IMAGES OF CARE

RESEARCH SUMMARY REPORT

The Images of Care research project is part of the Advanced Care Research Centre (ACRC). Sitting within the 'Understanding the Person in Context' initiative of the ACRC our research utilises innovative qualitative methods to better understand how individuals and their families experience later life and care.

The ACRC is a multi-disciplinary research programme combining research across fields including medicine and other care professions, engineering, informatics, data and social sciences. Our vision is to improve the quality and sustainability of care provision and to reduce inequalities in care provision in order to enhance the quality of life, dignity and the desired level of independence of people living with multiple conditions in later life.

Thank you!

We want to express our heartfelt gratitude to all the participants and community organisations that were involved in the Images of Care project for their contributions, time, dedication, and patience. Your insights have greatly enriched our research.

We are excited to present this final research summary of the Images of Care project.

Thank you for committing to this project. Your active participation has made our research possible and has played a vital role in the research outcome.

Once again, we sincerely thank you for your support.

"if there was no care in the world, the world would cease to be. It really would... It's just things that [people] do day by day to one another that allow the world to go on operating as it does"

- participant, female, age 75-79

Contents

Research Summary

The aim of the Images of Care project was to gain a deeper understanding of care in later life by researching how care is portrayed in the media and what care looks like in the lives of older adults. It is crucial to examine how care in later life is visually represented, as these visual representations shape societal norms and perceptions surrounding ageing and care. Overall our research asked two main questions: **1. What does care and later life look like in the media? 2. How do older adults visualise care in their daily lives?**

This report will highlight our research findings and show some of the impact our research has had through the development of image guidelines, our exhibitions, and student projects. Below you can find a brief summary of the findings and some of the highlights of the research:

SUMMARY FINDINGS

Media representations of care tend to reinforce narrow stereotypes of ageing as a decline. Care was represented through dependency and burden, reinforcing stereotypes that older adults are passive recipients rather than active participants in care.

Care in daily life is much broader, as shown through participant-generated images, which captured small, everyday acts of care, shared responsibilities, and relationships.

Care is complex, relational, and dynamic, involving both giving and receiving in many different ways throughout our lives. Our findings highlight the emotional, practical, and social dimensions of care that often go unacknowledged.

Older adults feel unseen and misrepresented in the media, leading to a lack of trust in how care and ageing are reported. Participants expressed a desire for images that reflect their lived experiences.

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

1. Analysing over 1,000 media images of care and later life from UK news sources, revealing negative representations of ageing and care.

2. Engaging older adults in analysis by running workshops where participants shared their perspectives on media images and how care should be represented.

3. A participatory photography project, where 15 older adults documented 170 moments of care in their daily lives, providing a rich and diverse visual narrative.

4. Developing image guidelines to help media, policymakers, and organisations make more thoughtful choices when selecting images of care and ageing.

5. Co-creating an exhibition of participants' photographs and stories, reaching diverse audiences internationally.

6. Expanding our impact, by presenting the image guidelines to the Scottish Government, showing the exhibition in Mexico, student-led initiatives at national events, and more!

> **"I think if you're wanting to have a wider image of care, then you can't have just one image."**
>
> - participant, female, age 70-74

Findings

MEDIA IMAGES OF CARE

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we saw an unprecedented amount of media attention on care and older adults, topics which had previously been overlooked in the media. We decided to take advantage of this increased media attention to understand how care is visually represented. We analysed over 1,000 images from UK news articles on care and later life during the pandemic. To help us gain a deeper understanding of these images we conducted workshops with older adults to co-analyse the meanings in these images.

You might think that media images are a minor concern compared to the broader impacts of the pandemic. However, these images are crucial as they shape assumptions, perceptions, and norms around ageing and care. Media images don't just show us important events, they influence how we view these events, the wider society, and our place in the world. For topics like ageing and care, media representations also provide a lens through which we might imagine our future.

Previous research on this topic has focused on negative stereotypes of later life and anti-ageing tropes in the media. However, in our research we show how care is an important factor driving this ageist representation. These images show this relationship between narrow representations of care and restrictive representations of older adults.

FINDINGS

The images presented on these two pages are a selection of the media images that we analysed in this project. Alongside these images, we have presented some of our key findings that have emerged from the data. Several important findings stand out to us such as the significant lack of racial diversity of older adults, that carers were largely female presenting, and older adults were rarely depicted as carers in these images. Most images also portrayed older adults as inactive, sedentary, and more frequently by themselves. There were also very few images of older adults with other older adults, or peers.

older adults were most often pictured doing passive activities of **sitting or lying**
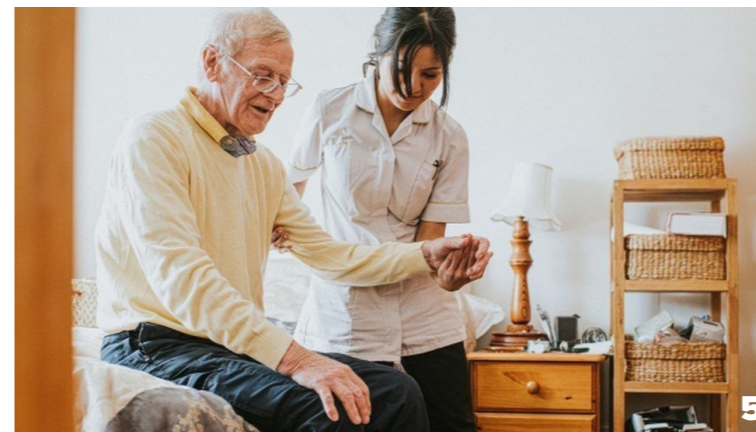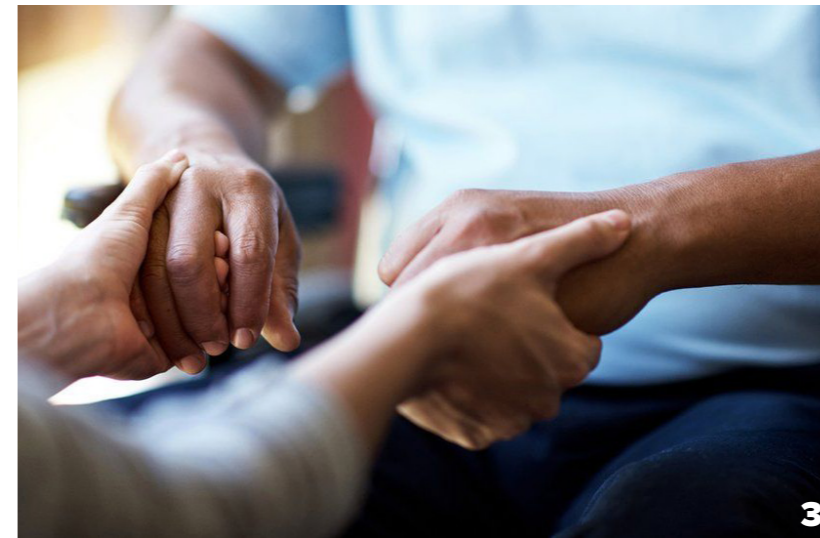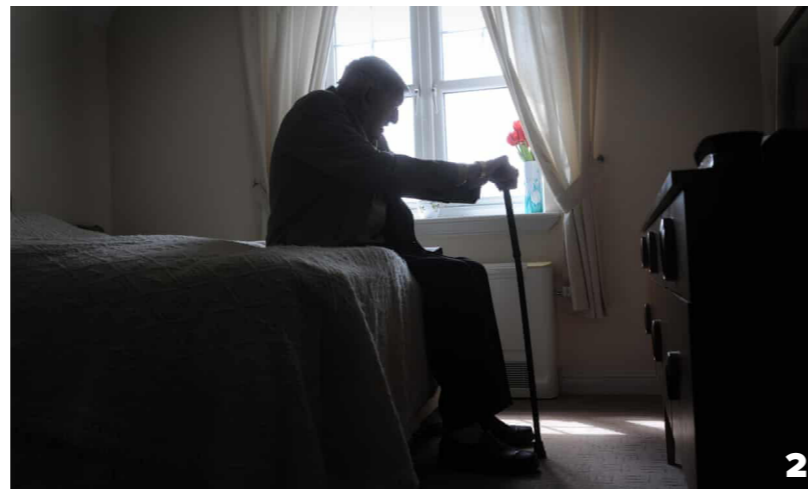
83% of carers were **female**

96% of carers were **formal care** workers or medical professionals

most frequent images in the dataset were of **older adults alone**

only **3%** of older adults were a **person of colour**

Touch and assistance directed at older adults were used to communicate care

68% of images were indoors

carers were young with only **2%** of **carers as older adults**

only **13%** of images with older adults showed them **with another older adult**

"it's almost discriminatory the way in which they opinionise ageing, the ageing process. And that is what gets me, is the discrimination side of things, because you're not allowed to do it for many other people, so why should you be able to do it with the elderly?"

- participant, female, age 60-64

Overall our findings tell us that these media images often depict older adults negatively through problematic stereotypes that equate care with a loss of independence and as a burden. Older adults are rarely shown as active participants in the care relationship, which is often portrayed as formal and transactional. These images create a depressing and negative view of both care and later life, ignoring the meaningful lives older adults can have even when they are in need of care.

While our analysis revealed important details about the types of images used in media representations of care, it didn't explain how these images are being used and how they are understood by viewers. To explore this, we held five workshops where older adults worked with us to discuss and analyse these images.

Studies have found that older adults feel they are represented poorly in the media and internalise these negative messages about ageing. Our workshop findings echoed these feelings. Participants expressed a clear desire for representations that respect their dignity and avoid portraying them as powerless.

Additionally, participants showed how context mattered greatly when interpreting images. An image isn't inherently ageist; it depends on its context. Older adults wanted images (real or staged) that reflect their true experiences and showed a fuller and more diverse picture of life as an older person. Many of the media images were negative, leading participants to express a desire for a broader range of images that not only provided a more balanced representation but actively worked against these negative representations.

Overall participants felt that many of the images did not accurately represent later life and were therefore not truthful. When the images didn't feel truthful it impacted their trust in the information and the media outlet sharing it. This connection between images and credibility was significant.

Workshop participants not only expressed their disappointment with the media but were also enthusiastically motivated to do something that would enact change. This enthusiasm inspired us to think of ways that our research could do more and how our outputs could be more impactful. This led to the development of image guidelines (see page 11 for more information on the image guidelines we created with participants).

IMAGES OF CARE IN DAILY LIFE

Our analysis of media images revealed how care is often narrowly and negatively portrayed. However, our research also asks how older adults themselves see care in their lives. To address this, we conducted a photography project, inviting older adults to document moments of care in their daily lives. This approach allowed us to move beyond media portrayals and delve into the personal, relational, and everyday realities of care. Through this project, we uncovered a more diverse and nuanced understanding of care that challenges stereotypes, celebrates the mundane, and highlights the complexity of care.

This project included 15 participants that took 170 photographs of moments of care in their daily lives. These photographs, alongside the interviews we conducted, showcased a variety of care-related moments and the multiple layers of meaning embedded even in the simplest acts of care. From small intimate gestures to significant life events these images beautifully reflect how care is intricately woven into every aspect of our lives.

Beyond simply gaining a greater understanding of care in later life, this research aims to push back against the invisibility of those with care needs. Topics of care and ageing are often excluded from our visual narratives, and older adults are rarely seen in the media except when being marketed to or spoken about. This photography project helps to make visible the often invisible and overlooked lives of older adults. It allows us to elevate experiences of care in later life as worthy of being seen and understood.

"I don't know what care looks like, but care certainly is a feeling"

- participant, female, age 55-59

FINDINGS

The findings from this project highlight the stark contrast between media portrayals of care and the real, lived experiences of older adults. While media images often depict care in narrow, formal ways, the photographs from this project revealed something much more personal and diverse. Here we present four key findings from this photography project.

1. Importance of the Mundane:

Small, everyday acts of care were central to participants' experiences. These moments like making tea, cleaning, or helping with small tasks may seem ordinary, but they hold deep personal meaning. They revealed that care is not limited to formal caregiving roles, instead the bulk of care
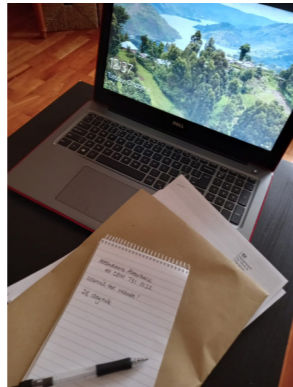
"because we're a couple, it's **teamwork**... we work so it could be managed. So, I can do the washing, and he'll do the ironing because it plays to our strengths... we work together as a team."

"a big part of caring, for me, **feels like admin**, communication, sending emails, text messages, phone calls"

"If I am able to **care for others**, it's because I've been cared for."

"my images probably feel more impersonal... or mundane. Certainly buses and dishes and boilers are not very exciting or emotive at all. But some of the images for me are emotive."

- participant, female, age 50-54

includes simple, daily actions that make a significant difference in someone's life. These everyday acts of care are often overlooked in media portrayals but were anything but insignificant. Participants shared powerful stories about importance of these moments, showing that care is truly woven into the fabric of daily life.

2. Complexity of Care:

Care is a complex and multifaceted process that varies greatly between individuals and across different situations. Participants took photographs that highlighted the complex networks of care they create in their lives, whether it's caring for others or being cared for themselves. This complexity often changes over time and is highly personal. But, in simplified media images, this complexity is difficult to communicate and often goes unrecognised in public conversations about care. Collectively the images that participants took revealed complex networks of care along with a complexity in the often contradictory meanings of care being simultaneously routine and mundane, yet deeply meaningful and often challenging.

3. Care as Relational:

Through the photos, participants emphasised that care is not unidirectional. Care does not just go in one direction from care giver to receiver. Instead, care is a mutual, relational process where we are all simultaneously care givers and receivers to different degrees and in different ways throughout our lives. Care is intricately tied to the relationships around us, both dependent on them and building them. Community, family, and friends showed up in these images as important moments of care. This speaks to the need for media and policymakers to recognise that care happens within relationships, that relationships are built through care activities, and what care means to a person is shaped by the relationships in their lives.

4. A New Definition of Care:

The photography project had participants question what care meant in their daily lives. In doing this, participants began to broaden their definitions to include not just formal care but also the everyday, emotional, complex, and relational aspects of care. These participant-generated images starkly contrasted with media representations of care. They reflected the unpaid and often overlooked work involved in care and allowed participants to define themselves beyond their age or care needs. The images subconsciously generated alternatives to the power imbalances often inherent in care and emphasised the importance of care for full participation in society.

This broader understanding of care challenges conventional definitions of care. If care is complex, deeply personal, and woven into daily life, it leads us to question how care systems and policies can begin to reflect this broad definition of care. By shifting away from transactional views of care and centring the person, care systems could better meet people's needs. It invites us to rethink how we value and represent care, both in media and in the structures that support it. Images of moments of care taken for this project were the starting point of the Images of Care exhibition on page 15.

"I think we do have a duty of care to ourselves, our communities, our environment, our planet Earth."

- participant, female, age 55-59

Image Guidelines

Out of the findings from our research, we co-created image guidelines aimed at improving the representation of care and later life. These guidelines were developed based on both our media findings and through collaborative workshops with research participants. They encourage thoughtful reflection on how to create and use images of both older adults and those with care needs. The guidelines provide practical advice for images that avoid harmful stereotypes, encourage inclusivity, and portray a more balanced view of care that highlights its diversity and complexity.

The creation of the image guidelines was a collaborative process that involved multiple stages of development and refinement. We began by writing an initial draft based on the research findings from our media analysis (page 4) and findings from the photography project where older adults captured moments of care in their daily life (page 7). We then invited back participants from our media workshops to help us refine these drafts, offering valuable feedback on both the content and design. Their perspectives ensured that the guidelines were accessible, relevant, and actionable.

WHY GUIDELINES?

During our research, participants expressed deep disappointment in how older adults were portrayed in the media. Many felt unseen or misrepresented and wanted to take action. They inspired us to find ways for our work to have a broader societal impact. While many brilliant ideas emerged from these discussions, we recognised that our research lent itself particularly well to creating a more practical guide to images of care and later life. This guide is intended not only for media professionals but also anyone choosing or using images such as community organisations, policymakers, or educators.

The guidelines are useful in addressing topics around the (in)visibility of older adults and those with care needs in media. They work towards promoting a more balanced and inclusive representation that encourages people to include older adults in discussions beyond ageing or care, helping to create a richer and more diverse visual landscape.

CONTENT OF THE GUIDELINES

The guidelines offer readers a clear framework for working with images of care in later life including the following sections:

Top 10 Tips:

Practical advice, such as involving older adults or those with care needs in decision-making, emphasising the diversity of later life, and depicting care as reciprocal.

Choosing and Using Images:

Guidance on sourcing images, obtaining image consent, and addressing some common ethical issues when reproducing images.

Image Content:

Suggestions for portraying older adults, carers, and those in need of care in a balanced and realistic way alongside examples of images to avoid and alternative images to consider. This includes avoiding overly negative portrayals, choosing diverse and inclusive settings beyond medical or home environments, and highlighting the full range of experiences in later life, across race, gender, ability, and more.

scan the code to download the guidelines

GUIDELINES IMPACT

The guidelines have already been shared internationally within academia, third sector organisations, and others. We have met with organisations like Getty Images, Age Scotland, and the Scottish Government, where the guidelines were well-received and sparked discussions about improving image use. We have distributed 300 physical copies of these guidelines to groups ranging from photography students to Alzheimer's researchers.

While we are proud of the impact we have made, our goal is to further expand their impact by engaging with even more organisations, schools, charities, and other stakeholders. We are committed to ensuring that these guidelines are widely adopted by people making decisions about representation. By doing this, we hope to foster a more inclusive and balanced portrayal of care and later life. You can access a copy of the guidelines online at https://edin.ac/459Bliy or by scanning the QR code provided on this page.

> **"People see care as in wheelchairs and... disabilities. That's how people see care. People don't see care in the day to day things that people do."**
>
> - participant, female, age 60-64

Exhibition

The Images of Care exhibition was co-created from our research on care in everyday life (page 7). Developed in collaboration with six participants from our photography project, the exhibition features all 170 photographs captured by older adults during the project. The images are paired with text written by the participants and excerpts from their interviews which together offer a nuanced view of care that is often missing from mainstream media. The exhibition challenges stereotypical notions of care as transactional, in medical settings, and dehumanising. Instead, these images highlight the emotional, relational, and everyday aspects of care that often go unnoticed. Viewers are invited to see care through the eyes of older adults and to reflect on their own experiences of care.

Our research highlighted how older adults are often portrayed through negative stereotypes, with care depicted as a burden or a problem. To offer a more balanced narrative, we conducted a participatory photography project where 15 older adults captured moments of care in their daily lives (see more on page 7).

After completing the initial analysis, we decided to turn these images into an exhibition. Six participants from the photography project returned to co-created the exhibition alongside the research team, ensuring that their experiences and voices were central to the exhibition.

Through the collaborative design process alongside the participants, it became clear that it was important for them that the exhibition show their perspective. They wanted the exhibition to "represent real people and situations" with one participant stating that, "Telling personal stories would make us proud."

> *"It made me reflect on the gap between media representations of ageing and care, and how I've experienced care and ageing in my own life. It also made me recontextualise the daily and mundane actions that I take for other people, and imagine those as care"*
>
> - exhibition visitor feedback

Their desire to be seen and heard shaped the exhibition's direction, turning it into an opportunity for visibility and representation.

The exhibition therefore tells the stories of four participants, with their own words accompanying their images. To ensure that every participant was represented, we also included a large collage of all the photographs taken during the project, along with quotes from participants reflecting a wide range of experiences. Adding an element of participation and reflection, the exhibition features an interactive panel where viewers can contribute by drawing examples of care in their own lives.

WHAT'S NEXT?

While the exhibition's reach has already exceeded what we had imagined, our work doesn't stop here. We are also exploring opportunities to create an online version of the exhibition, expanding its reach and making it accessible beyond the project.

The exhibition has shown us that care is a topic that resonates deeply with all of us. Moving forward, we aim to continue making these stories visible, encouraging reflection, and inspiring action around how all of us think about care and later life.

"Made me think of care in my own life and made me emotional about the care I've both received and given to others in my life. Also, made me think about the future and how I want to keep caring and being cared for and how I can be an ambassador of that in my everyday life and surroundings and pass it on to my child"

- exhibition visitor feedback

EXHIBITION REACH

The Images of Care exhibition has been shared both nationally and internationally, reaching diverse audiences in a range of settings. It has been featured at festivals such as the Impact Festival, the Festival of Social Sciences, and the Being Human Festival. At the University of Edinburgh, it was displayed during Doors Open Day, inaugural lectures, and the ACRC Symposium. Internationally, the exhibition was projected at the International Visual Sociology Conference in Mexico, extending its reach beyond the UK.

The exhibition has been presented to third sector organisations and written about in online blogs. It has also been presented in policy spaces, including in presentations to the Scottish Government, where it contributed to discussions about care and representation in media. The exhibition's ability to connect with different audiences has been one of its strengths. Whether viewed at academic events, public festivals, or policy meetings, it has sparked meaningful conversations about care, ageing, and visibility.

EXHIBITION IMPACT

The exhibition has reached hundreds of people, many of whom spent a considerable time engaging with the images and stories. It has consistently challenged people to think differently about care in their own lives and in society. Visitors have described feeling deeply moved, often reflecting on their personal experiences of both giving and receiving care. Feedback from visitors has been overwhelmingly positive with survey respondents from visitors agreeing that the exhibition offered a unique perspective compared to typical media representations. Most even claimed that it changed how they think about care and ageing.
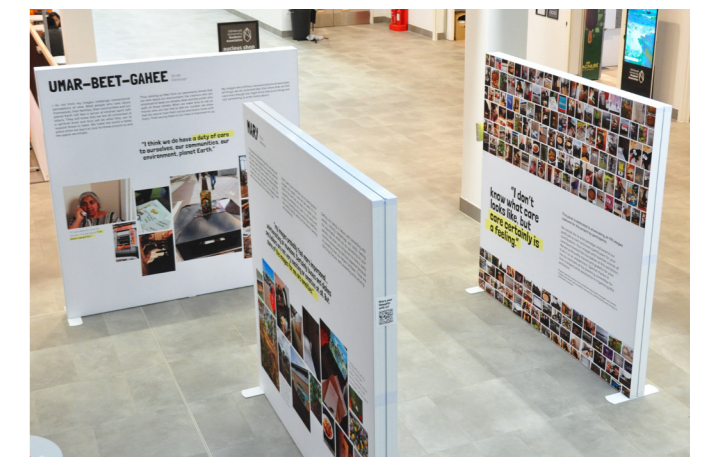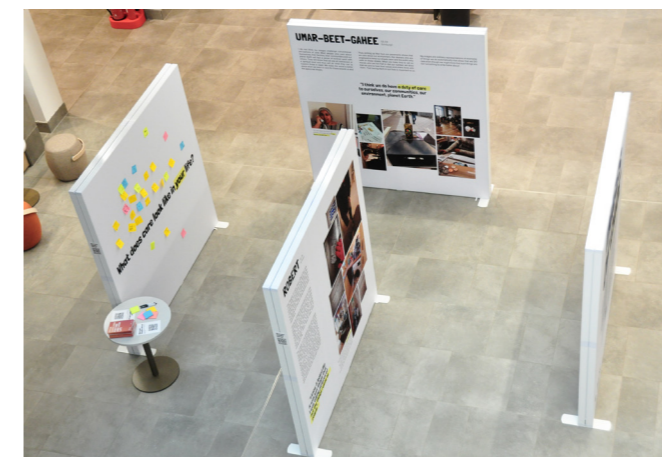
> **"I have seen some images of people being cared for in a way that I would like to be cared for, but very few, actually. So I'm hoping there's a sea change in the way that they care for adults before I need it."**
>
> - participant, female, age 65-69

Student Projects

DIVERSITY IN IMAGES OF CARE

The Images of Care project found that news media images lacked significant diversity across multiple dimensions reflecting trends found in previous research. The overall poor media representation of older adults has caused many organisations to create age-friendly image databases that aim to provide positive and more diverse images of later life. But are age-friendly image databases more diverse? ACRC Academy PhD student Kayla Ostrishko conducted a summer research project exploring diversity in positive ageing image banks.

The project analysed 233 images from a popular age positive image bank applying a coding framework adapted from the Images of Care research. In addition to analysing the images, Kayla attended two of the Images of Care media workshops gathering reflections on a selection of the images from participants and adding qualitative insights to her analysis.

The findings revealed that the age positive image data base contained more diverse representations in some respects such as a greater range of activities and locations. Compared to the news media, there were more images outside of the home and in community or social settings. However, certain gaps still persisted. In particular, images of older adults with darker skin tones were significantly underrepresented, making up just 6.8% of the dataset. Additionally, representations of care, those with care needs, and the oldest age groups of older adults were largely absent. This suggests that care continues to be seen as incompatible with positive ageing or contrary to age-friendly narratives. The study also identified gendered patterns in

Age-friendly image databases expand the narrative of ageing by depicting older adults in everyday activities, such as socialising in cafés, staying active outdoors, or using technology. However, gaps remain with care often absent in the images. Racial diversity was still limited especially with darker skin tones.

Gendered patterns also persisted in the dataset, with men more frequently shown in outdoor, active settings and women more indoors.

location-based representations, with men more frequently shown outdoors and women more often indoors.

The qualitative insights from the workshops highlighted a complex relationship between older adults and diversity in images of ageing. Participants expressed a strong desire for more positive media representations in relation to the overwhelming negativity they encounter in news media images. While the positive image database does provide more positive images what mattered most was whether the image accurately reflected their context and their real-life experiences. Discussions on racial diversity revealed that racial representation in ageing imagery was often tokenistic, with one participant raising concerns about the absence of racialised older adults. A striking moment emerged when a participant questioned why receiving care should be seen as negative, challenging the ingrained stigma surrounding care and dependency.

These findings reinforce the need for a more expansive and inclusive approach to representing ageing and care, one that does not erase the presence of care from positive portrayals of later life. This student-led research contributed valuable insights to ongoing discussions about representation of age and care, underscoring the importance of context, diversity, and visibility in shaping public perceptions of ageing and care.

AI GENERATED IMAGES OF CARE

By Melody (Zixuan) Wang

ACRC Academy PhD Student Melody (Zixuan) Wang further added to the Images of Care research by conducting a summer research project exploring how care is represented in AI-generated images. She then turned the project into an exhibition and event at the Festival of Social Sciences and Being Human Festival.

Artificial intelligence (AI) has been developed to be able to generate new high-quality images. Known as text-to-image (T2I) generative AI tools, these enable users to create an image from textual descriptions. The AI-generated images these tools create are increasingly produced and used across a broad range of fields.

This research investigated how care is represented in AI images by analysing more than a hundred "photos of care". Using one of the mainstream T2I tools, Midjourney, the findings revealed that AI-generated images are reproducing stereotypical, reductive, and inaccurate representations of care by default. The images often conflate care with old age and women, they reduce care to medical care and a one-to-one relationship, and visualise care via hands and touch, neglecting the broad spectrum of care practices in everyday life.

Based on these findings, the research further tested the potential of mitigating the biases and creating alternative images of care by carefully crafting the prompt (a process called "prompt engineering"). The findings indicate that while prompt engineering might mitigate certain biases, AI still struggles to accurately portray care relations, requiring specialised skills, knowledge, and an ongoing reflexive approach to generate meaningful outputs. The research concluded by proposing a reflexive prompting framework, and discussing the implications for future T2I evaluation, design, and usage.

Overall, the research aims to raise awareness of the potential risks posed by generative AI tools in perpetuating societal stereotypes and calls for more critical and creative use of these tools to challenge hegemonic cultural norms.

EXHIBITION & IMPACT

The findings of this research were designed into an exhibition, which, together with the Images of Care exhibition, formed the "Can AI Represent Care?" exhibition, workshop, and sharing event at Inspace in November

2024. The events were featured in both the Festival of Social Science and the Being Human Festival.

The exhibition and the associated events were well-received, drawing over 150 attendees in total. The audience represented a wide age range, from under 16 to over 75. The events effectively brought together members of the public, policymakers, and researchers from a broad array of disciplines all within and beyond the university.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

While the research and exhibition have already far exceeded the expectation for a student summer project, we hope to create lasting impact by exploring opportunities to:

1. publish the research findings;
2. translate the research and exhibition content into educational materials and guidelines for public use;
3. create an online version of the exhibition;
4. collaborate with policy makers and tech companies to turn the research findings into policies and product design.

With our life increasingly intertwined with technology, it is crucial to reflect on how these technical tools, such as Midjourney, are built, used, and the influence they may have on shaping societal views on care and later life.

Melody's doctoral research will continue working on the intersection of care and technology, studying the role of technologies, especially AI-enabled and data-driven ones, in older adults' everyday care practices using participatory approaches.