



## **Visual Representation of Senior Citizens**

### **The Role of Discourse Coalitions for Identification with Images and Accessible Information Delivery**

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#### **Abstract**

This paper discusses why senior citizens are more and more represented as *eternally youthful seniors* in many western societies today and why images of the *frail needy seniors* play a less dominant role. First, the historical roots of these kind of images will be presented. Then, the concept of discourse coalitions (Hajer, 1997) will be used to analyse specific Dutch examples illustrating the ways senior citizens are represented as *eternally youthful seniors* in public and private information sources. Finally, I will discuss the importance of future empirical research on the identification with images for senior citizens' accessible information delivery, so can we can ensure that they will not be excluded from crucial information.

**Key words:** Visual representation of senior citizens, discourse coalitions, information accessibility, identification with images

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In many western countries the population is greying. In our information society access to information about products and services is important for all generations (Loos et al., 2012). This paper focuses on the question why senior citizens are more and more represented as *eternally youthful seniors* in many western societies today and why images of the *frail needy seniors* play a less dominant role. First, I will show the historical roots of these images. Using the concept of discourse coalitions (Hajer, 1997) will allow me to analyse specific Dutch examples which illustrate the ways senior citizens are represented as *eternally youthful seniors* in public and private information sources. To ensure that senior citizens will not be excluded from crucial information, I will finally discuss the importance of future empirical research on the identification with images for senior citizens' accessible information delivery.

### **The historical roots of the eternally youthful seniors and the frail needy seniors**

Several studies show that images of *eternally youthful seniors* play a dominant role in our society (e.g. for television commercials and advertising: Suokannas, 2005; van Selm, Westerhof, & de Vos, 2007; Williams, Yläne, & Wadleigh, 2007; Yläne, Williams, & Wadleigh, 2009; Christensen & Suokannas, 2010). In this article I will show how Hajer's concept of discourse coalition can help us explain the frequent occurrence of images of this kind in our society today. Hajer (1991, p. 65) defines a discourse coalition as 'the ensemble of (1) a set story-lines; (2) the actors who utter these story-lines; and (3) the practices in which this discursive activity is based'.<sup>2</sup> The following illustrates the extent to which actors such as insurers of pension plans and public authorities are concerned - as part of a discourse coalition - with constructing the narrative of a pleasant life full of attractive activities.

In the Netherlands, Zwitserleven (an insurer of pension plans) has contributed strongly to this kind of story-lines. Dutch people probably remember the commercial starring Kees Brusse lounging in a deckchair on a sunny beach abroad, reading about the weather in the Netherlands in an English newspaper and then looking into the camera...

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<sup>1</sup> This paper article is based on part 3 of the inaugural lecture by Loos (2010).

<sup>2</sup> Hajer (1997) conducted his own research into discourse coalitions in the acid rain debate.



Figure 1. Zwitterleven

... and mockingly declaring<sup>3</sup>:

I am afraid that this is going to be a very boring sort of commercial. It seems fair to warn you. So, all of you, go and make coffee, because nothing else is going to happen. Unless you think it's fun to watch me, but that I can't imagine. The weather in Amsterdam [with an English accent]: cloudy, heavy rain [grinning] oh, dear [shakes his head]. [translation]

The message of this story-line is clear: take out a Zwitterleven policy and you, too, are guaranteed to enjoy your retirement in a similar paradise. In later commercials, the actors responsible for imprinting this story on our minds have become younger and younger.<sup>4</sup> After all, you can't start too early to start to save for your retirement pension. As the number of senior citizens has continued to rise, more and more companies have started airing commercials of this kind.

And it hasn't stopped there. Below, we'll see that the Dutch government is uttering a similar story-line: if you assume responsibility and start saving for your old age, you can 'compensate the loss of resources in later life'. This looks to be a discourse coalition, and more specifically, that of the *eternally youthful seniors*. This discourse coalition is rooted in a distant past, as the following painting shows:

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.reclamearsenaal.nl>

<sup>4</sup> See Kees Schiferli (1983) on the backgrounds of the Zwitterleven advertising campaign on <http://www.reclamearsenaal.nl/index.php?id=116> and De Lange (2008) for a critical review of the Zwitterleven experience.

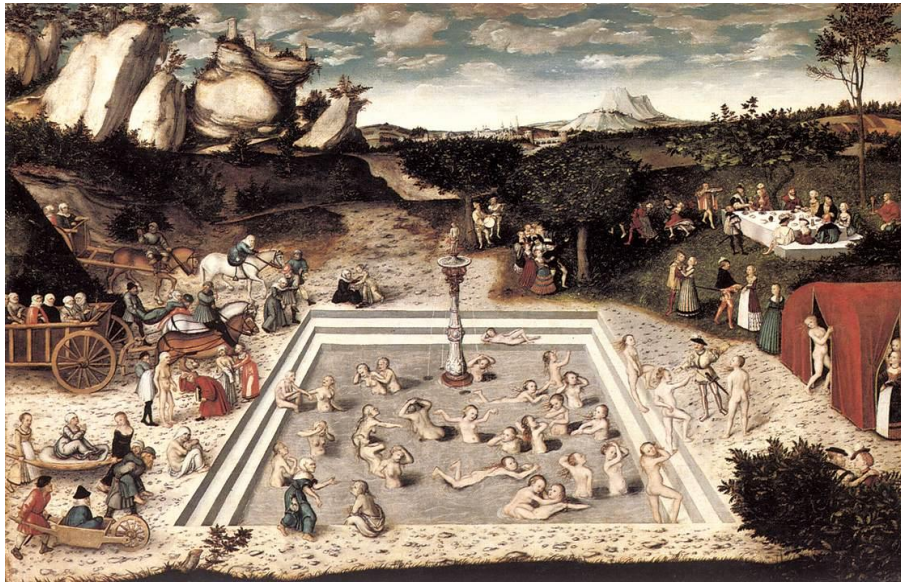


Figure 2. Fountain of Youth (1546) by Lucas Cranach the Elder  
Staatliche Museen Berlin (<http://www.wga.hu/index.html>)

The Fountain of Youth depicts people (naked *women* - what a surprise) standing to the left of the fountain being examined by physicians before entering the water, to emerge on the right-hand side as rejuvenated beauties. This may be interpreted as a myth: “since myth is a type of speech, everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a discourse” (Barthes, 1972, p. 109). The myth in this case is that of ‘eternal youth’. We all want so badly to stay young that we are susceptible to images invoking ‘eternal youth’. It is no coincidence that the refrain of a popular song went:

*Forever young, I want to be forever young.  
Do you really want to live forever, forever, forever?  
Forever young, I want to be forever young.  
Do you really want to live forever?  
Forever young.*

There is just one problem: our mortality. This, however, would appear to be solved with the concept of the ‘third age’, that precedes the ‘fourth age’ (Laslett, 1991). Our increased life expectancy means that we will spend a long time in the ‘third age’, the period of retirement, while the ‘fourth age’ will be reduced to a short, painful descent into decay. It is striking that in the Netherlands especially public authorities make use of the concept of the ‘third age’. The ‘*third age*’ receives ample mention in policy memorandums, while the ‘*fourth age*’ is quietly ignored. Hence the study published in 2007 by the Ministerie van Volkshuisvesting,



Ruimtelijke Ordening en Milieubeheer [Dutch Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment] was given the title *Dynamiek in de derde leeftijd* [*Dynamism in the Third Age*]. Other examples are the *Verkenning levensloop - Beleidsopties voor leren, werken, zorgen en wonen* [*Life Course study*], published in 2002 by the Ministerie van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid [Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment] and the study entitled *Mogen ouderen ook meedoen* [*May Seniors Participate, too*] carried out by the Raad voor Maatschappelijke Ontwikkeling [Council for Social Development] in 2004, in which the term ‘third life phase’ is used.

It is no surprise that the desire to be forever young is commercially exploited by private organisations, with images that reinforce this myth (see also Bonstein & Theile (2006) for several examples of such images and Gullette (2004) about the debate over “Positive Aging”). But using the concept of the ‘third age’ (or ‘third life phase’) also enables public authorities to combine a positive message (most citizens will live longer in good health) with a warning (you yourself are in the first place responsible for compensating the loss of resources in later life<sup>5</sup>). Such discursive practices of both private and public authorities have served to keep the myth of ‘eternal youth alive’, which has allowed the dominant discourse coalition of the *eternally youthful seniors* to develop.

Obviously, other voices may also be heard in our society expressing concern about the quality of life in old age. Apparently the Beatles worried about the same thing when they sang:

*Give me your answer, fill in a form.  
Mine for evermore.  
Will you still need me, will you still feed me?  
When I'm sixty-four?*

This opposing view derives from a different discourse coalition, namely that of the *frail needy seniors*. The realisation that ageing comes with decay is part of our heritage and, in the past, was frequently aptly depicted as the so-called ‘steps of life’<sup>6</sup>:

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<sup>5</sup> See the story-line uttered by the Dutch policy memorandum which will be discussed below.

<sup>6</sup> See Covey (1989) for the ways old age (including decay) was portrayed in art and literature from the Middle Ages to the 16<sup>th</sup> century.



Figure 3. The steps of life, a woodcut by Hendrik Numan (around 1780)

There are also institutions, mostly health service organisations, that present this less agreeable side of ageing. For example, the publications of the NIZW [Netherlands Institute of Care and Welfare]<sup>7</sup> and Vilans<sup>8</sup> carry cover images of senior citizens using wheeled walking frames to draw attention to this specific target group.



Figure 4. Cover of the Vilans' publication *De levensloopbenadering: Een bron van inspiratie* [The life course approach: a source of inspiration]

<sup>7</sup> See, for example Penninx (2005) and Willems & Alsem (2006).

<sup>8</sup> The website of Vilans offers a wealth of information in this area:  
<http://www.vilans.nl/smartsite.dws?ch=&id=108065>

However, the actors in the discourse coalition of the *frail needy seniors* are no match for the discourse coalition of the *eternally youthful seniors*, as evidenced by a recent readers' survey carried out by the magazine of the ANBO, the largest Dutch association for senior citizens, which revealed that many readers were annoyed by advertisements for Up Easy chairs and wheeled walkers (Van den Berg et al., 2010, p. 11). Both discourse coalitions invoke violent emotions. Criticism of the *eternally youthful seniors* can be heard from De Lange (2007, 2008) and Dorrestein (2008), while Laslett (1991) has sought to redraw the image of the *frail needy seniors*. My point is the implications of this for the design of information sources for senior citizens (see final section of this paper).

The dominant discourse coalition is that of the *eternally youthful seniors*. The narrative it tells has deep historical roots (painting Fountain of Youth) and taps into the universal yearning to live a long and healthy life. "(...) we constantly 'import signs from other contexts (another era, social group, culture) into the context in which we are now making a new sign, in order to signify ideas and values which are associated with that other context by those who import the sign.'" (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 10)

Moreover, discourse coalitions are characterized by their strategy of appropriating parts of other discourse coalitions. For example, the Beatles song I quoted earlier is printed on the cover of the policy memorandum *Ouderenbeleid in het perspectief van de vergrijzing* [Ageing population policy within a greying population perspective] published in 2005 by the Ministerie van Volksgezondheid, Welzijn en Sport [Dutch Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports]. This shows that the government is aware of the fact that thunderclouds may be gathering, but abides by the solution described by the following story-line: there is a problem (ageing), but if we intervene on time and the citizens also take their own responsibility, we can expect a rosy future. The then Dutch State Secretary of the Ministry, Clémence Ross-van Dorp, wrote to the Dutch House of Representatives in the report that accompanied this policy memorandum:

People are in the first place themselves responsible for compensating the loss of resources in later life. Everyone hopes to grow old, so no one can argue that he did not see this coming. For those people who are not capable of taking adequate individual measures for their later life stages, solidarity in society is essential to safeguard the sovereignty of every senior citizen with respect and dignity. [translation]



Stone (1997, pp. 142-143) calls this a ‘story of helplessness and control’:

“It usually runs like this: “The situation is bad. We have always believed that the situation was out of our control, something we had to accept but could not influence. Now, however, let me show that in fact we can control things.””

Story-lines of this kind are a superb illustration of how a discourse coalition works: an actor (a governmental institution, in this case a Ministry) utters a story-line (the peril of a greying population that may be averted by a timely intervention by citizens themselves) which is embedded in discursive activities and actions (description of the measures to be taken, again by citizens themselves). In this way, the actor in the discourse coalition of the *eternally youthful seniors*, as it were, takes the wind out of the sails of the discourse coalition of the *frail needy seniors*.

I have shown that insurers of pension plans, and public authorities, such as ministries, make use of the myth of the eternal youth and utter story-lines like: act now, avoid the hazard of old age by buying our product (such as supplementary pension or health insurance). Such story-lines are embedded in discursive practices (e.g. in commercials and advertising<sup>9</sup>, information brochures, policy memorandums<sup>10</sup>) and actions: the senior citizen is a client who has to be seduced into buying their ‘anti ageing product’ (see also Bonstein, & Theile, 2006; Gullette, 2010).

### **The implications for future empirical research on senior citizens’ accessible information delivery**

*The eternally youthful seniors* and the *frail needy seniors* are merely two sides of the same coin. The looming danger of euphoria and stigmatisation should be avoided by using a mix of images that do justice to the diversity within the older population group (Loos, 2012). Otherwise we risk that a considerable group of senior citizens can not identify anymore with the image presented in the information sources. Let me illustrate this with the help of a concrete example. In a Dutch study into the role of images on websites, an older woman told that she was terribly irritated by all the healthy, rich and radiant couples she came face to face

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example research conducted by Suokannas, 2005; Van Selm, Westerhof, & de Vos; 2007; Williams, Yläne, & Wadleigh, 2007; Yläne, Williams, & Wadleigh, 2009; Christensen & Suokannas, 2010 on the representation of older people in television commercials and advertising.

<sup>10</sup> See also the policy memorandum discussed above, which states that ‘People are in the first place themselves responsible for compensating the loss of resources in later life.’



with on many websites (Loos, 2009). She considered these images an affront to single senior citizens who were unable to spend a lot of money or were in poor health.

Whether in television commercials, advertising, or public information supplied via folders and websites, these images are a dominant feature in our society. In her 2008 essay *Laat me niet alleen - Oud worden in de eenentwintigste eeuw: Hoe gaan we dat doen?* [*Don't leave me – Ageing in the twenty-first century: The question is, how?*], Renate Dorrestein ardently appealed against the ‘pursuit of eternal youth and what may be termed ageless ageing’.<sup>11</sup> The cover of her book superbly depicts the phenomenon of ageless ageing, featuring a vital older couple with a surfboard in the ocean.

Now, there is undoubtedly a group of senior citizens that is attracted by pictures of this kind, but there are also an awful lot who find it impossible to identify with such images. The question is, what happens when organisations use images of this kind only - on their homepage, for example. Healthy senior citizens with money and a partner are likely to have no trouble identifying with such images. The picture of a vital older couple on a scooter at the top of the homepage of the Dutch 50PlusBeurs, the trade show for over-fifties, in 2010 is an excellent example:



Figure 5. 50 plus beurs Vier 't leven [Time to enjoy life]<sup>12</sup>

Under the picture runs the caption: ‘A warm welcome to the site of the world’s biggest event for active plussers’:

‘Time to enjoy life!’ This is the 2010 theme of the 50PlusBeurs. Drop by and discover undreamt possibilities. Learn from the workshops. Look at what the future has to offer you. Get information and advice. Taste, touch, smell and enjoy with all your senses. You’ll be amazed at the range of exhibits. Enjoy the shows, indulge and treat yourself. Visit and compare. Enjoy a truly immersive experience at the 50PlusBeurs! [translation]

<sup>11</sup> Quote on the back cover of the essay.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.50plusbeurs.nl>

While this text is fine for healthy, rich senior citizens with a partner, but older singles in poor health and/or with little money will obviously not identify with the temptations described, and the chance that they will consult a website with such images and text in search of information is likely to be small. This does not promote the accessibility of a website of this kind for that target group. In the Netherlands the size of this group of poor senior citizens should not be underestimated. The website of the Dutch Nationaal Ouderenfonds [National Fund for Senior Citizens] reports that<sup>13</sup>:

In the Netherlands, some 1.4 million people live (in 2005) under the poverty line. This is equal to 8.8% of the population. Of these, 7.2% are aged 65 and up. In total, there are 100,800 people of 65 and over living under the poverty line. (Source: Armoedemonitor SCP 2007<sup>14</sup>) [translation]

Poverty is not the only important aspect in this regard. Van Campen (2011, p. 5) points out that the group of people with functional deficits is increasing rapidly in the Netherlands:

The number of frail older people will increase by about 300.000 persons, from almost 700.000<sup>15</sup> in 2010 to more than 1 million persons in 2030, according to the estimations of the Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau [The Netherlands Institute for Social Research] (Van Campen 2011). (...) We define frailty among older people as a process of the accumulation of physical, mental, and/or social functional deficits. [translation]

This group should also be taken into consideration in the design of information sources. It is important that they have access to the information to which they are entitled in order to continue to be able to function socially. Gregor et al. (2002, p. 152) use the notion of designing for dynamic diversity to make designers of computing systems aware of “the decline in the cognitive, physical and sensory function [of older people]”. This notion could also be used as a guiding principle for future empirical research on the identification with images for senior citizens’ accessible information delivery; see Loos (2012) for an example.

If organisations adopt the principle of ‘dynamic diversity’ in designing information sources, keeping in mind the role played by images in the identification process of senior citizens, we can prevent senior citizens from being excluded from crucial information. In this way, *all* senior citizens will continue to have access to information about the services and products that are relevant for them, and they will continue to be able to participate in full in our society (Loos et al., 2012). “*Full participation* by all members of a group, socially, culturally,

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.ouderenfonds.nl>

<sup>14</sup> See Vrooman et al. (2007).

<sup>15</sup> The Dutch population numbers about 2.5 million persons of 65 years old and older (van Campen, 2011, p. 19).

economically and affectively in that community's affairs is a *sine qua non* for that group to flourish. That includes a commitment to values regarded as central for maintaining social cohesion. That in turn requires full access to semiotic, cultural, social and economic resources." (Kress, 2010, p. 18)

As individual differences between senior citizens increase as they grow older ('aged heterogeneity', Dannefer, 1988), Kasper et al. (2009, p. 10) rightly note that in market studies: " (...) the image portrayed of senior citizens tends to be rather one-dimensional. They are either depicted as sick, sad and stuck looking out the window in pyjamas or typified as active bon vivants, wealthy habitués of Zwitserleven beaches. Both are exaggerated stereotypes that bear little relation to reality. Finding a typology of senior citizens that could yield more than these stereotypes would therefore be well worth the effort." (translation) To avoid such stereotyping, they present a quadrant approach for typifying senior citizens, as follows: underprivileged and without vigour, underprivileged and vigorous, privileged and no vigour, privileged and vigorous. Another example of a typology using segmentation criteria not based on age can be found in the report *Grijzer worden met kleur [Greying with Colour]* by Brouwer et al. (2005). This report distinguishes four types based on life style: the mentor, the recreant, the volunteer and the dependent. It would be worth investigating for public and private organisations whether senior citizens relate to such a typology and, if so, how to tailor the text and images in the information being provided to these different types of senior citizens. It is, moreover, important to examine whether this could enhance the feelings of identification of senior citizens with the way they are being represented, and whether this indeed could make it easier for them to gain access to information.



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