

Kayla Lee

J202 – How Stories Work
Final Project
2025

1. Topic Selection: Aging Population and Elder Care

Aging Population and Elder Care

2. Synopsis

This media framing feeds into broader cultural ageism. According to recent surveys, a significant portion of Americans fear getting older, and more than half believe society does not respect its elders. Growing up in a culture that praises youth and sidelines older generations, people internalize the idea that aging means losing value and independence. Social media trends such as “OK boomer” deepen this generational divide by mocking older adults as out of touch or responsible for societal problems. These cultural messages not only shape how young people view the elderly but also how older adults view themselves.

This pattern becomes even clearer when we consider how movies critique ageism. The film *The Substance* illustrates the social pressure to remain young by following a middle-aged woman whose career fades as she ages. Her younger counterpart gains popularity and admiration, while she is pushed further to the margins. The film also highlights the clear double standards between men and women: the aging male producer remains powerful and unbothered by his appearance, while the aging female celebrity faces relentless scrutiny. Rather than portraying aging itself as negative, the film exposes how society creates the fear of aging and punishes those who show signs of it. It functions as a satire of the very media portrayals that have contributed to widespread ageism.

These cultural and media-driven stereotypes have real-world consequences. Older adults are often assumed to be technologically behind, making it harder for them to participate in a society where digital literacy is essential. This contributes to misunderstandings between generations and reinforces the belief that older people cannot adapt or understand modern life. It also affects policies and social systems: when the public views the elderly as burdens rather than contributors, support for elder care, accessibility, and inclusive policies weakens. As a result, ageism becomes more than an attitude—it becomes a structural issue.

Overall, the dominant narrative around aging is shaped by fear, misunderstanding, and the glorification of youth. It focuses on decline rather than experience, and dependency rather than resilience. This narrative needs to shift toward recognizing the wisdom, value, and continued contributions of older adults. Reframing aging is essential not only for how we treat seniors today but also for how younger generations will eventually understand their own futures.

2. In-Depth Analysis

3. In-Depth Analysis

Historical and Social Context of the Aging Narrative

As the aging population grows, ageism has become more visible and widespread, not only in the United States but around the world. In the U.S., adults ages 65 and older now make up about 18% of the population, up from roughly 12% two decades ago, and this share is projected to rise to around 23% by 2050. This demographic shift means that older adults are far more present in everyday life, yet social attitudes and narratives have not fully adjusted to this reality. Instead of treating longevity as a collective achievement, many public conversations frame older adults as a strain on younger generations and social systems.

Intergenerational tension is closely connected to economic change. Many younger people believe that baby boomers had easier access to stable jobs, affordable housing, and a clearer path into the middle class, while Gen Z and younger millennials are facing student loan debt, soaring housing prices, and a more precarious job market. At the same time, there is widespread anxiety about the future of Social Security and Medicare. Younger adults worry that they will pay into these systems for decades but may not receive the same level of benefits when they reach retirement age, especially as trust funds approach projected depletion. This fear can easily turn into resentment, encouraging the idea that older generations “took all the benefits” and left younger generations with the bill. In this context, the slang term “boomer” has shifted from a neutral label for a generation to a negative insult that implies older people are entitled, out of touch, or responsible for present-day problems.

Technological change also deepens the divide. Much of today’s news, culture, and social life happens online, through platforms, apps, and digital media. Older adults who are less familiar with new technologies can become isolated from information and public discourse. This does not mean they are incapable of learning, but the rapid pace of change can make it difficult to “catch up,” especially when design and access are not inclusive. Younger people may interpret this gap as proof that seniors are “stuck in the past,” while older adults may feel excluded from spaces that now define mainstream culture. These social, economic, and technological conditions all feed into a broader narrative that sees aging as a problem to be managed rather than a life stage to be respected.

There is also a powerful economic frame that treats older adults primarily as costs. Pensions, healthcare, long-term care, and social services are often described as “burdens” on taxpayers or threats to economic growth. Some commentators even suggest that an aging population is “dragging down” the U.S. economy, although other analyses point out that older adults hold significant purchasing power and contribute in many ways to economic and community life. When public debate emphasizes costs more than contributions, it reinforces the idea that older people are a drain on resources—another key element of the ageist narrative.

Media Representation and Stereotypes

Media representation plays a central role in shaping how society views older adults. Across film, television, advertising, and news, certain stereotypes appear again and again. Older characters are often portrayed as grumpy, rigid, or constantly complaining about “how things used to be.” They are shown as resistant to change, always breaking or misunderstanding technology, and insisting on outdated customs. At the same time, they are frequently depicted as physically frail, helpless, sick, and dependent on others, especially when the character is an older woman. Even when media gives them positive traits, such as “wisdom,” that quality is often used as a limit—suggesting that their value lies only in giving advice while younger characters drive the action.

Underrepresentation is another serious problem. A widely cited USC Annenberg study found that only about 11% of speaking characters in popular films were age 60 or older, even though older adults make up closer to 18–20% of the U.S. population. When older people rarely appear on screen—and when they do, they are reduced to background figures, comic relief, or stereotypes—it subtly sends the message that they are not really part of the “main story” of society. In other words, they exist in real life but not in the cultural imagination.

The beauty and advertising industries add another powerful layer to this narrative. Many products are marketed using phrases like “anti-aging,” which suggests that aging itself is something to fight against or erase. In skincare and cosmetics campaigns, models are often very young, heavily edited, and shown with completely wrinkle-free skin. This creates an unrealistic, almost impossible image of “acceptable” appearance. Older women especially receive the message that visible signs of aging are failures to meet social standards. While there are some notable attempts to challenge this pattern—such as luxury campaigns featuring women in their 60s or 80s as fashion icons—these are still exceptions rather than the norm.

At the same time, digital culture has introduced new forms of ridicule, such as the “OK boomer” meme. This phrase is often used to dismiss older people’s opinions as clueless or irrelevant, especially when they express confusion about new technology or changing social norms. On the surface, it may seem like a harmless joke, but repeated over time it normalizes the idea that older adults’ voices do not matter. The combination of negative stereotypes, lack of representation, and open mockery creates a media landscape where ageism is not only common but often goes unquestioned.

Economic and Policy Frames and Intergenerational Tension

Economic concerns around Social Security and Medicare intensify the conflict between generations. Younger people see headlines about shrinking trust funds and rising healthcare costs and fear that by the time they retire, there will be nothing left. Politicians sometimes

frame these programs as “unsustainable,” which can indirectly frame older beneficiaries as the reason for younger generations’ insecurity. This can easily fuel a blame narrative: older people are cast as the ones “using up” resources, while younger workers are portrayed as those who must sacrifice.

Voting patterns also play a role. Older adults tend to vote at higher rates than younger adults, giving them significant influence over which policies are enacted. This can create the perception that policies are designed mainly to protect seniors’ interests, while younger people’s concerns about debt, climate, or housing are minimized. At the same time, ageist stereotypes can actually weaken serious policy discussions about elder care and accessibility. If older adults are seen primarily as frail, confused, or resistant to change, it becomes easier for policymakers and the public to justify keeping their needs at low priority.

However, this narrative ignores another side of the story: many older adults continue to work, volunteer, care for grandchildren, and contribute financially to their families and communities. Some research shows that older workers have made up a significant share of employment growth in recent decades, and older consumers hold a large portion of disposable income. Yet these facts rarely appear in the mainstream story about aging. Instead, the dominant narrative remains focused on what older people “take” rather than what they give.

Consequences of the Current Narrative

The current aging narrative has serious consequences at both the social and individual levels. Socially, it deepens mistrust between generations. Younger adults, worried about their financial futures, may blame older generations for economic conditions they did not directly create. Older adults, in turn, may feel unfairly accused or dismissed, which can make them defensive or withdrawn. This tension makes it harder to build policies and communities that work for all ages.

On an individual level, repeated exposure to ageist messages can lead to internalized ageism—when older people start to believe negative stereotypes about themselves. The World Health Organization’s global report on ageism notes that internalized ageism is linked to worse physical and mental health, reduced life expectancy, and less willingness to seek opportunities or try new things. If older adults see themselves as “too old,” “too slow,” or “a burden,” they may avoid social activities, learning experiences, or even medical care. This withdrawal can accelerate the very decline that stereotypes expected in the first place, creating a self-fulfilling cycle.

Emotionally, ageism can contribute to loneliness, depression, and feelings of invisibility. When elders rarely see themselves represented in media—or see only distorted images—it signals that their lives and stories are no longer valued. For younger people, constantly hearing that aging is something to fear encourages anxiety about the future and a fragile sense of

self-worth tied to youth. In this way, ageism harms people at every stage of life, not just in old age.

Characters, Conflict, and the Narrative Structure

Within this narrative, older adults function as the main protagonists: they are the group whose dignity, rights, and value are at stake. The antagonists are not individual young people but the larger forces that shape how society thinks about age—media stereotypes, beauty standards, economic frames that reduce people to costs, and policies that fail to protect or include older adults. The central conflict is between a youth-dominated culture and a rapidly aging population that refuses to disappear. On one side, there is a system that worships novelty, speed, and “newness”; on the other, a growing group of people who carry history, experience, and different rhythms of life.

The stakes of this conflict are high: the quality of elder care, the fairness of social policies, workplace discrimination, and the mental and physical health of millions of people. If the current narrative continues unchallenged, it will become harder to build societies where people can age with dignity and connection. Understanding how this narrative formed—and how it is maintained—is the first step toward transforming it in the later parts of this project.

Why a Narrative Shift Is Essential

Ultimately, everyone who is lucky enough to live long will become old someday. Aging is not a problem belonging only to “them”; it is a shared future. Because of this, it is essential to move away from a narrative that treats older adults as burdens, obstacles, or punchlines. Instead, we need stories that recognize aging as a stage of life that can include strength, independence, learning, and contribution. A more balanced narrative would not deny the real challenges of aging, such as health issues or economic strain, but it would place these challenges in a broader context of dignity and interdependence.

Changing how we talk about aging—and how we portray older people in media, policy, and everyday life—is not just about being kind. It is about creating a society where people of all ages can see themselves in the story and feel that they still belong.

Cultural Analysis (1 Page Polished Version)

4. Timeline

The Evolution of Aging

1940s–1960s



The 1940s to 1960s marked a shift in societal views on aging, focusing on **respectability** and the experience of older adults in post-war society.

1970s



In the 1970s, the **counterculture movement** emerged, challenging traditional narratives and advocating for the rights and visibility of older individuals in society.

1980s



The 1980s brought a fascination with youth culture, leading to **ageism** as older adults became increasingly marginalized in media and advertising, reflecting societal preferences.

1990s



By the 1990s, there was a growing acknowledgment of aging as a complex **experience**, promoting narratives that highlighted the positive aspects of growing older, including wisdom and resilience.

2000–2005

As **digital technology** expanded rapidly, older adults struggled to adapt to internet-based communication. This period strengthened the stereotype that seniors were “**out of touch**,” shaping early ageist media narratives around technology.

2005–2010

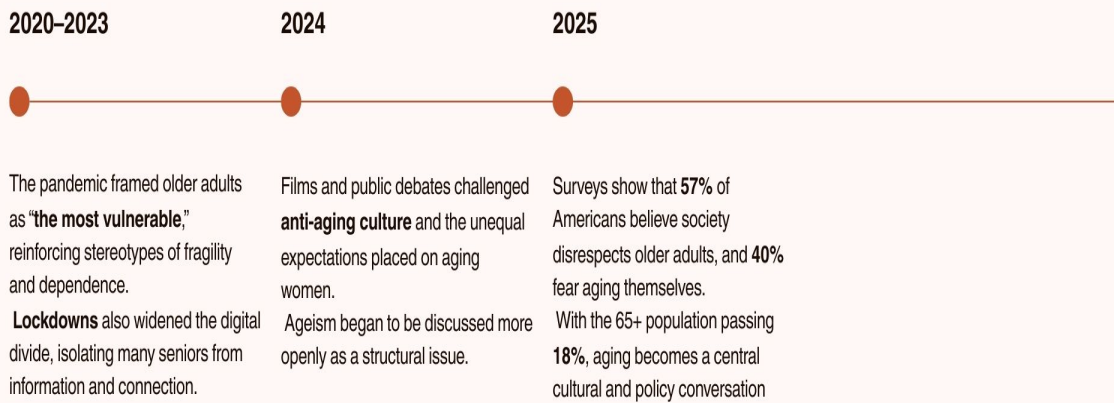
News outlets began using terms like “**silver tsunami**” to describe the rising aging population. This framing positioned older adults as a coming “**burden**,” reinforcing negative public attitudes about aging and healthcare costs.

2010–2015

Studies showed that adults over 60 made up **less than 15%** of speaking roles in major films and series. Older characters were often portrayed as **frail, comedic relief, or irrelevant**—deepening cultural ageism.

2016–2019

Economic frustration and rising inequality led to **intergenerational tension**. The viral phrase “**OK Boomer**” popularized the idea that older generations were out of touch, fueling modern conversations about ageism.



5. Cultural Analysis

Ageism is deeply rooted in cultural norms because culture shapes how societies assign value, dignity, and worth to individuals across different life stages. When a culture normalizes youth-centered ideals—such as independence, productivity, and physical attractiveness—it reinforces harmful stereotypes that directly affect older adults’ self-perception, healthcare access, and social participation. These cultural narratives do not remain symbolic; they translate into real-life inequities that influence mental health, employment opportunities, and social integration.

One of the most significant cultural consequences of ageism is the reduction of opportunities for older adults. Stereotypes that label seniors as “unproductive,” “slow,” or “outdated” create structural barriers in employment, social involvement, and even medical treatment. According to global labor data, older workers face higher rates of hiring discrimination and are often viewed as less adaptable to changing industries (OECD, 2020). These assumptions not only limit their ability to remain active in society but also reinforce a cultural belief that aging is

associated with decline rather than capability.

Ageism also widens the communication gap between generations. As modern lifestyles increasingly prioritize speed, digital fluency, and individual autonomy, older adults may be excluded from mainstream conversations, especially in societies that place a high value on individualism and economic self-sufficiency. A 2021 WHO global study found that in many countries, younger adults view elder care as a personal “burden,” reflecting cultural pressures to prioritize personal achievement and independence over intergenerational support. This perception contributes to emotional distancing and undermines social cohesion across age groups.

Culturally, media plays a major role in reinforcing these stereotypes. Across global film and television industries, older adults are significantly underrepresented. A USC Annenberg report found that adults over 60 appear in only about 12–15% of speaking roles in major films—far below their proportion in real populations. When older characters do appear, they are often portrayed through narrow clichés: frail, comedic, technologically incompetent, or irrelevant. These portrayals limit the cultural imagination of what aging can look like and perpetuate the idea that older adults lack social value.

Together, these cultural patterns reveal that ageism is not simply a personal attitude but a global narrative problem. Cultures around the world continue to privilege youth and novelty, shaping systems that marginalize older adults in work, healthcare, and media representation. Addressing ageism therefore requires more than policy changes—it demands a cultural shift toward recognizing aging as a meaningful, valuable stage of life rather than a decline from it.

6. Research and Bibliography

Pew Research Center. (2025). How Americans are thinking about aging. Pew Research Center.

World Health Organization. (2021). Global report on ageism. World Health Organization.

University of Florida, College of Medicine. (2023). Societal views on aging. University of Florida.

Ng, R. (2022). Hostility toward baby boomers on TikTok: The rise of “OK boomer.” *American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*.

Palmore, E. (2005). Three decades of research on ageism. *Generations*, 29(3), 87–90.

Global Coalition on Aging. (2019). Is an aging population hurting the U.S. economy? Global Coalition on Aging.

Farrell, C. (2019). Is an aging population hurting the U.S. economy? *Forbes / Next Avenue*.

Smith, S. L., Choueiti, M., & Pieper, K. (2016). Still rare, still ridiculed: Portrayals of senior characters in film. USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative.

Smith, S. L., & Choueiti, M. (2017). Seniors on the small screen: Aging in popular television. USC Annenberg.

Hotaling, P., & Hotaling, L. (2024). Ageism in media and entertainment. Answers for Senior Care.

Dychtwald, K. (2019). Ageism is alive and well in advertising. AARP.

Curology. (2023). Ageism and anti-aging: Rethinking wrinkle prevention. Curology.

Allies Cosmetics. (2023). Breaking barriers: Combating ageism in the beauty industry with inclusivity. Allies Cosmetics.

The New York Times. (2019). Old people are ignored and distorted in ageist marketing, report finds. The New York Times.

OECD. (2019). Working better with age: Policies to support older workers. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

OECD. (2025). Navigating the golden years: Making the labour market work for older workers. In OECD Employment Outlook 2025.

Social Security Administration. (1990). Social Security and the U.S. aged population. Social Security Bulletin, 50(10), 13–25.

Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. (2025). What the 2025 Social Security Trustees' report shows about long-term funding risks. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

University of Florida, Online Aging Studies. (2025). How an inverted population pyramid affects society. University of Florida.

World Health Organization. (2018). Attitudes toward aging: A global survey. World Health Organization.

Narrative Pitch: Reframing Aging Through Language, Media, and Storytelling
Introduction: The Problem is Not Age — It's the Story We Tell About It

7. Narrative Pitch

Aging is one of the most universal human experiences, yet culturally we speak about it in the most restrictive and dismissive ways. Words such as boomer, old-fashioned, slow, and outdated circulate casually in everyday language and media, embedding themselves deeply into our cognitive patterns. As these terms repeat across advertising, entertainment, and

social media, they shape a dominant narrative: older adults are not valuable, not relevant, and not worth paying attention to.

But this narrative is fundamentally flawed. We live in a world where fashion cycles constantly return to the 70s, 80s, Y2K, and Old Money aesthetics—styles created and worn by the very generations we now label “outdated.” The contradiction is clear: we consume and celebrate their culture while simultaneously disrespecting the people who lived it.

As an advertising major, I believe few tools are more powerful than messaging. Advertising is everywhere—on our phones, on the streets, in our homes—quietly shaping our attitudes. If ageism is a narrative problem, then advertising is part of its solution. My project proposes a campaign designed to shift cultural perception through emotionally grounded storytelling that asks audiences to rethink what “old” really means.

Narrative Problem: Harmful Language Shapes Harmful Perceptions

Ageism does not begin with policy or institutions—it begins with words. When “old-fashioned” is used to mean boring, irrelevant, or uncool, people internalize these associations. When “boomer” becomes a meme for ignorance or stubbornness, an entire generation becomes caricatured. Repetition makes prejudice familiar; familiarity makes prejudice invisible.

Media reinforces this cycle. Underrepresentation and stereotype roles teach younger audiences that older adults exist on the margins of society. These linguistic and visual messages create a feedback loop: ageism feels normal, even when it harms real people.

To shift ageism, we must shift the narrative. And to shift the narrative, we must offer a better story.

Proposed Narrative Shift: From “Old = Outdated” to “Old = Origin, Legacy, Depth”

This campaign aims to transform the cultural meaning of “old.” Instead of portraying aging as deterioration, the narrative reframes it as:

origin (the place where trends, art, and ideas come from),

legacy (cultural assets that younger generations admire),

depth and value (like aged wine or vintage fashion).

The goal is not to idealize aging, but to restore the respect stripped away by careless language and youth-centered media culture.

■ **Campaign Proposal: TWO STORIES, ONE MESSAGE**

Campaign Title:

“Maybe the Problem Is Your Perception.”

“Old is not outdated. Old is valuable — you just forgot to see it.”

Story 1: Time-Slip Film Ad — “Her 80s Friend”

Format: 60–90 second narrative advertisement

A teenage girl is suddenly transported into the 1980s. She meets a confident, stylish girl with the perfect “80s queen bee” energy: big hair, neon accessories, bold jackets, walkman headphones. The teenager is mesmerized—“Your style is so old 80s vibe, it’s so cool!” The 80s girl laughs, confused by the word old.

They spend the day together, dancing, shopping, sharing stories. The atmosphere is nostalgic, warm, and vibrant—showing the beauty of a past era.

Suddenly, the teenager is pulled back into the present. She walks through her house and passes her grandmother, who softly asks, “Where did you go?” The girl barely answers, absorbed in her phone.

The grandmother sighs. The camera zooms into a framed photo on the wall: The grandmother as a young woman — the same iconic 80s girl she met.

Screen text:

“Old-fashioned wasn’t always old. Maybe the problem is your perception, not their worth.”

Narrative Purpose:

Humanizes aging by connecting generations emotionally

Reframes “old-fashioned” as cultural origin, not decline

Shows that every older adult was once the person we admire in trends

Breaks stereotype through aesthetic + emotional storytelling

Story 2: Metaphorical PSA — “Aged Wine”

Format: 30–45 second conceptual spot

Two young adults are selecting wine. They talk with admiration: “Older wines are deeper... richer... more valuable.”

The camera pans subtly to reveal an older man standing near the shelf. He is scanning newspaper job listings—all marked with age restrictions, “under 40 only,” or “experience required (but young).”

He sighs and pushes his cart away slowly. The irony becomes visible: the world praises aged wine while discarding aged people.

Final screen text:

“Why is it not the same for people?” “Value doesn’t disappear with age.”

Narrative Purpose:

Strong metaphorical concept

Makes viewers confront their own bias

Delivers clear social critique with minimal visuals

■ Intended Impact

Both ads aim to:

Expose the contradictions in how society treats aging

Reclaim the emotional and cultural value of older generations

Challenge linguistic patterns that reinforce ageism

Encourage empathy and intergenerational connection

Shift perception from “burden” to “origin / depth / cultural foundation”

These stories do not pretend aging is simple. They simply show what ageism hides: every older adult carries beauty, history, and humanity.

■ Conclusion: Changing Words, Changing Perception

Narratives shape culture, and advertising shapes narratives. By reframing “old” as something meaningful rather than dismissible, this campaign invites audiences to confront their unconscious bias and rethink the way they speak about aging.

Ultimately, this pitch argues one thing:

****Aging is not the problem.**

The problem is the story we tell about it.**

■ Reflection (Polished Final Version)

During this assignment, I learned how powerful storytelling can be in shaping the world’s perspective on social issues. Before working on this project, I often recognized problems like ageism but never thought deeply about how narratives and language reinforce them. As I researched and analyzed this topic, I realized that ageism is not just a social issue but a narrative problem that becomes normalized through the words we use and the media we consume.

Because my major is advertising, it was especially meaningful to explore how visual communication and messaging can challenge harmful perceptions. Creating my own campaign made me see how advertising can influence people’s opinions—not just about

products, but about entire groups of people. Through this process, I learned how important it is to create narratives that are fair, respectful, and reflective of real human experiences.

Overall, this assignment helped me understand the responsibility that comes with being a storyteller and future advertising professional. I now see that changing a narrative can also change attitudes, and possibly change society itself.

8. Visual Elements

**You love the era but ignore
the person who lived it.**



**Old-fashioned wasn't always
old. Maybe the problem is
your perception.**

AGED WINE

Aged wine gets selected. Aged people get rejected.

