

# **Television and Positive Ageing in Australia**

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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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## ABSTRACT

As a means to engage with others, television offers the viewer a great deal. In Australia commercial TV is particularly popular, and many turn daily to this cultural arena which graphically portrays our shared concerns and values. Viewers are kept informed and entertained, advertisements display the luxuries and necessities that direct lifestyle choices, and local and global stories are presented for mutual consideration. Audiences are connected not only with products, personalities and newsmakers, but also with fellow viewers who are sharing the experience. Retired people take particular advantage of this multi-faceted link with the outside world, when additional leisure time and reduced social and physical mobility create spaces that can be filled with the narratives and 'para-social' connections of a medium that transports the world to the viewer. Yet one definitive statement that can be made about popular television is that older people are rarely acknowledged and often ridiculed. An easily accessible and valuable communications medium marginalises those most dependent upon it – for information and entertainment, but also, I would argue, dependent upon it to help facilitate key recommendations of the 'successful ageing' formula.

Authoritative prescriptions for ageing well emphasise the benefits of social engagement, with television helping to facilitate this by involving the viewer with local concerns and wider accounts of human enterprise. Yet the popular media often presume that older people are no longer viable consumers or citizens, thus alienating them from mediated stories and populations. 'Success', according to commercial media sensibilities, is equated with youthfulness and economic means – twin

attributes rarely associated with retired people. As a result, advertising is directed primarily at young, middle-class audiences, and the TV programmes to hook their attention are often typecast with similarly youthful protagonists. Older viewers are taken for granted and rarely acknowledged, and more disconcertingly, stereotyped and ridiculed to empower younger viewers. This dissertation seeks to explore these issues from a sociological perspective, primarily within the Australian context. Research strategies include a detailed analysis of the role of television in older people's lives and how they are portrayed, with results aligned with 'successful ageing' guidelines. Included in this approach is a study of how older people are portrayed on commercial TV in Australia, and a discussion of findings. The final section includes a chapter which consists of an examination of negative media portrayals from a political and human rights perspective, and the final chapter which asks how the oldest and frailest may be impacted by the cultural devaluation of old age.