Abstract

Professionals in human services fields have begun studying the effects of ageism on aging populations, particularly in developed countries. It is speculated that many peoples' attitudes towards the elderly could be influenced by the cultural values often presented within television and movies. In particular, Asian societies who typically practice filial piety from Confucian values could be an exception to modern ageism around the globe. Since the 1980's, Japanese animation has swept the world in popularity due to its unique drawing style, storylines and range of characters. With the timely emergence of anime and ageism in popular culture, the goal of this paper is to discover how older adults are portrayed within anime. Through a content analysis of 6 different anime, the portrayal of elders seems to be that of a secluded, yet powerful guru, who often acts as comedic relief in the program. Gender differences, however, are noted in these specific perceptions.

The Confucian Elder or Powerful Guru? Portrayals of Elderly within Japanese Anime

Around the globe, the growth of the aging population is receiving much more attention than ever before in history. Despite the importance of matters which result from aging, studies have been dedicated toward the elderly themselves rather than the structures that are affected by their ever-increasing life spans. As a result, a newer concept dubbed as "ageism," which refers to any prejudice or discrimination based off of a person's age, has received an influx of professional attention. In regard to the topic at hand, elderly (anyone over the age of 65) discrimination will be addressed in this research. Since the 1980's, Japanese animation has swept the world in popularity due to its unique drawing style, storylines and range of characters. With the timely emergence of anime and ageism in popular culture, the goal of this paper is to discover how older adults are portrayed within anime.

By 2050, it is predicted that the population over 65 will nearly triple in size (Fiske & North, 2015) and Japan happens to be the most rapidly aging country on the globe (Inoguchi & Shin, 2009). As mentioned above, the issues of how we will accommodate and treat this growing population is receiving a large amount of attention and research. Many believe that opinions of older adults can vary by society, especially those with Asian values. Confucian Asia specifically refers to the countries of China, Japan, North Korea, South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan and Vietnam.

Along with common belief, there has been an empirical and historical basis as to why the East would have more respect for elders compared to the West. Belief systems and cultural values can perpetuate in a society for long periods of time. Confucius' philosophy of self-discipline extended into a renowned social philosophy which was grounded on the principle of *ren*, which translates to "loving others." In Confucianism, *Xiao* is the belief of obedience and devotion towards elder members of the family and placing their needs before your own. Confucius cited *Xiao* as the foundation of *ren* and expressed its importance in sociopolitical and family harmony. *Xiao* was later adopted in Japanese philosophy and renamed as *kō* in the 17th century. (Encyclopedia Brittanica, 2016). The values of family or community versus the individual and diversity directly influence how people in these cultures live their lives. Surveys

of citizens in these countries show that majority of residents are still loyal to Confucian values of collectivism, discipline and consensus. Further, in a 2006 study that asked families to rank three values that they would most likely teach at home, all of the countries listed above chose Confucian values (independence, diligence, honesty, mindfulness or sincerity) as their top three (Inoguchi & Shin, 2009). In addition, the rate of elderly parents cohabiting with children is significantly higher in Japan than that of the United States, a Western nation (Fiske & North, 2015).

Controversially, past research mentions that the industrialization of Asian nations could actually be deteriorating the positive opinions towards seniors. As the traditional roles of storyteller and wisdom giver depreciate in value, elders begin to lose their place in society and have less control over household or societal productivity. Also, the immense amount of people aging within Asian societies place pressures upon health care and labor systems, which is similar to what much of the developed world is simultaneously experiencing,. Therefore, despite the present cultural expectations and values, negative views may develop towards elders anyway.

A meta-analysis on studies comparing the Western (U.S., U.K., Australia, Canada, Germany, etc.) and Eastern regions (China, Japan, Vietnam, North Korea, etc.) completed by Fiske and North (2015) found that Asian cultures harbored attitudes that were significantly more negative overall. The researchers in this study suggested that country-level factors (cultural norms such as individualism in the West vs. collectivism of the East) that consistently appeared to predict East vs. West differences included: the aging population strain per country, which predicted negativity towards elders, and the status of cultural individualism, which predicted positivity towards elders. Fiske and North (2015) posit that these two factors have much greater influence on the attitudes of the elderly than industrialization alone.

On a separate note, it could also be argued that cultural values do not necessarily represent personal beliefs of citizens. Guan et al. (2016) investigated attitudes towards older adults and their relation to personal and cultural values. Overall, they found that personal values were influencing beliefs of the elderly more so than cultural values. Contrary to what Fiske and North (2015) suggested, Guan et al. (2016) found no significant correlations between societal individualism and attitudes of older adults, even though a relation was shown between personal communal value and attitudes. In transition, it is speculated that media outlets are capable of conveying cultural phenomena such as views on elderly and aging. Japanese anime provides a viewpoint of this controversy that is unique to that particular culture, thus providing a possible window towards a resolution.

Most animated shows have a short amount of time to illustrate their stories and tend to rely on stereotypical representations as a result (Anderson & Robinson, 2006). Previous research has shown that the topic of aging is not popular in cartoons and that elderly characters in children's shows are often portrayed as undeveloped, one-dimensional (i.e possessing only one emotion or trait which dominates character portrayal) and are unnecessary to the main plot of the show. Anderson and Robinson (2006) found that only 8% of characters in animated programs were old and that older males were seen more often than older females. It is speculated that older adults are under-represented as a result of the entertainment market as well as within cultural

values, as previously described. Robinson and Skill (1995) mention that the changing popular demographic towards the young and hip in developed nations could lead to changes within the demographic presented in prime time television. Consequently, entertainment corporations will likely direct efforts towards the prime demographic market.

In an article published by Borne (2009), the presentation of Confucian values within Japanese anime is discussed. Born explains that it is useful to analyze modern expressions of Confucian values when trying to understand how they might apply to life in Japan. Examples of *Naruto* and *Shonen Jump* are used to illustrate how values of hard work, friendship, reciprocity and propriety are necessary to the development of characters and storylines in this culture (Born, 2009). The goal of the current study is to investigate whether Confucian values are displayed through portrayals of elderly within animation, therefore signifying that Japanese culture still claims such values, or not.

To research how elderly characters are portrayed within Japanese media, six different anime were viewed. A representative sample of anime over the last 20 years was attempted by choosing series based off of diversity of release date. Variety in plot was also attempted to ensure that the context of each character is different even if the data collected is similar to characters in other comparison anime. In total, the anime used for this content analysis were as follows: *Yu Yu Hakusho, Moribito, One Punch Man, Tokyo Ghoul, InuYasha* and *Dragon Ball*. Rather than having confounding arguments about how embedded the character actually was in the series, characters were only analyzed if they were reoccurring within the series. This criterion was included to ensure that this was a character that was making a lasting impression on viewers and could be taken seriously, rather than a background character (villagers, minor enemies, etc.) that would not be remembered. An equal sample of three women characters (Genkai, Kaede and Torogai) and three male characters (Bam, Master Roshi and Yoshimura) were selected to be analyzed. After viewing majority of each anime and carefully evaluating each character's attitude and behaviors, three themes emerged in how all six characters were portrayed: the role of humor, interactions of perceptions with gender and the use of seclusion.

Three of the characters (Genkai,*Yu Yu Hakusho,* Kaede, *InuYasha* and Roshi, *Dragon Ball Z*) were used as examples of humor through dialogue within their shows. These three shows in particular relied upon humor to convey messages about the plot, the characters themselves and the dynamics between the two. Thus, it was imperative to transcribe examples of this humor to better illustrate how these three elderly characters are perceived by their younger counterparts within their programs (TRANSCRIPTIONS NOT INCLUDED IN THIS VERSION). Humor, in all three examples and throughout their respective programs, were often directed towards making light of another characters mistakes and shortcomings as well as the appearance or stigma towards the elderly character being analyzed. Sources of humor within *Yu Yu Hakusho, InuYasha* and *Dragon Ball Z* (and also within other chosen programs not included here) tended to mock appearances, perceptions of strength and the mental health (basket-case, senile, crazy, etc.) of the elderly character. These findings would suggest that Eastern cultures like Japan may have deteriorating views of elderly after all, as previous researchers have suggested.

One of the most significant themes that reoccurred throughout each anime was the notion of power and autonomy, which was incredibly important in the development of main characters. Contrary to opposition towards autonomy in older adults, the anime within this study did not limit the power that its elder characters portrayed. In fact, all six characters, regardless of gender, were powerful and often "gurus" of their practices, who were "brought out of hiding" to train the main characters or aid the plot in some way. Hence, while negativity towards elder characters within anime seems necessary to providing entertainment within some series, the perception of all elder characters as all-powerful, wise and skilled masters provides insight about Confucian concepts being reinforced within Japanese culture.

In conclusion, it can be stated that while research has been conducted on ageism in regard to historically Confucian societies, much of the evidence is conflicting and inconclusive. The analysis provided from this study, unfortunately, does not provide a clear answer either, when questioning today's prevalence of Confucian theology within Japanese culture. The uses of humor and seclusion provide no support that filial piety prevails, since they promote rugged individualism and an ignorance of the aging process. Yet the portrayal of all elderly as powerful masters in their field support the notion that they are wise and valuable members of society with necessary skills that must be passed down.