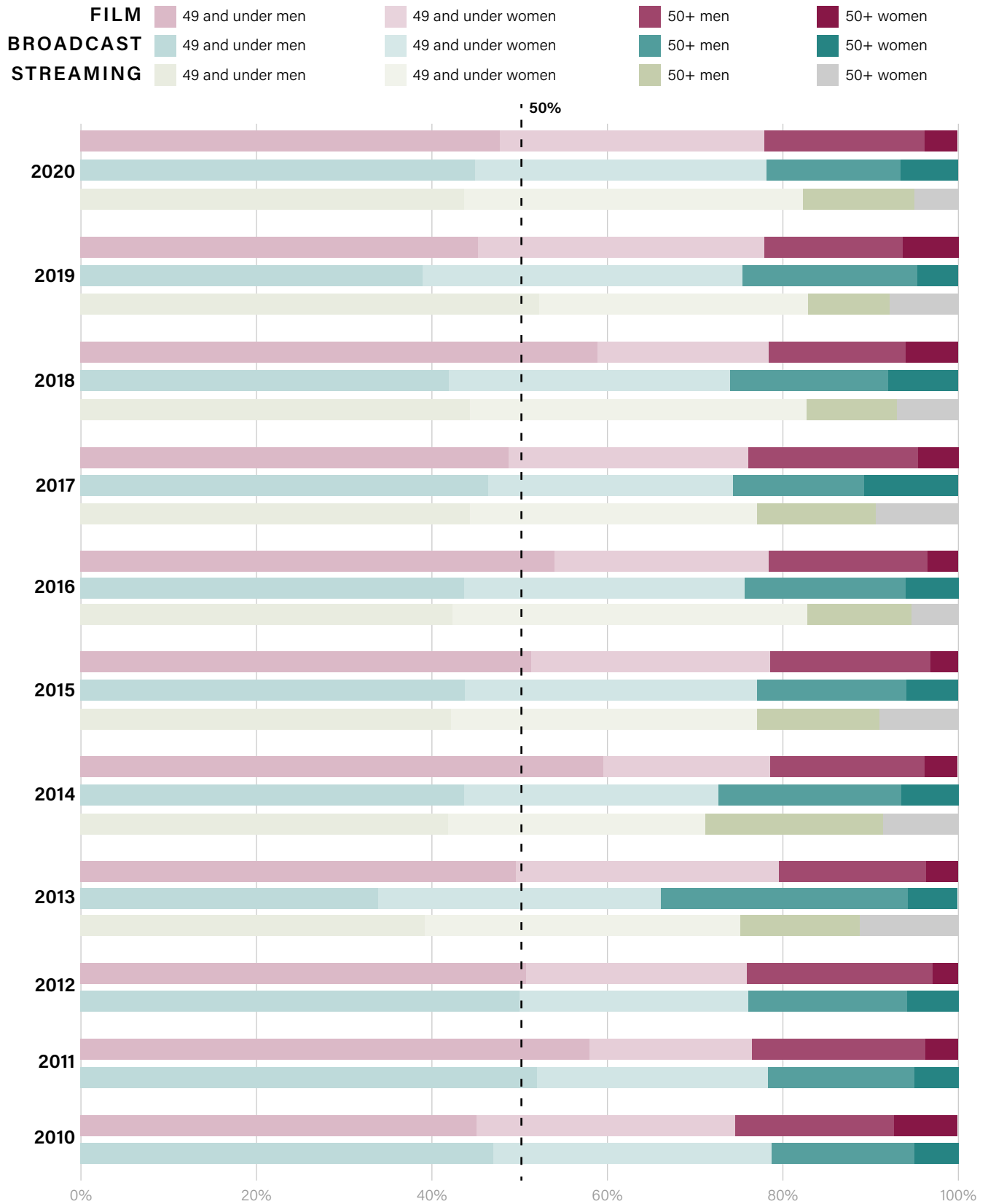
avoiding including one series' season finale or sweeps episodes) while also accommodating for the fact that season premieres or pilot episodes may differ from regular season norms.

Overall, characters 50+ are far less likely to be shown in popular films and television[23]. As presented in Chart 4, characters 50+ are typically less than a quarter of all characters shown on screen in films and television — and from 2010 to 2020, there is little change over time. Furthermore, women 50+ are less common than men 50+. For all years we examine and across all platforms, men 49 and under are most commonly shown on screen, followed by women 49 and under, men 50+, and least common are women 50+.

Comparing film to both broadcast and streaming television, the findings suggest that broadcast television is most likely to feature characters 50+. However, differences are small — on average, 50+ characters are 22.5% of all characters in top films, 24.8% of all characters in most popular broadcast shows, and 21.1% of all characters in most popular streaming shows.

CHART 4

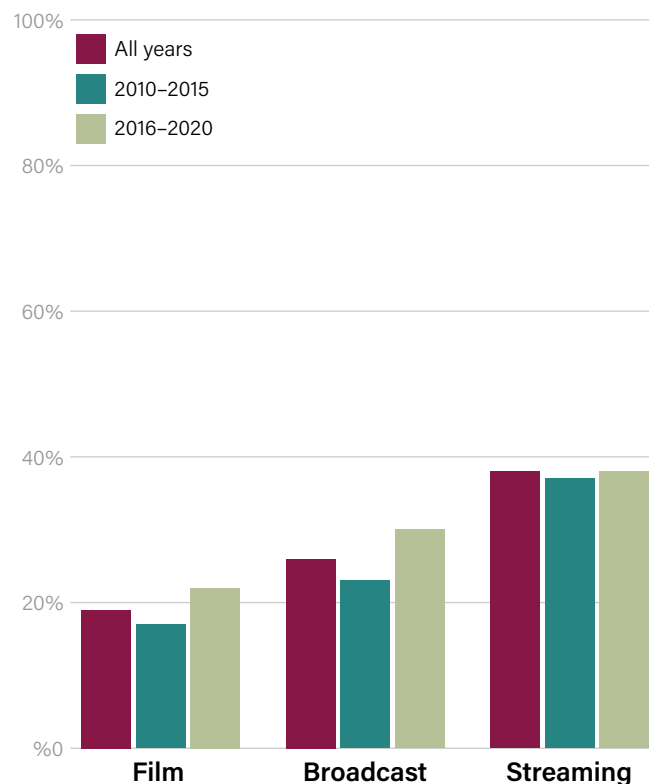## Male and Female Characters 50+ in Film and Television 2010 to 2020

FILM	49 and under men	49 and under women	50+ men	50+ women
BROADCAST	49 and under men	49 and under women	50+ men	50+ women
STREAMING	49 and under men	49 and under women	50+ men	50+ women

Which Characters 50+ Are Shown On-Screen?

As shown in Chart 4, characters 50+ are uncommon on screen. But when characters 50+ are on screen, who are in these roles? We provide an intersectional analysis across platforms, comparing the first half of the decade to the second half of the decade, in order to determine who is cast in these roles. Our analysis shows that across all platforms (and both halves of the decade), characters 50+ are much more likely to be men than women: About 4 out of 5 characters 50+ in film, 3 out of 4 characters 50+ in broadcast television, and 2 out of 3 characters 50+ in streaming television are men (see Chart 5). Notably, for all platforms, from the first half of the decade to the second half of the decade, there is a modest increase in the share of 50+ characters who are women compared to the share who are men, representing a potential shift toward more positive change over time. However, a more positive change would be an increase in the share of 50+ characters, overall.
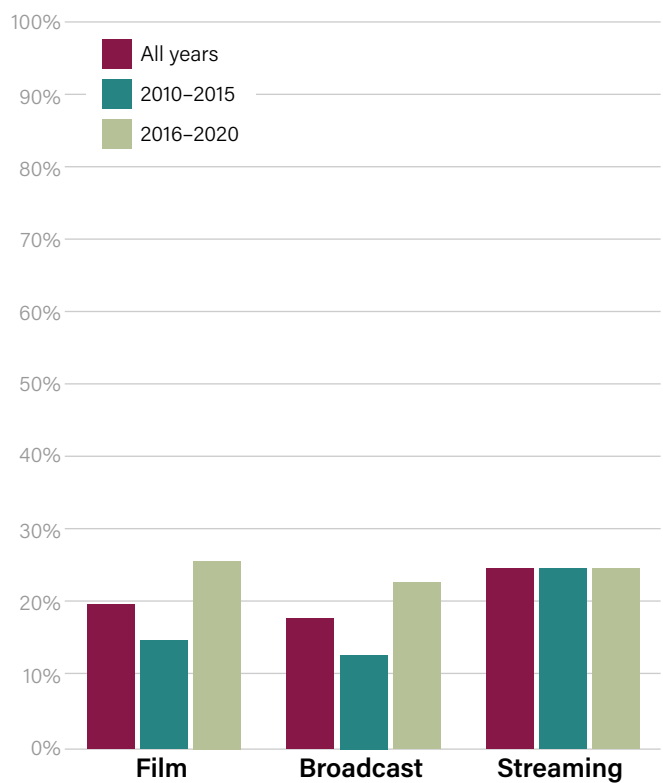
Characters 50+ are much more likely to be white than people of color — 4 out of 5 characters 50+ in film, 4 out of 5 characters 50+ in broadcast television, and 3 out of 4 characters 50+ in streaming television are white (see Chart 6). Notably, there is an increase in the share of 50+ characters of color for film and broadcast from the first half of the decade to the second half of the decade; but for streaming the share of characters of color 50+ is steady at 1 out of 4 characters for both time frames.

CHART 5

Share of Characters 50+ in Top Film and Television Who Are Women

CHART 6

Share of Characters 50+ in Top Film and Television Who Are People of Color

Characters 50+ are rarely LGBTQIA+ (Chart 7) or disabled (Chart 8). 50+ characters who are LGBTQIA+ are most common in top streaming shows — from 2010-2020, on average 4% of 50+ characters were LGBTQIA+ in top streaming shows, compared to 0% in top films and 1% in broadcast television. 50+ characters who are disabled are least common in streaming shows — from 2010 to 2020, on average 1% of 50+ characters were disabled in top streaming shows, compared to 5% in film and 5% in broadcast television.

50+ characters who are disabled are least common in streaming shows — from 2010 to 2020, on average 1%

of 50+ characters had a cognitive, physical or mental disability in top streaming shows, compared to 5% in film and 5% in broadcast television.
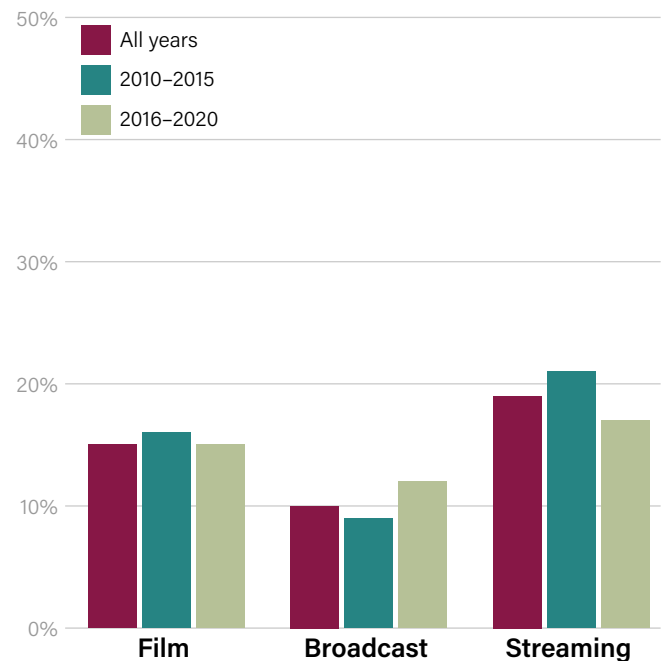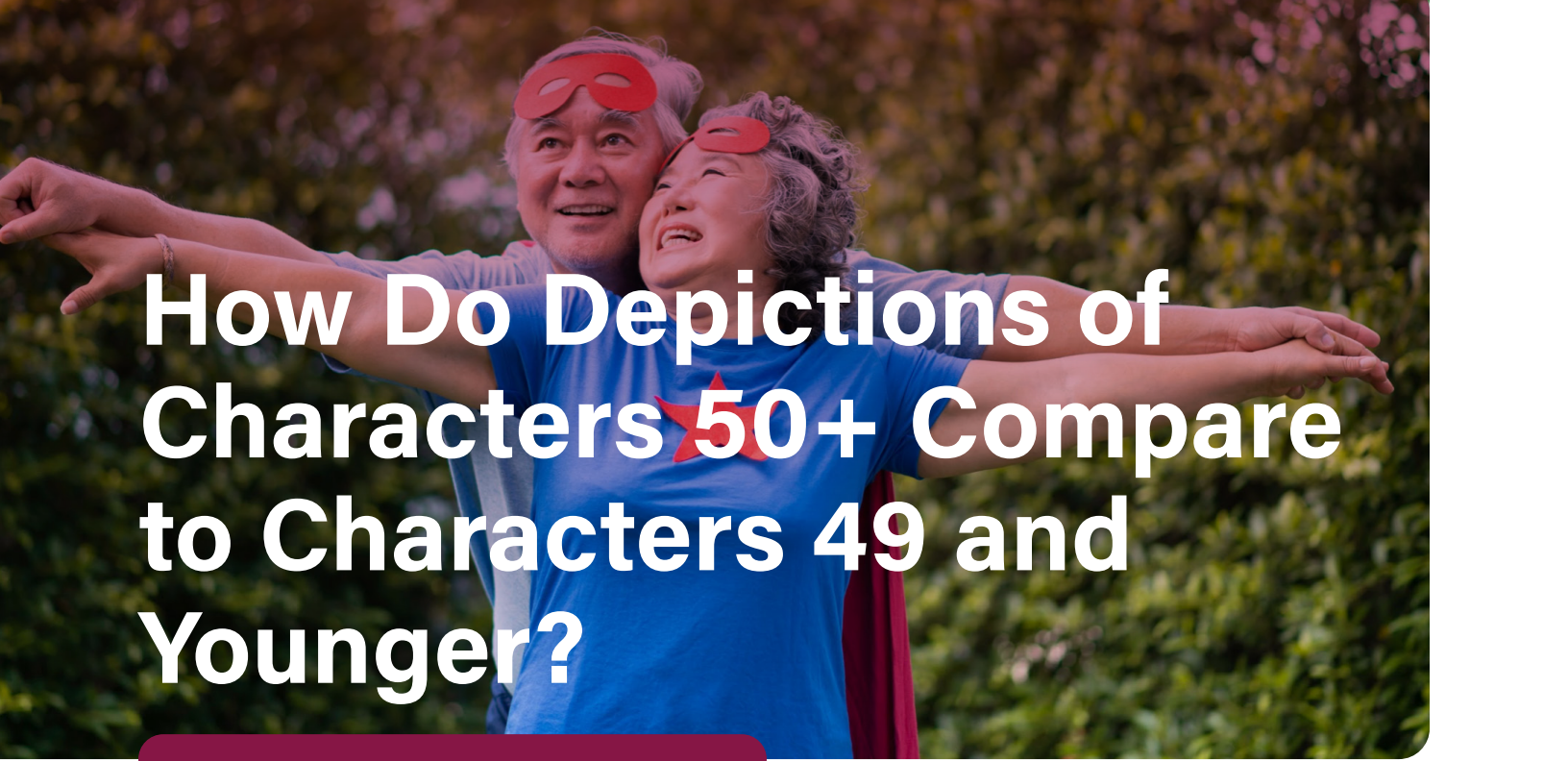
Depending on the platform, 10% to 19% of 50+ characters have a large body type. Streaming shows are most likely to feature a 50+ character with a large body type (21% of 50+ characters in the first half of the decade and 17% in the second half). Broadcast shows are least likely to feature a 50+ character with a large body type (9% in the first half of the year and 12% in the second half of the year).

Taken together, the intersectional analysis suggests that characters 50+ are more likely to be male and white, and not visibly disabled, LGBTQIA+, or with a large body type. However, the analysis shows an increase in the share of 50+ characters who are women and people of color from the first half of the decade to the second, which suggests a positive shift for women 50+ and men and women of color 50+.

CHART 7

Share of Characters 50+ in Top Film and Television Who Are LGBTQIA+

Legend:
- All years
- 2010–2015
- 2016–2020

(y-axis: 0% to 50%)

Film, Broadcast, Streaming

CHART 8

Share of Characters 50+ in Top Film and Television Who Are Disabled

Legend:
- All years
- 2010–2015
- 2016–2020

(y-axis: 0% to 50%)

Film, Broadcast, Streaming

CHART 9

Share of Characters 50+ in Top Film and Television Who Have a Large Body Type

Legend:
- All years
- 2010–2015
- 2016–2020

(y-axis: 0% to 50%)

Film, Broadcast, Streaming

How Do Depictions of Characters 50+ Compare to Characters 49 and Younger?

In this section, we compare the quality of the portrayals of characters 50+ to adult characters 49 and younger (20 to 49). Because of how few 50+ characters were shown, we aggregate findings into two time frames — 2010-2015, and 2016-2020.

Beyond the findings regarding individual 50+ characters, we also examined how productions fared overall. We ran additional analyses to determine which films and television shows featured *any* 50+ characters in leading, supporting, or minor roles.

The largest differences between characters 50+ and characters 49 and younger are:

- Visibility — Characters 49 and younger outnumber characters 50+ across all platforms, and younger characters are far more likely to be cast in leading roles.

- Romance — Characters 49 and younger are more likely to have romantic storylines and be shown as affectionate than characters 50+.

- Villains but not heroes — Characters 50+ are much more likely to be villains, but much less likely to do heroic things, like rescue other characters, than characters 49 and younger.
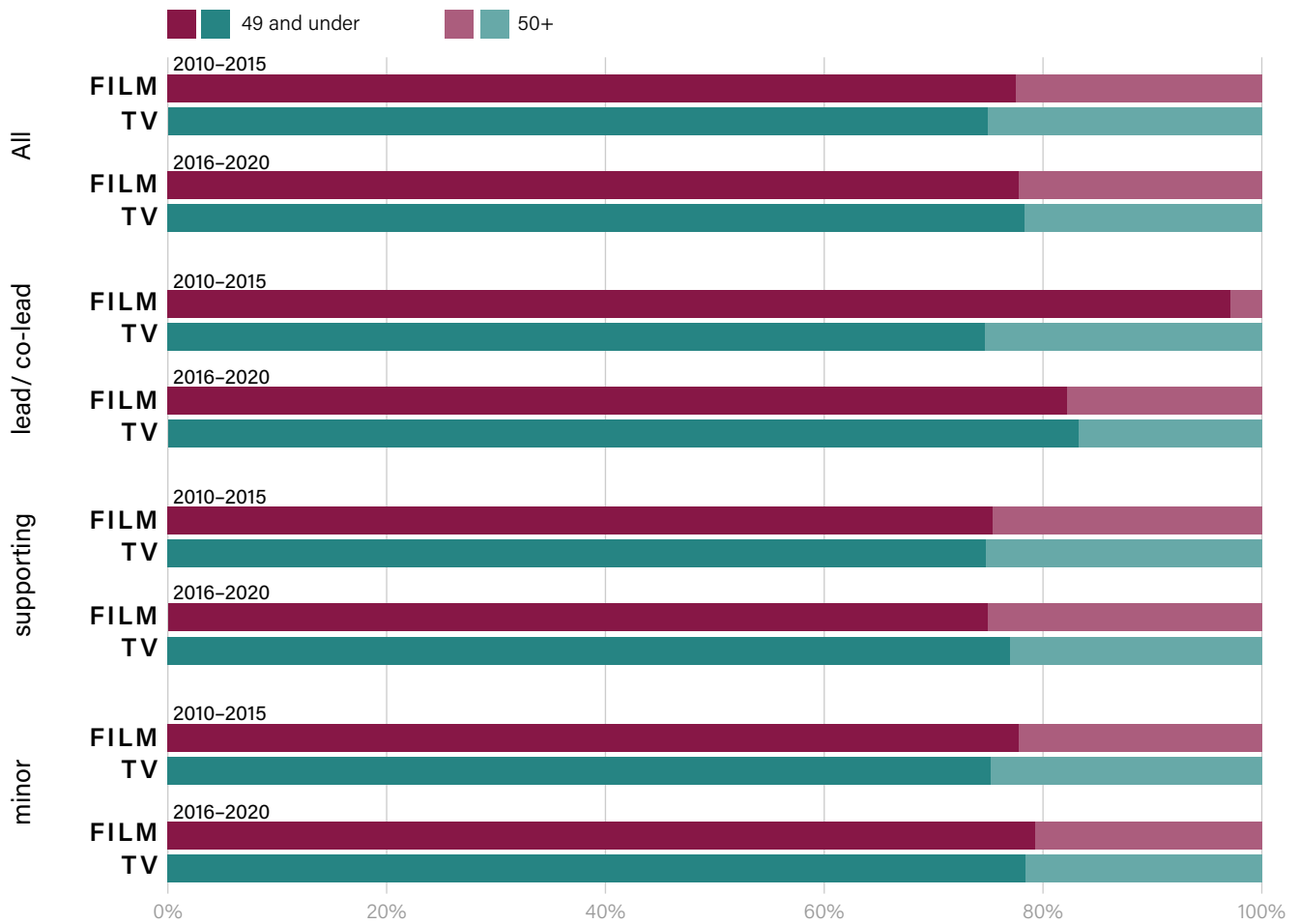
Who is on Screen?

In top-grossing domestic films, characters 50+ are less than a quarter of all characters. From 2010 to 2015, characters 49 and under comprised 78.2% of all characters, while characters 50+ made up 21.8% of all characters. From 2016 through 2020, characters 49 and under were 78.7% of all characters and those who were 50+ made up 21.3%. Further, representation of 50+ characters is especially poor at the lead/co-lead level. Just 2.9% of leads/co-leads between 2010-2015 were 50+, with some improvement from 2016-2020 when 15.1% of lead/co-leading were 50+.

Turning to television shows, from 2010 to 2015, characters 49 and under comprised 74.9% of all characters, while those 50+ made up 25.1% of all characters. From 2016 through 2020, characters 49 and under were 78.3% of all characters and characters who were 50+ made up 21.7% of all characters. 50+ characters are more likely to be leads/co-leads in television, than in film — 25.3% of leads/co-lead from 2010-2015 are 50+, and 21.7% of leads/co-leads from 2016-2020 are 50+.

Characters 50+ are more likely to be in supporting and minor roles than in lead/co-lead roles in film and television, but even in these lesser roles characters 49 and under outnumber them substantially, and this is true for 2010-2015, and 2016-2020 (see Chart 10). Overall, only 10.9% of films had a 50+ character as a lead or co-lead, but 33.7% of television shows did.

CHART 10

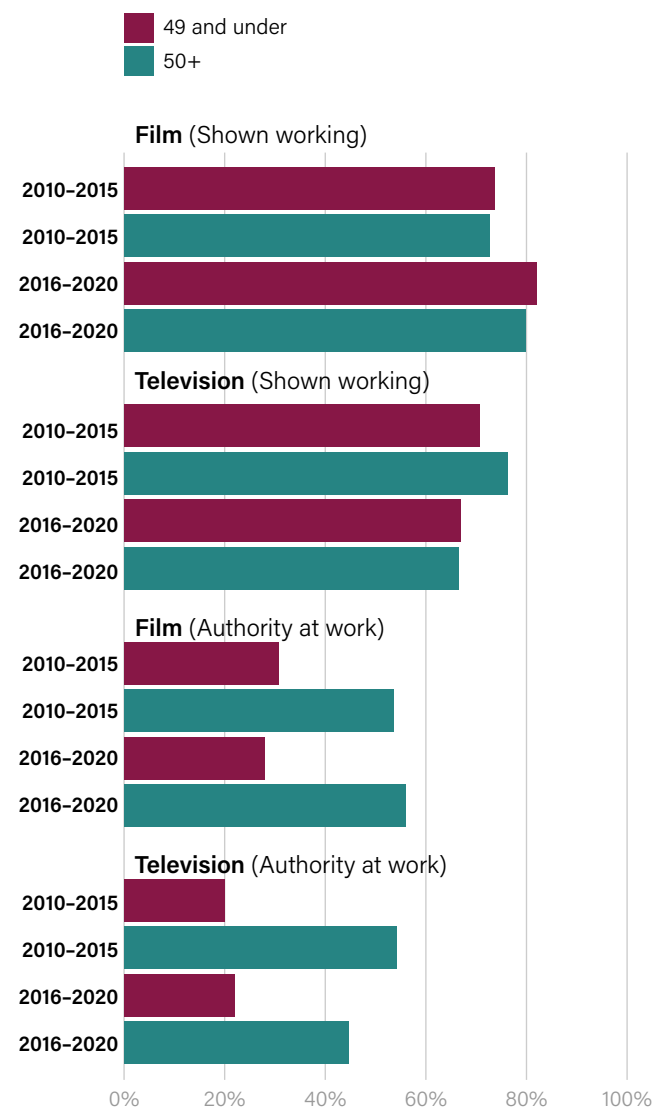Differences in Character Prominence by Age Group - Film and Television

> **"The American producers are... afraid to show wrinkles and age spots on real people."**

Who is Shown as Professionally Successful?

From 2010-2015 and 2016-2020, characters 49 and under and characters 50+ were shown working at a similar rate for both time frames. However, characters aged 50+ were much more likely to be shown in positions of authority at work than characters 49 and under. This finding is steady over the two halves of the decade.

CHART 11

Characters Shown Working and As Leaders - Film and Television

■ 49 and under
■ 50+

Film (Shown working)

2010–2015
2010–2015
2016–2020
2016–2020

Television (Shown working)

2010–2015
2010–2015
2016–2020
2016–2020

Film (Authority at work)

2010–2015
2010–2015
2016–2020
2016–2020

Television (Authority at work)

2010–2015
2010–2015
2016–2020
2016–2020

0%   20%   40%   60%   80%   100%

Interestingly, there are clear patterns in terms of the types of occupations that 50+ characters portray in entertainment media. For characters 50+, the majority (or near majority for television) are in law enforcement, the military, government positions, or are in lines of work that are criminalized, or contrastingly, are superheroes. But all these careers are similar in that they are fields related to power — either enforcing rules (law enforcement, military, government, superheroes), or breaking rules (crime) — and are common in action films and procedural television shows.

TABLE 2

50+ Characters in Power Occupations - Film and Television

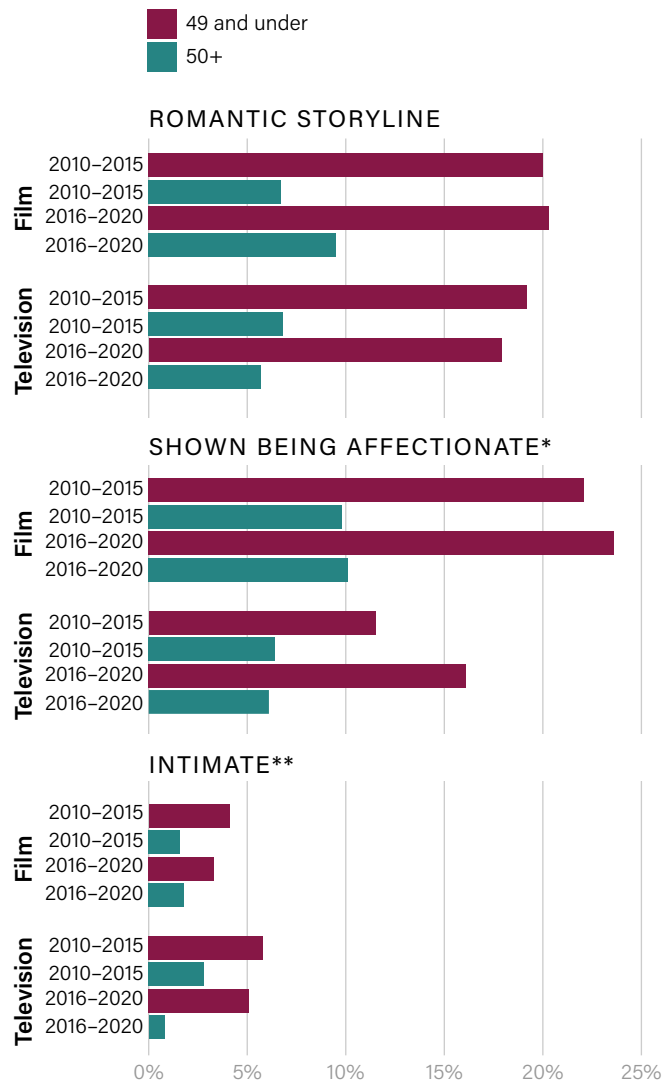|	Film	Television
Law enforcement	6.1%	24.9%
Military	12.7%	10.7%
Crime	10.0%	3.6%
Superhero	7.5%	0.0%
Government officials	13.8%	4.0%
All	50.0%	43.2%

Who Falls in Love On-Screen?

Younger characters are far more likely to have a romantic storyline than characters 50+. Characters 49 and under were more than three times as likely to have a romantic storyline than characters 50+ between 2010-2015 in films (20.0% compared to 6.7%) and television (19.2% compared to 6.8%). This trend continued for 2016-2020 in films (20.3% compared to 9.5%) and television (17.9% compared to 5.7%). Thus, characters 49 and younger are two to three times as likely to have a romantic storyline in the top-grossing domestic films and television than characters 50+.

Furthermore, characters 50+ are rarely shown being affectionate on screen. From 2010-2015, only 9.8% of characters who were 50+ were shown being affectionate, compared to 22.1% of characters 49 and under who were.

From 2016-2020, this affection gap was steady (10.1% compared to 23.6%). Characters 49 and younger are also more likely to be shown (or implied to be) intimate with others, but the difference is small. These findings lend support to ageist stereotypes that older characters are lonely and without romantic companionship or do not need or want intimacy.

CHART 12

Romance and Sex On-Screen - Differences Between Younger and Older Characters

- 49 and under
- 50+

ROMANTIC STORYLINE

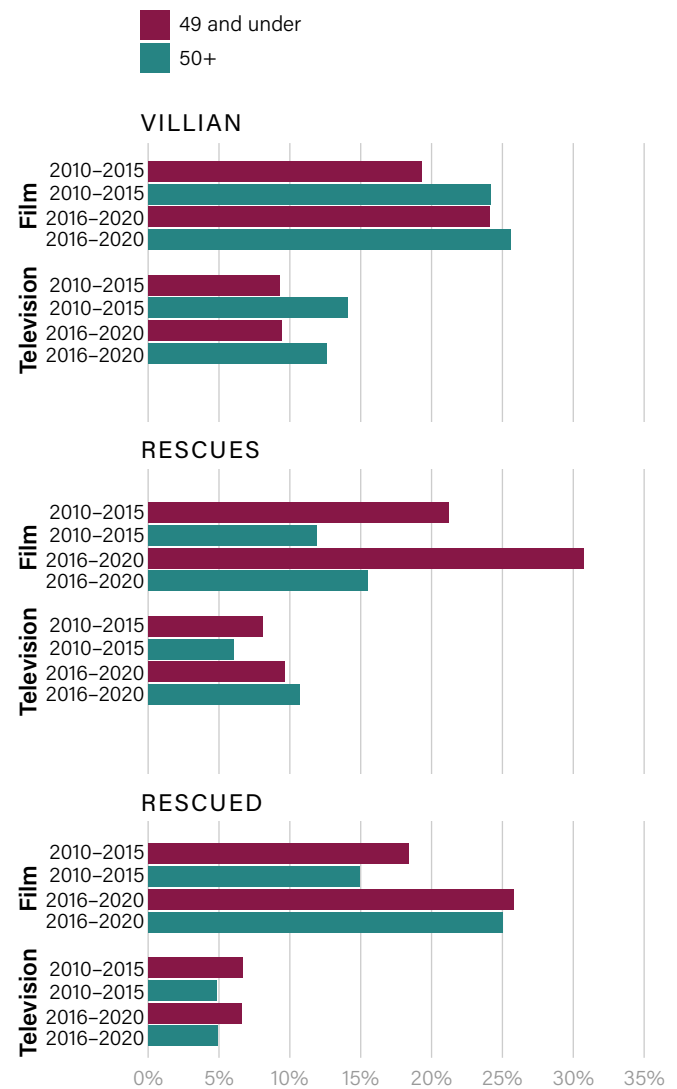### SHOWN BEING AFFECTIONATE*

INTIMATE**

*For example, character is shown kissing, going on a date, holding hands
**Character is implied as or shown having sex

Who Is the Hero and Who Is the Villain?

Characters 50+ are slightly more likely to be cast as villains than characters 49 and younger. However, characters 49 and younger are much more likely to carry out heroic acts, like rescuing others, than 50+ characters. Thus, younger characters' have a more balanced portrayal when it comes to playing heroes and villains than older characters, for whom the scale tips toward villainy.

CHART 13

Villains and Heroes On Screen - Differences Between Younger and Older Characters

- 49 and under
- 50+

VILLIAN

RESCUES

RESCUED

Moreover, characters 50+ are more likely to be rescued than to rescue others, whereas characters 49 and younger are more likely to rescue others than be rescued. This finding may speak to the stereotype that older adults are viewed as passive and/or dependent on others for their care and safety.

When aggregated to see which films and television shows have any 50+ villains or heroes, we find just how common this trend really is — 59.0% of the films and 43.2% of the television shows have at least one 50+ villain. However, only 30.0% of films and 22.1% of shows have 50+ heroes. This illustrates the fact that entertainment media regularly relies on older characters as antagonists.

TABLE 3

Films and TV Shows with Villains and Heroes Who Are 50+

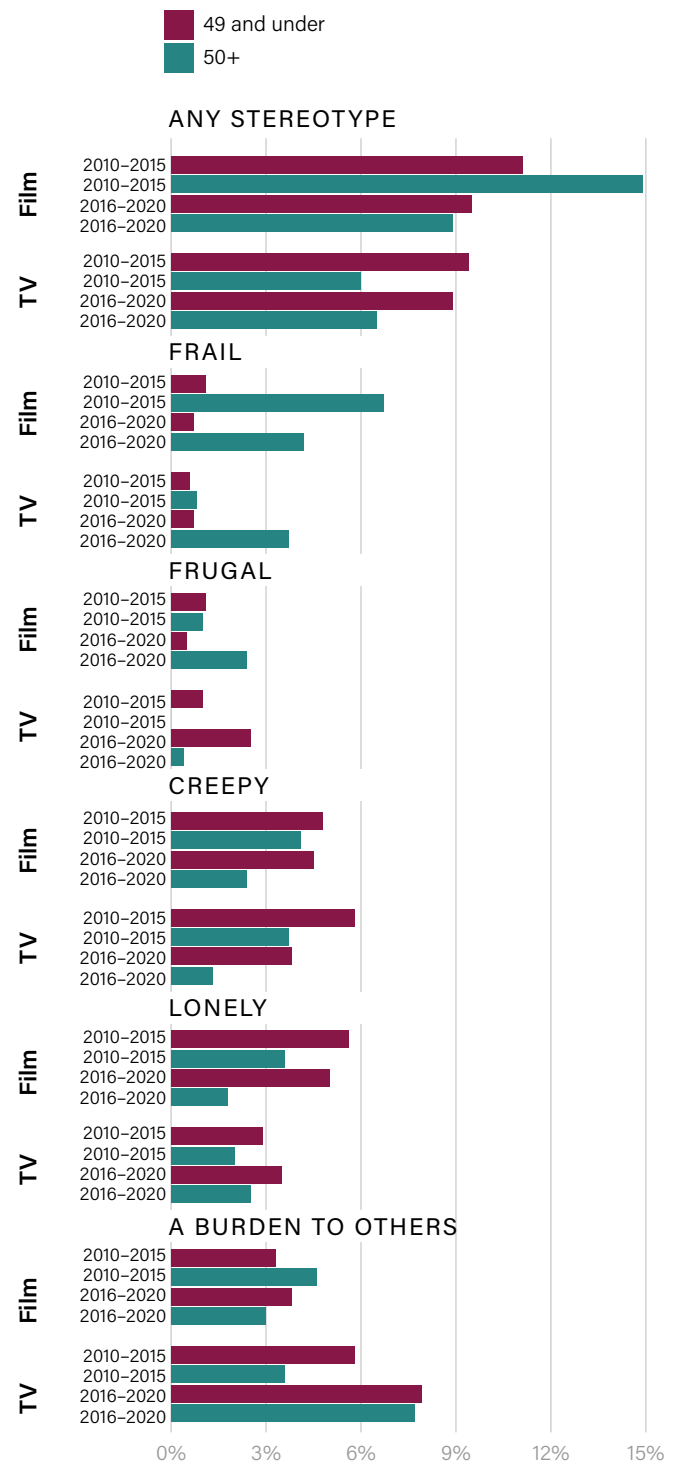|	Film	Television
Villains	59.0%	43.2%
Heroes	30.0%	22.1%

Are 50+ Characters Shown In Stereotypic Terms?

Overall, it is uncommon for a character who is 50+ to be shown in the stereotypical ways we examined — frail, frugal, creepy, lonely, or a burden to others. "Frail" is the most common ageist stereotype — in films, 6.7% of characters 50+ are frail from 2010-2015, and 4.2% from 2016-2020; in television, just 0.8% of characters 50+ are frail from 2010-2015, but 3.6% are frail from 2016-2020.

Although no single stereotype is especially common, 14.9% of characters 50+ in films and 8.9% of characters 50+ in television possess at least one ageist stereotype. But these traits are not unique to the characters 50+, as Chart 14 shows. Still, when these stereotypes are embodied by characters 50+ it reinforces negative beliefs about older people, because these ideas are already entrenched.

CHART 14

Stereotypes About Aging On-Screen — Differences Between Younger and Older Characters

Overall, we find that many films and television shows rely on at least one of these stereotypical traits for a 50+ character. Over three-fourths of films (75.54%) and over two-thirds of television shows (67.37%) include at least one 50+ character portrayed with stereotypical traits.

TABLE 4

Share of Films and Television Shows With a Stereotypical 50+ Character

	Film	Television
Stereotypical Traits	75.5%	67.4%
Ageist Character	25.5%	13.7%
Story revolves around a young person	39.1%	24.2%

Furthermore, we found that films and television shows often have 50+ characters that either rely on ageist humor or, sometimes, are added for the sole purpose of making ageist jokes. These characters do not always have significant roles (though sometimes they do), but are present just so that their age can be used as the punchline of a joke. We find that 25.5% of films and 13.7% of television shows rely on ageist humor in this way.

While considering how characters 50+ are portrayed, we also identified whether or not their personal narrative stands on its own or is dependent on a younger person. We found that 50+ characters with no story line of their own appear in over one-third of films (39.1%) and nearly one-quarter of television shows (24.2%).

"

The characters my age on TV seem to all have very normal happy lives without daily physical limitations.

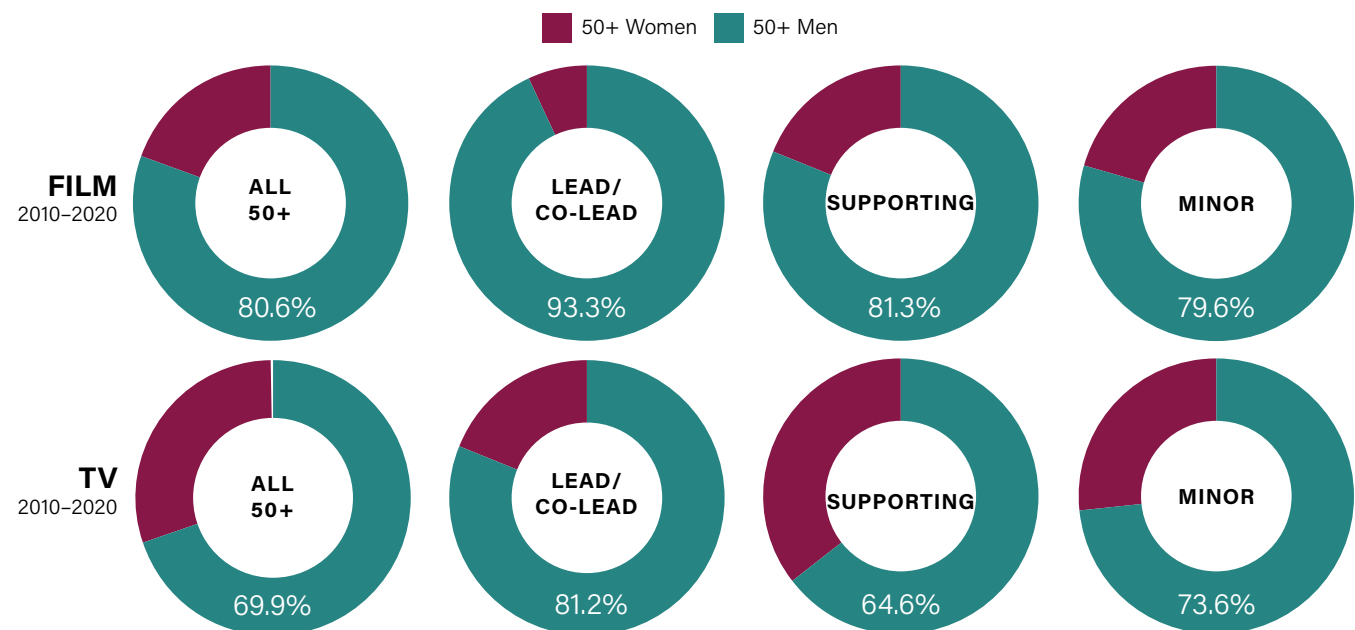# How Do Depictions of Men 50+ Compare to Women 50+?

In this section we compared how men and women 50+ are represented in top films and popular television. From 2010 to 2020 there were just 64 leading/co-leading or supporting characters played by women 50+. Due to this small number of 50+ characters we aggregate all characters from 2010 to 2020 for this section's analysis.

The most glaring differences between male and female characters 50+ are:

- Visibility — Male characters 50+ are 80.6% of all characters 50+ in film, and 69.9% of all characters in television; male characters 50+ are also much more likely to be the lead/co-lead (93.3% of 50+ leads/co-leads in film, and 81.2% of leads/co-leads in television).

- Villains and Heroes — Male characters 50+ are more likely to be villains but also heroes than female characters 50+ in top-grossing films.
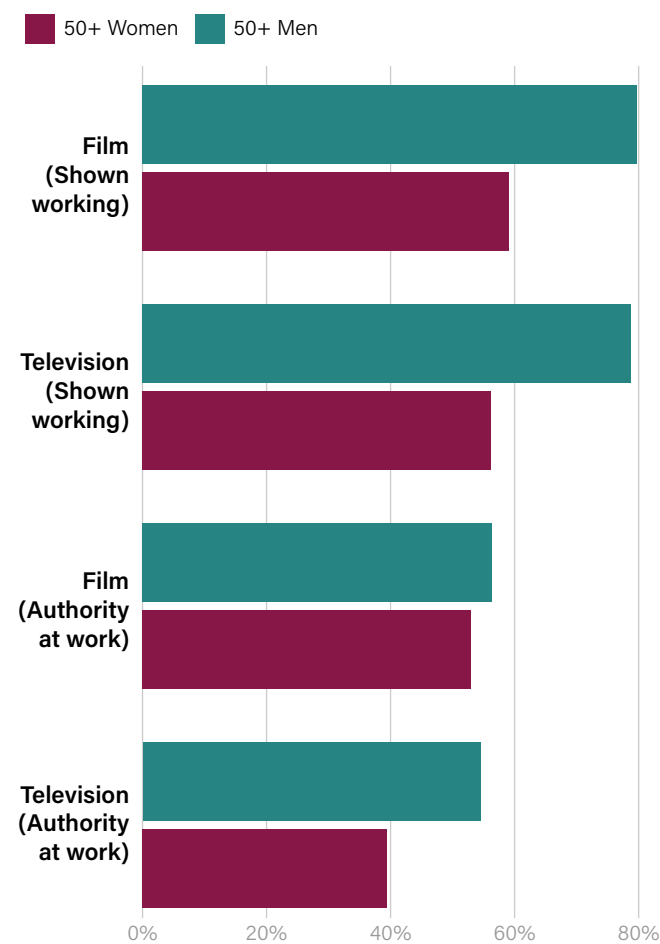
CHART 15

Gender Inclusion Among Characters 50 and Older

■ 50+ Women   ■ 50+ Men

FILM
2010–2020

| ALL 50+ | LEAD/ CO-LEAD | SUPPORTING | MINOR |
| 80.6% | 93.3% | 81.3% | 79.6% |

TV
2010–2020

| ALL 50+ | LEAD/ CO-LEAD | SUPPORTING | MINOR |
| 69.9% | 81.2% | 64.6% | 73.6% |

Of all characters 50+ in film, a staggering 80.6% are men, and in television that share is 69.9%. Among characters 50+, men outnumber women by a wide margin. Of 50+ leads, in film, 93.3% are men and in television 81.2% are men. The gap is largest at the lead/co-lead level of character prominence, but is also wide among supporting characters (81.3% are men in film; 64.4% are men in television), and minor characters (79.6% are men in film; 73.6% are men in television).

CHART 16

50+ Male and Female Characters Shown Working and As Leaders

Men 50+ are more likely than women 50+ to be shown working (78.7% compared to 56.2%) and as an authority figure at work (54.5% compared to 39.4%). When considering the characters in occupations related to power — which was shown to be the primary roles allotted to 50+ characters — there are clear differences between on-screen representations of 50+ men and women. Overall, over half of 50+ male characters are in one of these types of roles in both film and television, whereas only a third of 50+ women in film and less than a quarter of 50+ women in television have these roles. This disparity may contribute to the overall gap between roles for men and women — if the types of roles that tend to be available for 50+ characters are those in traditionally masculine fields, or associated with the "Old Boys Network," it is not surprising that male actors would be cast for them.

TABLE 5

Occupational Sectors for Men and Women Over 50 in Film

	50+ Men	50+ Women
Law enforcement	6.4%	4.6%
Military	14.2%	6.1%
Crime*	11.5%	3.0%
Superhero*	8.5%	3.0%
Government officials*	24.1%	18.2%
All*	53.4%	34.9%

* Denotes statistically significant differences between men and women

TABLE 6

Occupational Sectors for Men and Women Over 50 in Television

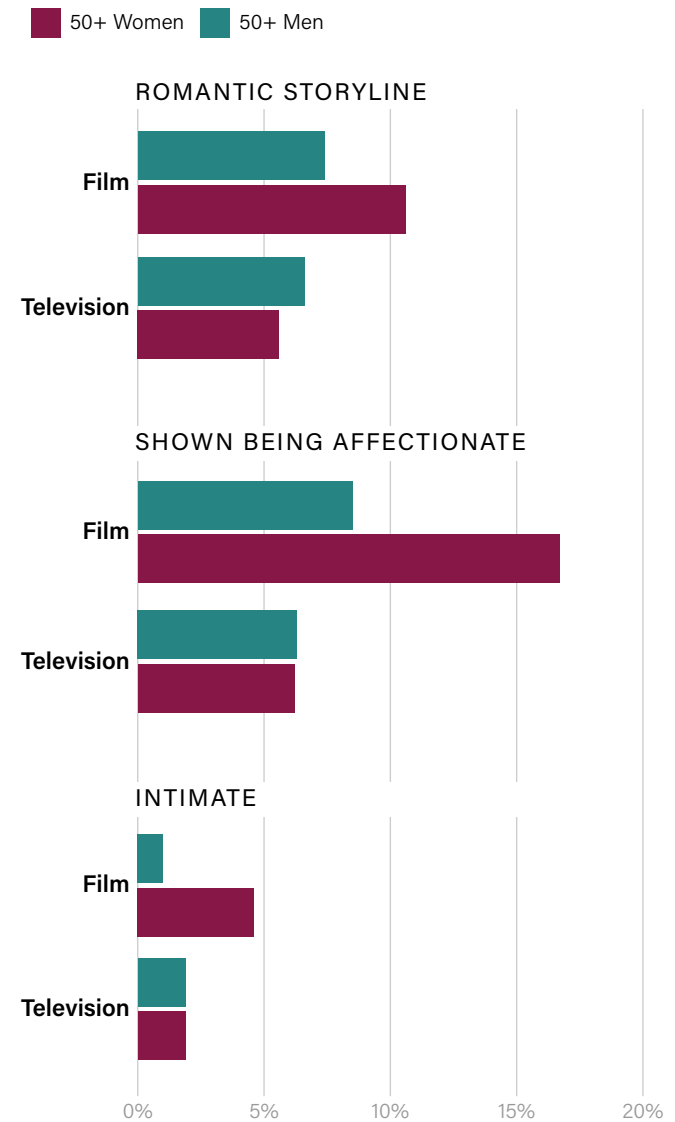|	50+ Men	50+ Women
Law enforcement*	30.8%	12.4%
Military*	12.3%	7.5%
Crime*	4.8%	1.2%
Superhero	0.0%	0.0%
Government officials	5.1%	1.9%
All*	53.0%	23.0%

* Denotes statistically significant differences between men and women

> **Most TV shows don't show us old folks as caring and [as] strong as we really are.**

As reported above, characters 49 and younger are about three times as likely to have a romantic storyline in films than characters 50+. But of the characters 50+ who do have a romantic storyline, the share of women 50+ with a romantic storyline is greater than the share of men 50+ in film, but not television.
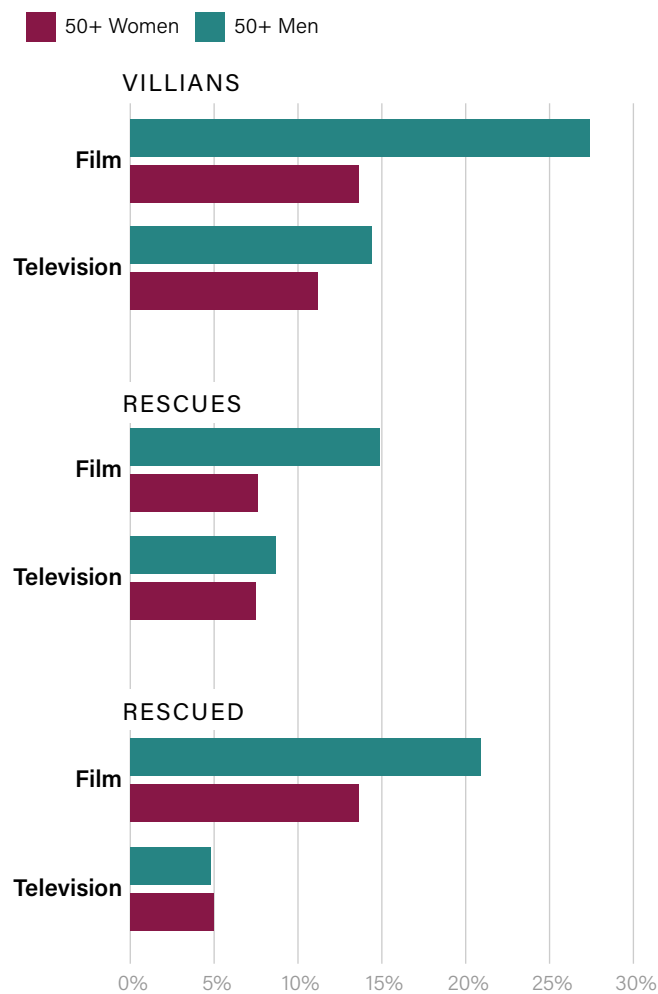
CHART 17

Romance and Sex On-Screen - Differences Between Men and Women 50+

■ 50+ Women ■ 50+ Men

ROMANTIC STORYLINE

SHOWN BEING AFFECTIONATE

INTIMATE

More male characters 50+ than women 50+ are in villainous roles in film (28.5% compared to 14.1%); in television the gap is smaller and not statistically significant (14.4% compared to 11.2%). Although men 50+ are more likely to be villains than women 50+, they are also more likely to be heroic than women 50+. Nearly 15% of men 50+ are shown rescuing someone in films compared to less than 8% of women 50+; in television the gap is small and insignificant (8.7% compared to 7.5%).
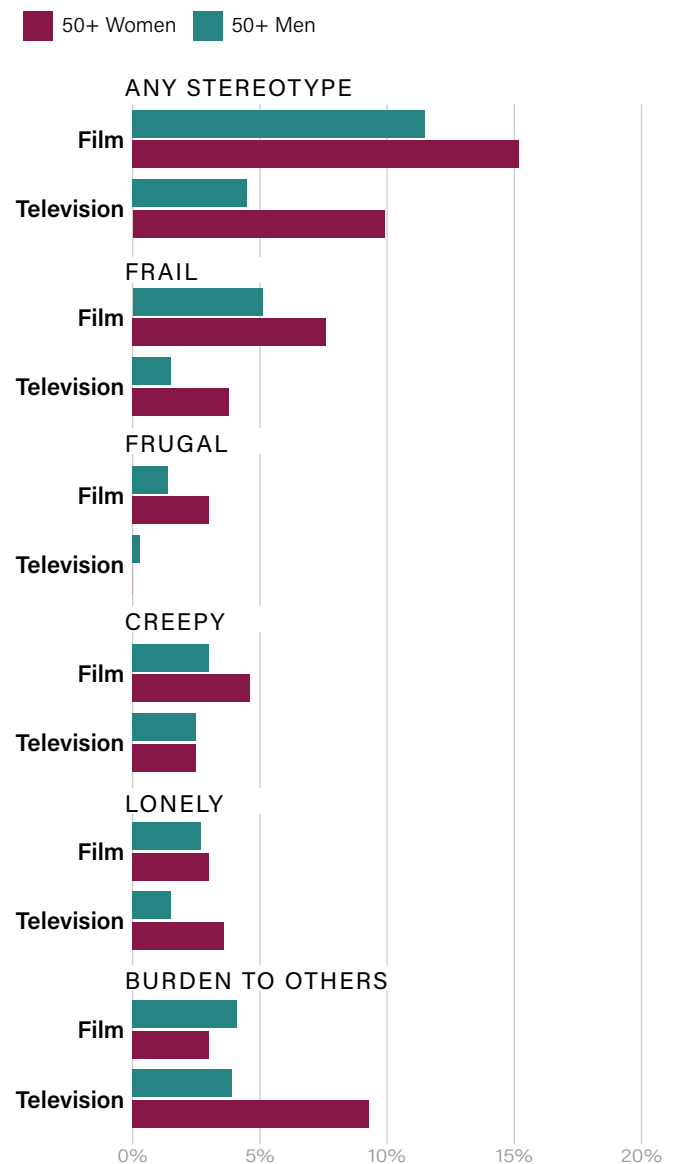
We also looked at whether characters 50+ were written in stereotypically terms such as frail, frugal, creepy, lonely, or a burden to others. Overall, as shown in the section above, characters 50+ did not exemplify these negative stereotypes, and there was little difference between men and women. The most common stereotype observed was frail — 7.8% of female characters 50+ and 5.4% of male characters 50+ were frail. Female characters 50+ were also more likely than male characters 50+ to be frugal, creepy and lonely, but differences were small.

CHART 18

Villains and Heroes On Screen - Differences Between Men and Women 50+

CHART 19

Stereotypes About Aging On-Screen — Differences Men and Women 50+

Conclusion

The state of representation for 50+ characters in film and television has significant room for improvement. Overall, there are very few leading roles for any older characters. Beyond that, 50+ women are vastly outnumbered by their male counterparts. Furthermore, the majority of productions still fall back on at least one ageist stereotype, and additionally 50+ characters are given fewer opportunities for character development as love interests and heroes.

Despite criticism from actors in the industry over the past ten years, we find little improvement in the representations of 50+ characters over time. Indeed, in some instances, we see *less* representation, not more. While there are some instances of improvement - such as an increase in 50+ leads and heroes in film - many of these occur in major action franchises wherein the leading actors aged into this demographic.

This overreliance on existing franchises and action/procedural genres for 50+ representation may contribute to the gender differences we find. 50+ characters are often those in law enforcement, government, and other positions of power. This, combined with sexist standards for aging and beauty, leave very few roles available for women 50+.

Additionally, while there are many *characters* who are not reduced solely to ageist stereotypes, entertainment media still fall back on them as a whole at significant rates. Older characters are still being written into narratives for the purpose of making ageist jokes and overall, 50+ characters are given fewer opportunities to have well-rounded stories, romantic storylines, and heroic moments. These standards contribute to the overall messaging in entertainment media that aging is inherently bad or humorous, and that older people have less interesting and dynamic lives than their younger counterparts.

These findings are reflected in the commentary from the survey respondents, who communicated a desire to see older characters who are thriving and still living interesting, dynamic lives. Audiences clearly want to see older characters from all financial backgrounds, with a diversity of family structures, and with honest portrayals of the highs and lows of getting older.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONTENT CREATORS

Just 25% of people who are 50+ said they are very satisfied with the accuracy of characters who portray their age group. By telling more authentic stories about aging with characters who look and feel their age, consumers will see themselves better reflected on screen:

Characters 50+ are less than a quarter of all characters in top-grossing domestic films and most-popular television shows. To address this inequality, reflect on past, present and future productions to identify where 50+ characters' stories have been overlooked and have potential to be told.

Challenge your own expectations about who can play what. This report finds that three in four 50+ characters are men. Consider 50+ women, especially women of color, to play characters in male-dominated occupations to bridge this gap.

Intersectional diversity is uncommon among 50+ characters. Write more stories that center on the lives of LGBTQIA+ and disabled 50+ characters.

Age and aging is used as a punchline in many films and shows. But older people are not inherently undesirable or funny simply because they are old. Avoid hiring the older background actor whose only purpose is to be the butt of a joke. Think twice before including dialogue or camera shots that imply that someone's sexuality is a joke or that they are inherently sexless or undesirable simply because they are above a certain age.

Consider how all characters talk about age, even when older characters are not around. Do guys call each other "grandma" as an insult? Do characters complain that they are "so old" because they stay in on a Saturday night? This kind of language contributes to harmful attitudes about the value and quality of life over 50.

Our analysis observed extremes in 50+ representation. Characters 50+ are either seen as old and frail or as adept action stars or supervillains. Allow more space for 50+ people who are living normal, dynamic lives. Show the aches and pains, but also show the joy, the insight, and the adventures that people over 50 experience as well.

REPRESENTATION PITFALLS:
Common Tropes to Avoid

According to our survey, 83% of men and women 50+ agree with the statement "sometimes I feel the media/culture doesn't realize how much they stereotype older people." The following are some common tropes that rely on stereotypes about older people in film and television. Try to avoid these representation pitfalls:

The Sage

Older characters are sometimes relegated to roles in which they serve no purpose other than to advise younger characters. While it is good to show appreciation for the wisdom that comes with age, these characters need to be well-rounded and have their own narrative arcs and motivations beyond just serving younger people. Note that this is often attributed to characters of color, and can contribute to racist stereotypes as well (such as the "Magical Negro" or "The Guru").

Does this film or episode employ "The Sage" trope?

☐ An older character whose main purpose is to advise or mentor younger characters.

☐ Wise, but lacks dimensionality and autonomy

The Age Gap

Age gaps occur in two different ways. First, there are romantic couples with major age differentials between the two partners (often an older man and a much younger woman). Second, there are major gaps between actors' ages and those of the characters they play. The former can contribute to harmful notions of predatory power dynamics between men and women and can also disempower female actors over a certain age. Similarly, the latter also takes roles away from older actors while also potentially contributing to stereotypes, as younger actors do not have the life experience for the role and can often fall back on what they have seen on screen. Endeavor to cast age-appropriate actors for roles and consider whether casting choices could contribute to stereotypes.

Does this film or episode employ the "Age Gap" trope?

☐ An older male character is in a relationship with a female character who is much younger.

☐ An actor plays a character whose age is much older or much younger than the actor's actual age.

The Cranky Old Person

The Cranky Old Person trope embodies the "get off my lawn" stereotype. They complain about social change and people, and talk about the good old days.

Does this film or episode employ the "Cranky Old Person" trope?

☐ An older grumpy character.

☐ An older character who is anti-social.

☐ An older character who is stubborn and unwilling to change or adapt.

Dirty Old Man/Woman

The Dirty Old Man/Woman is an older (usually male) character who hits on, sexually objectifies, or sexually touches younger characters. This character's behaviors are usually portrayed in a comedic way, which makes it seem innocent or harmless.

Does this film or episode employ the "Dirty Old Man/Woman Trope?

☐ An older man or woman who is sexually inappropriate toward much younger characters.

☐ An older man or woman who preys on younger characters but it is shown as comedic and/or harmless.

Old Maid

The "Old Maid" is an older female character who is unmarried, without children, and is typically lonely. She may have pets (e.g. cats or birds), but is seen as a sad lonely person by others. Other characters may comment that she is a "spinster" or "barren" because she never married or had children.

Does this film or episode employ the "Old Maid" Trope?

☐ A lonely older woman who never married or had children.

☐ A lonely older woman pitied by other characters for being unmarried and without children.

ENDNOTES

1. Broadcast and streaming

2. Nielsen Total Audience Report 2020. https://content.nielsen.com/2020-total-audience-report-thank-you

3. Fengler, Wolfgang. 2021. The Silver Economy is Coming of Age: A Look at the Growing Spending Power of Seniors. Brookings Institution: https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2021/01/14/the-silver-economy-is-coming-of-age-a-look-at-the-growing-spending-power-of-seniors/

4. 2019 American Community Survey, U.S. Census Bureau

5. De Pater, I. E., Judge, T. A., & Scott, B. A. (2014). Age, Gender, and Compensation: A Study of Hollywood Movie Stars. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 23 (4): 407–420.

6. "This Chart Shows Hollywood's Glaring Gender Gap." (Retrieved from https://time.com/4062700/hollywood-gender-gap/); "Why the Age of 40 is So Important In Hollywood." (Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/09/19/these-charts-reveal-how-bad-the-film-industrys-sexism-is/)

7. https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/05/hollywood-ageism-women

8. https://www.yahoo.com/lifestyle/2015-06-16-helen-mirren-calls-hollywood-ageism-f-cking-outrageous-at-wrap-21196847.html

9. "Frail, Frumpy and Forgotten." https://seejane.org/wp-content/uploads/frail-frumpy-and-forgotten-report.pdf

10. Iversen, Thomas Nicolaj, Lars Larsen, and Per Erik Solem. "A conceptual analysis of ageism." *Nordic Psychology* 61.3 (2009): 4-22.

11. Levy, 1996.

12. Huasdorff et al. 1999.

13. Levy, B. R. & Myers, L. M. (2004). Preventive health behaviors influenced by self- perceptions of aging. Preventive Medicine, 39, 625–629.

14. Bowling, A. (1999). Ageism in cardiology. British Medical Journal, 319, 1353–1355; Ory, M., Hoffman, M. K., Hawkins, M., Sanner, B., & Mockenhaupt, R. (2003). Challenging aging stereotypes: Strategies for creating a more active society.American Journal of Preventive Medicine, 25, 164–171.

15. Ober Allen J, Solway E, Kirch M, Singer D, Kullgren J, Malani P. Everyday Ageism and Health. University of Michigan National Poll on Healthy Aging. July 2020

16. https://www.aarp.org/politics-society/advocacy/info-2019/older-americans-economic-impact-growth.html

17. Respondents 50+ were over-sampled in order to obtain a large enough sample to analyze differences between men and women in this age group.

18. For each film and television show, we identified all characters who meet specific criteria for inclusion. Minor characters had to speak at least two words, with their faces shown. However, a non-verbal character may also be included if they were significant to the story, such as an animal sidekick in an animated film. Minor characters were coded for demographic, professional, and story information (such as prominence and villainy). Supporting characters must be present in more than one scene, while leads or co-leads are the stars of the film or television shows. For supporting, lead, and co-lead characters, we also identified characteristics related to aging (including stereotypical behavior such as frailty or frugality), the extent to which the character's backstory is developed, the nature of their romantic and familial relationships, and their influence on the story, among other things. Our analysis excludes characters for whom age is not applicable or can not be determined (e.g. aliens, humanlike robots or machines, animals, or animated objects or creatures).

19. https://www.boxofficemojo.com/year

20. Identified for the Institute by Nielsen

21. Given that ratings information about streaming programs has been mostly unavailable until recently, we instead identified top shows from Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime by relying on the aggregations of critical reviews by Rotten Tomatoes. The site provided the best shows for each platform - we sampled the top ten shows per year proportionally from the three platforms.

22. https://editorial.rottentomatoes.com/guide/best-hulu-shows-and-movies-to-binge-watch-now/ (shows produced for FX were removed from consideration) https://editorial.rottentomatoes.com/guide/best-netflix-shows-and-movies-to-binge-watch-now/ https://editorial.rottentomatoes.com/guide/best-tv-shows-and-movies-original-to-amazon-prime-video/

23. Broadcast and streaming