

Beyond Ageing Stereotypes: Imagery & Iconography

Gerard BRISCOE, Ivelina GADZHEVA, Imran NAZERALI

gerard.briscoe@rca.ac.uk

Royal College of Art

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abstract Ageism is a relatively modern construct arising from significant increases in life expectancy. For example, Stone Age representations of older people simply noted differences in hair colour. Frailty stereotypes are unrepresentative, because the majority of older people have diverse functional capacity. Nonetheless, ageism within the media is widespread, with older people, even in contemporary dramas, often limited to stereotypes of snowy-haired invisible grandparents or homeless people. Similarly, prevalent icons of older people often utilise stereotypes of physical frailty. A notable example is the 1981 United Kingdom road sign for slower, frail people crossing the road, which is designed to notify drivers to reduce vehicle speed. It depicts a frailty narrative that has become the archetype for iconography of older people. Such stereotypes lead to the design of digital technologies focusing on healthcare, rather than desires and aspirations. So, we suggest an alternative iconography for older people, moving beyond stereotypical physical frailty, and approaches to addressing ageism stereotypes in wider society through popular media. We conclude by moving beyond ageing stereotypes, counterbalancing the mostly negative ones to affect changes in perceptions of popular culture, which is critical not only for the older people of today, but also our future selves.

Project Background

Frailty stereotypes are unrepresentative, because the majority of older people have diverse functional capacity, 58% from ONS figures. Nonetheless, ageism within the media is widespread, with one US study estimating that only 11% of characters in the top-grossing films of 2016 were older than 60, compared with 18.5% of the overall population. Similarly, prevalent icons of older people often utilise stereotypes of physical frailty. The 1981 United Kingdom (UK) road sign for slower frail people crossing the road, which notifies drivers to reduce vehicle speed. It depicts a frailty narrative, showing a man and woman hunched-over with walking sticks. Sometimes the words 'Elderly People' are below the sign, clearly associating frailty with ageing. It has become the archetype for iconography of older people. Such stereotypes lead to, for example, the design of digital technologies focusing on healthcare, rather than desires and aspirations.

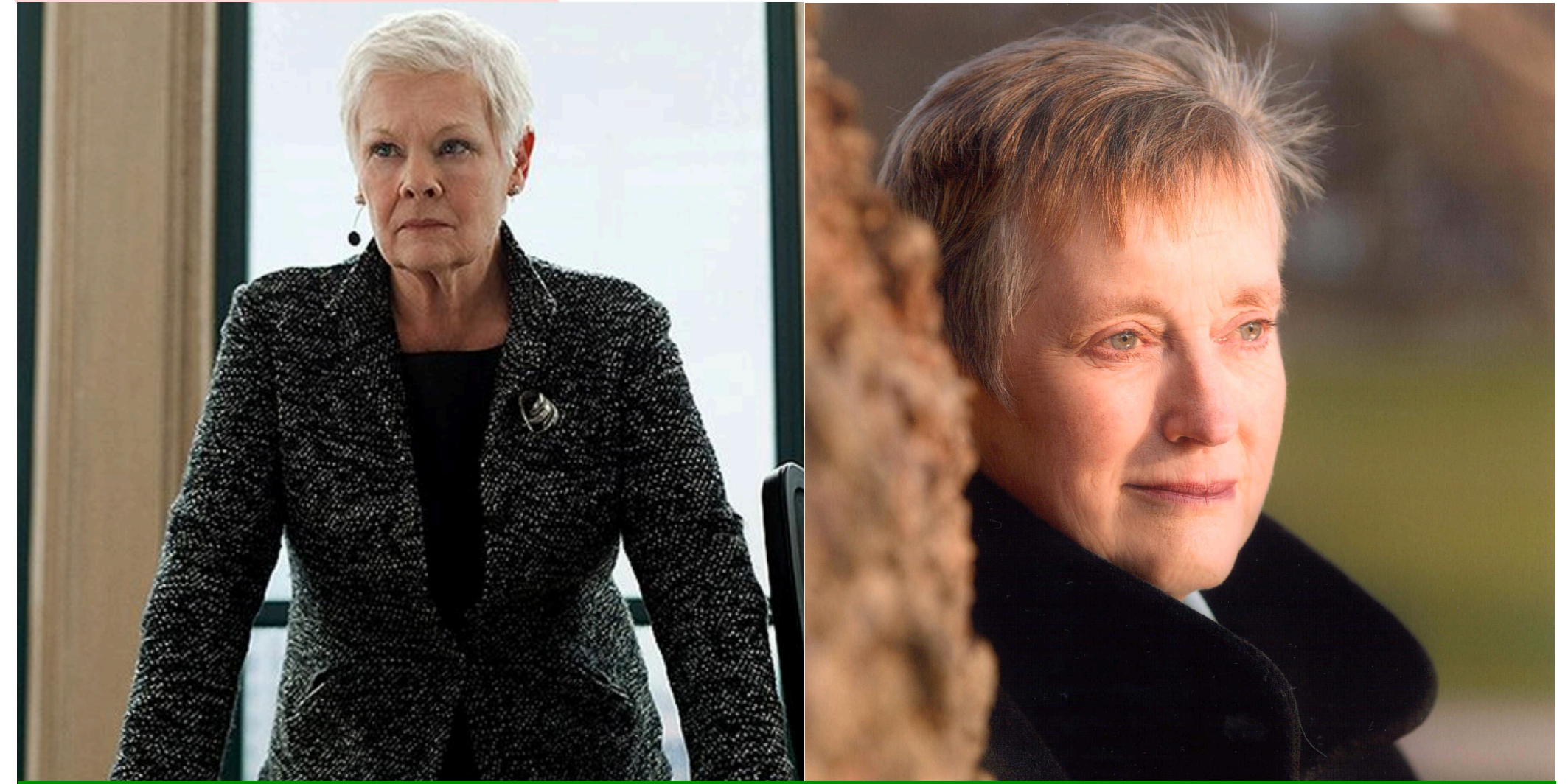
Stone Age-ing



Methodology

We conducted background research regarding the history of ageing imagery. We also considered the icons prevalent today for older people, noting that the majority derive from the 1981 UK road sign. Furthermore, attempts to establish positive alternatives have failed to become widely accepted. We also considered stereotypes in modern media, noting that the majority of ageing stereotypes are directed towards women. For example, older women were almost always 'grannies' or 'spinsters'. We therefore considered the Bechdel test for female stereotypes in fiction. We determined that while alternative positive iconography is required, cultural change is also required to provide an opportunity for widespread adoption. So, we first developed a number of design concepts for icons,

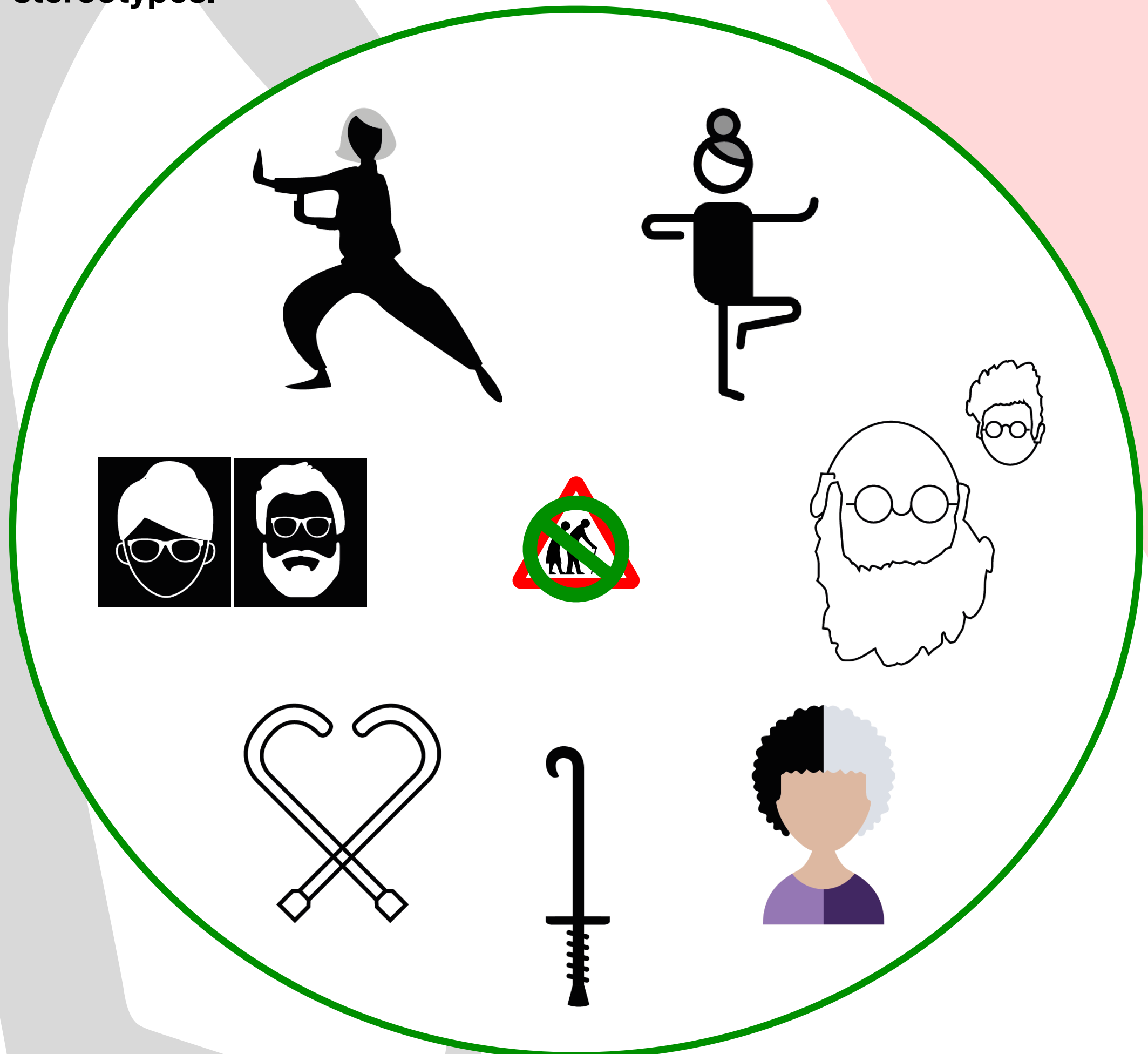
considering key themes of canes, hair and vitality, counterbalancing stereotypical physical frailty, which we tested with a small number of older people. Then, we outlined an Age-Inclusion test for ageing stereotypes in fiction, modelled on the Bechdel-Wallace test.



Spy Chief: Fiction Imitates Reality

Outcomes

In the history of ageing imagery we have noted that Stone Age representations of older people simply noted differences in hair colour. However, the 1981 road sign has become the archetype for iconography of older people. Furthermore, ageism within the media is widespread, with the majority directed towards women. We determined that cultural change is required for the widespread adoption of alternative positive iconography. So, we developed a suite of age-positive icons, including a dancing lady, a Tai Chi lady, and a pogo walking stick. Feedback from older people included positive comments about the dancing lady. We also outlined an Age-Inclusion media test, proposing a series of simple questions to identify ageing stereotypes. Future work should consider animation and negative space techniques for icons. Also, given that the majority of ageism within the media is directed towards women, Age-Inclusion media tests should focus on female ageing stereotypes.

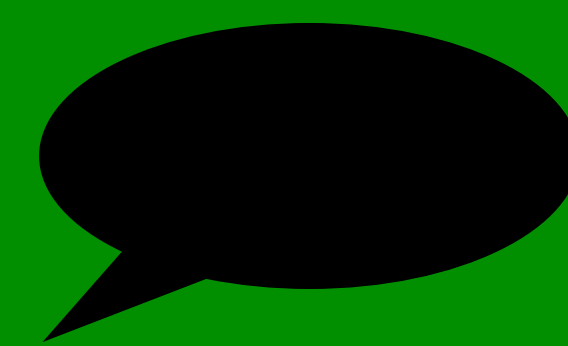


1. Media has to have at least two older people,
2. who talk to each other,
3. about something other than younger people.

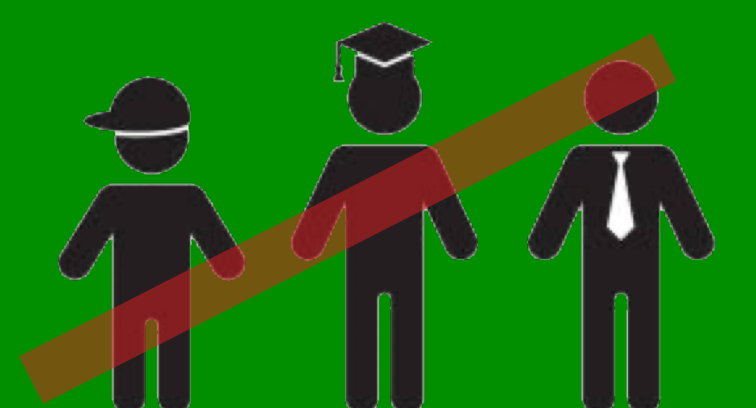
Age-Inclusive Media Test



2+ OLDER PEOPLE



TALK TO EACH OTHER



ANYTHING BUT THE YOUNG