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Can seniors be trendy? Elderly people in pop culture

Streszczenie

Artykuł oparty na przekazach medialnych, opisuje elementy nowoczesnego stylu życia seniorów. Jest ukłonem w kierunku gerontopedagogiki propagującej postawę pozytywnego starzenia się.

Slowa kluczowe:

ludzie starsi, nowoczesny styl życia seniorów, pozytywne starzenie się, starość w kulturze popularnej

Abstract

This paper is based on media releases and describes aspects of the modern lifestyle of senior citizens. It promotes gerontological pedagogy in the context of positive attitudes to ageing.

Key words:

elderly people, modern lifestyle of senior citizens, positive ageing, old age in popular culture

Consumption, mass media, mobility, homogeneity of customs and social rules are the factors which modify the identity of post-modern seniors. The regime of pop culture demands flexibility and adaptability. It requires updating one's patterns of thinking and behaving. On the one hand, it underlines difference and individuality, on the other, it forces one to adapt to the preferences of others.

Senior citizens tend to adopt the trends created by the media. They break the rules and follow what is attractive, ephemeral and transient. In line with the principle of cultural recycling, they update their knowledge about the everyday. They keep looking for ways to live and function in the world.

The materials that inspired this paper include press releases, web portals, and radio and TV messages that reveal tendencies among the third generation with regards to fashion, sport, recreation, education, etc. It should be emphasised that these are concerned with some of the more extraordinary men and women over 60. No doubt senior citizens who are aware of their needs, independent and self-sufficient, “(...) and equipped with the wisdom of maturity at the same time”¹ (Wandrasz 2005: 162) are emblematic for our times.

In popular culture, “(...) the body is the passport to all that is good in life” (Featherstone 1991: 186). In the 21st century, older people have started glorifying beauty, health, vitality, fashion, and care and beauty treatments. They are afraid of senility, which

¹ Translation from Polish. Original quotation: „(...) a równocześnie posiadający mądrość człowieka dojrzałego”.

has always been defined as lack of attractiveness, sickness, suffering, helplessness and limitations. They fight against “(...) wrinkles, sagging flesh, tendency towards middle-age spread, hair loss etc. (...) with help from the cosmetic, beauty, fitness and leisure industries” (Featherstone 1991: 178).

Female post-modern seniors regularly use anti-ageing products: moisturising, anti-wrinkle and firming lotions. The use of make-up tricks (using make-up for mature complexions) allows them to hide skin imperfections. Older women use skin illuminators, powders and colour correctors. There are also many products for men to help them hide the signs of ageing. Many hairdressers handle the problem of men’s grey hair.

Older women seek radical ways to improve their beauty much more often. Cosmetic surgery is now very popular. It is promoted chiefly by show business celebrities. For instance, two renowned Polish female celebrities, Krystyna Mazurówna (dancer and choreographer) and Maria Czubaszek (writer) underwent cosmetic medical treatments. Both took part in the TV programme “Surgery Secrets”. They had their lips, eye lids and hands improved. There was lifting and Botox involved. In the episode broadcast on 5 March 2013, Krystyna Mazurówna confessed: “I don’t want to have the face of a 20-year-old woman. I don’t want to pretend I am 20. I want to feel OK with myself (...) Why should I be ashamed (...)? Are teeth fillings so embarrassing (...)?”² (TVN Style 2013).

Impeccable clothes have an impact on one’s image. Garments protect the body and underline gender and age differences. They generate a sense of being attractive, they emphasise individuality and they reflect the degree to which the wearer follows the latest fashion trends. Post-modern seniors are fully aware of this, as they visit shopping centres more and more often. They dress casually and elegantly and wear sporty clothes. They choose modern or vintage styles. They notice brands, colours and designs. They play with fashion. Their style can frequently be shocking, astonishing or surprising. In this context, one should definitely mention 92-year-old interior designer Iris Apfel, Anna Piaggi, the late editor of the Italian *Vogue*, and Liu Xianping, a 72-year-old man from China who poses for photos in female outfits. In 2012, a social campaign under the name of *Fashion for Everyone* was organised in Warsaw. Dorota Wróblewska, the initiator, wanted to change the way old age is perceived in Poland. Selected senior citizens took part in a fashion show and in a short film. They were also portrayed in the album *Fashion People. Poland*. The project participants proved that people of their age can be extravagant, chic and nonchalant.

Similarly, the Advanced Style blog reveals the fashion sophistication of senior citizens. The blog’s founder, Ari Seth Cohen from New York, takes photos of senior citizens’ street fashion. He engages people who are 60 or even 100 years old in his sessions. According to one blogger, they are even more absorbing than younger women “(...) because

² Translation from Polish. Original quotation: „Ja nie chcę mieć twarzy 20-latki. Nie chcę udawać, że mam 20 lat. Chcę być w porządku z sobą (...) Dlaczego się wstydzić (...)? Czy plombowanie zębów też jest wstydliwe (...)?”.

they are now at the age when they do not need to impress anyone. They can wear whatever they like”³ (Jaklewicz 2012: 16).

In this context, it is worth mentioning retired supermodels who are making a comeback (Linda Rodin, 65; Carmen Dell’Orefice, 82; China Machado, 84; Daphne Selfe, 84), as well as beauty contests for senior citizens. The latter, though more widespread in America, have also been organised in Polish welfare centres (e. g. Ostoja Welfare Centre in Gdańsk and the Welfare Centre in Kalisz). Undoubtedly, the Israeli Miss Holocaust contest is one of the most remarkable events in this category.

Senior citizens living in a popular culture environment wish to be fitter than ever. Finally, “(...) older people are no longer afraid that sport and recreation can lead to accidents and worsen their health condition instead of improving it”⁴ (Erazmus and Trafiałek 1997: 53). Those who were professional sportspersons in their youth are now remarkably fit. Online sources mention an 80-year-old Himalaya climber from Japan (Yuichiro Miura), the extraordinary achievements of the oldest female yoga practitioners (Tao Porchon-Lynch and Bette Calman) and the acrobatics of Johanna Quaas. Average senior citizens are following in their footsteps. They regularly attend recreation and sport clubs and go to dancing classes. They do aqua aerobics, Nordic walking, yoga, aerobics and tai-chi. They walk, run, swim and cycle. Some are lovers of skating, roller-skating and skateboarding (e. g. Tom Winter, a 69-year-old professor at Nebraska University; Lloyd Kahn, a 78-year-old writer from San Francisco).

Competitions for old men, veterans and masters are organised in response. These are contests for those who engage in team sports, athletics, table tennis or body building despite their advanced age – all those who cannot live without swimming, cycling, etc. A documentary film made in 2004, *The Masters*, is a homage to all senior citizens who enjoy physical activity. It shows the determination, the spirit and vigour of the oldest swimmers in Poland: Barbara Korol (born in 1926), Władysław Trawiński (born in 1923) and Edward Niemczyk (born in 1927).

Regardless of the recreational or professional character of doing sports, such people improve their physical and mental condition, delay the processes of ageing, stay fit and forget about everyday problems. “Apart from improving health, such activities satisfy needs related to rivalry and perfectionism as well as self-fulfilment”⁵ (Filipek-Sperska 2012: 322).

Contrary to standard expectations, pensioners give in to hedonist drives. Professional stability is the best time to live one’s dreams and carry out previously abandoned plans and passions. The older generation indulges in pleasures, hobbies and entertainment.

³ Translation from Polish. Original quotation: „(...) bo osiągnęły wiek, kiedy już na nikim nie muszą robić wrażenia. Mogą zakładać, co tylko chcą”.

⁴ Translation from Polish. Original quotation: „(...) bariera strachu, wyrażająca się w obawie, że ruch może doprowadzić do wypadków i pogorszenia stanu zdrowia, a nie jego poprawy”.

⁵ Translation from Polish. Original quotation: „Oprócz aspektu zdrowotnego (...) umożliwia (...) zaspokojenie aspiracji agonistyczno-perfekcjonistycznych oraz potrzeb w zakresie samorealizacji”.

Tourism has become one of their favourite pastimes again. However, pilgrimages are now *passé*. Senior citizens prefer cafés, clubs and discos and all the places you need to know to be cool. Following their Western peers, they choose sanatoriums and heritage tourism. They want more than just rest. They appreciate new acquaintances, attractions, unforgettable impressions and cognitive values.

In the 21st century, senior citizens are discovering new areas of activity they have never known before. They are engaging in youth professions. Wirginia Szmyt (born 1939) alias DJ Wika has been playing at a Warsaw dance club. She easily operates the console, the mixer and the laptop. She lives up to the image of a queen of the night: she wears jeans and shirts with prints. She has become recognisable in the media due to her hobby. This is a quote from one of her interviews: “When I play music, I break the stereotypes about old people. I teach the joy of life, relaxation and distance (...)”⁶ (Lisicki 2011: 18).

Attending a so-called university of the third age is another way to manage one’s free time. This trend has also come to Poland from Western countries. Pensioners enjoy learning, which is proved by the growing number of such facilities. The curriculum is indeed impressive. It includes such sections as visual arts, literature, language, computers, sports, etc. Senior citizens can thus gain or update their knowledge in various fields. They can develop or discover new interests and cultivate their skills. They also interact with other people and make lasting friendships. “Education reinforces identity and the sense of belonging. It allows one to be in touch with the way that society develops”⁷ (Szymanek 2010: 163). At times, senior citizens have a strong thirst for knowledge. They go to various academies to quench it. Thanks to the media, the information about the oldest students is spreading (e. g. Bogumiła Manc and Jerzy Królewiecki).

In the global society, the ability to use electronic devices is much appreciated. Seniors tend to use mobile phones and computers with internet access more frequently. IT courses for older people have made a major impact in this respect. Communication with family and friends is now extended thanks to the Internet. It is no wonder that internet users aged 60+ often send e-mails and talk via Skype to their closest relatives and friends. Some of them go even further and write electronic diaries. The oldest blogger in Poland is Zdzisław Stankiewicz, holder of a PhD in history. There are also women among the senior bloggers, for instance 92-year-old Halina Biežuńska (Grandma Halna). One of her reads: “I wonder how many women of my age are interested in computers. Maybe there are female internet users older than me? (...) How has the world changed? (...) What progress? Isn’t this a brilliant opportunity for older people? (...)”⁸ (Halna 2007).

⁶ Translation from Polish. Original quotation: „Puszczając muzykę, promuję przełamywanie stereotypów o starszych i starych ludziach. Uczę radości życia, rozluźnienia, dystansu (...).”

⁷ Translation from Polish. Original quotation: „Edukacja jest czynnikiem wzmacniającym tożsamość i przynależność do społeczeństwa, umożliwia nadążanie za jego rozwojem.”

⁸ Translation from Polish. Original quotation: „(...) zastanawiam się, ile kobiet w moim wieku (...) interesuje się komputerem. A może są jeszcze starsze internautki ode mnie? (...) Jak zmienił się ten świat?

The conclusions that may be drawn from the above provide an affirmative answer to the question posed in the title of his paper. A senior citizen can definitely be trendy. The examples presented prove that there is a positive attitude towards ageing. These might resemble futuristic visions, since the number of such active senior citizens is still relatively low. “The image of a good-looking, elegant old lady is far from the average Polish stereotype of an old person”⁹ (Czerniawska 2007: 210). Peers from other, highly developed countries are much more open to social and cultural transformations. As they live in a different reality with developed and efficient social support, they are much more adaptive. They can function effectively in the contemporary world also due to their better financial standing.

In general, all people, including senior citizens, have to face the challenge of continuously updating and broadening what they know about the reality around them. Only then will they avoid being excluded from society. Growing up not so much in old age but towards old age seems to be crucial. Gerontological education carried out from the youngest years can bring measurable effects. “Acquisition of certain habits (...) in childhood or adolescence can (...) make many things easier in the later life of a senior citizen”¹⁰ (Fabiś 2005: 100). People who have always respected their own body and cultivated their intellect, taking up all kinds of activities, will continue to do so after they retire.

Following the senior citizens presented by name in this paper, all the others should break free from any limitations that restrict them and “go for it”. They should fight negative stereotypes about old age. They need to take responsibility for their own fate and the quality of their life. Why limit the range of everyday possibilities and options? They ought to follow the example of those who have destroyed myths and appealed to younger generations. Why fear ridicule due to dyed hair, hidden baldness or a masked belly (Zych 2009), if one does it on the basis of one’s own convictions? One can certainly grow old with dignity and in a youthful spirit. One does not exclude the other. Therefore, let old people think “(...) about themselves, let them look in the mirror to learn the truth about themselves from the one who faces them in the looking glass (...) let them remember that the world cares not a fig about our attitude towards them. Life will not stop to wait until we grow wiser”¹¹ (Wąchała n. d.).

(...) Jaki postęp? Czy to nie jest wspaniałe życie dla starszej osoby? (...”).

⁹ Translation from Polish. Original quotation: „Obraz zadbanej i eleganckiej starszej pani czy pana odbiega od tzw. przeciętnego, szarego polskiego staruszka”.

¹⁰ Translation from Polish. Original quotation: „Nabywanie pewnych nawyków (...) w dzieciństwie, czy w wieku młodzieńczym jest (...) wielkim ułatwieniem w codziennym życiu seniora”.

¹¹ Translation from Polish. Original quotation: „(...) nad sobą, może spojrzy w lustro, by od tego z przeciwnika dowiedzieć się prawdy o sobie (...) I niech pamięta, że świat niewiele sobie robi z tego, że my się na niego obrażamy. Życie nie stanie obok, by poczekać, aż zmądrzejemy”.

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