

ORIGINAL RESEARCH: EMPIRICAL RESEARCH –  
QUALITATIVE

## Representation of age and ageing identities in popular music texts

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Cambridge, UKKELLY J., WATSON R., PANKRATOVA M. & PEDZENI A.-M. (2016) Representation of age and ageing identities in popular music texts. *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 00(0), 000–000. doi: 10.1111/jan.12916**Abstract****Aims.** To critically examine the representation of ageing identities in popular music texts.**Background.** Having a positive outlook provides both short-term benefits and has been proven to help people live longer. Music is capable of conveying positive and negative emotion towards ageing, however, only a limited number of unpublished studies exist on how age and ageing is represented in popular music.**Design.** Qualitative discourse analysis.**Methods.** In July 2014, a search without time limits was completed of the music lyrics databases, *The Music Lyric Database*, *Songfacts*, *The Macronium* and *Absolute lyrics* for English language music texts relating to age and ageing.**Results.** Findings revealed ( $N = 76$ ) relevant music texts offering up negative and positive discourses of age and ageing, with negative predominating. Identities of age and ageing were categorized as ‘contented and celebrated aged’, ‘pitiful and petulant pensioners’ and ‘frail and flagging old folks’.**Conclusion.** From this study, it is evident that mainly negative representations of age and ageing are available in popular music texts. It is imagined that the negative representations of age and ageing can be dispiriting, confidence and esteem lowering for older people and their potential impact might be considered carefully by artists. However, while evidence exists that negative and positive emotions can influence health and well-being, further qualitative research is needed to explore what impact precisely the negative texts have on those experiencing ageing.**Keywords:** age, ageing, discourse analysis, identity, nurse, nursing, popular music**Introduction**

With significant achievements in life expectancy and the number of people aged 65 or older predicted to increase

from an anticipated 524 million in 2010 to nearly 1.5 billion in 2050 (WHO, 2011), ageing is a matter of global and national importance. Ageing research, however has tended to focus on age related disease at the expense of neglecting examination of the social and cultural influences on the ageing experience. Important aspects, social and cul-

#### Why is this research or review needed?

- As popular music is a powerful mass medium which has both positive and negative effects on peoples' emotions, and in turn on peoples' health and well-being, it is useful with increasing longevity to know how age and ageing is represented in popular music.

#### What are the key findings?

- While age and ageing is represented both negatively and positively in popular music, negative representations predominate.
- Positive age and ageing identities revealed in this study included 'contented and celebrated aged' and negative identities of 'pitiful and petulant pensioners' and 'frail and flagging old folks'.

#### How should the findings be used to influence policy/practice/research/education?

- The findings suggest that popular music texts predominate and that this may have a detrimental impact on the ageing experience and have negative health sequelae.
- Most of the music texts were generated from a young person's perspective and their imaginings of old age.
- Future efforts could include promotion of older people to create music texts from an older person's perspective.

tural systems shape age perception and age self-perception or age identity, by altering the experience of chronological age. Social philosopher Mead (1934) illustrated this in the assertion that 'we are more or less unconsciously seeing ourselves as others see us' and [...] 'addressing ourselves as others address us' p. 25. Various social and cultural media offer meanings of the ageing experience. This study explores ageing identities in the medium of popular music.

## Background

Ageing can be defined as 'a process whereby people accumulate years and progressively experience changes to biological, social and psychological functioning as they move through different phases of the life course' (Phillips *et al.* 2010, p. 12). Although changes in individual identity are attributed to age and physical proficiency as part of the ageing process (Chaney 1995), it seems that society is in control of the social aspect of ageing and assigns the ageing to pre-defined acceptable social experiences and restricts access to other experiences. Moreover, it allocates certain expectations about behaviour in accordance with age identity (Hockey & James 2003). Historically, ageing has been perceived as an

undesirable phenomenon with change to existence that one previously enjoyed to one where older people are perceived as frail idle beings with poor health and in need of support (Westerhof & Tulle 2007, Horton *et al.* 2008). Wright (2002) reported that people live in fear of getting old, however, a conflicting discourse is mooted that older people usually do not conform to the public identity construction of old age or identify themselves as old (Rozario & Derienzis 2009) and appear generally satisfied with their own ageing (Kotter-Gruhn *et al.* 2009). Phelan (2011) explored elements, which influence public perceptions of older people and ageing. The gender of the perceiver and of the older person, age, level of knowledge and understanding, nature and quality of contact with older people, cultural influences, modernization, and the media all play important parts in how ageing is positively or negatively perceived. Media portrayal is a particularly powerful instrument in influencing older peoples' outlook and philosophy towards ageing and old people. Identities are socially constructed through public discourse (Kelly *et al.* 2012). Public discourse such as media images of old age regulates the way older people see themselves and therefore negative or positive labels of ageing affect the personal awareness of their own ageing process (Dahmen & Cozma 2009). Published studies to date have revealed discursive constructions of age and ageing identities in terms of health and social frailty, dependency and liability (Harbison & Morrow 1998, Ainsworth & Hardy 2007). Discourses of age and ageing in mass media are no different where in studies of television, older people are underrepresented, particularly females (Nussbaum & Coupland 1995, Robinson & Skill 1995, Bonnesen & Burgess 2004).

Similar themes are available in print media studies where ageing issues seldom receive attention in newspapers and magazines and older people are notably absent from advertisements (Murphy 2004, Martin *et al.* 2009, Williams *et al.* 2010). Where older people are represented in print media, they are positioned predominantly as a health risk requiring management (Ylanne 2012), typically dependent and outside of society (Fealy *et al.* 2012). While a study in the US of online discourses revealed some positive ageing identity themes, health-related messages remain a dominant discourse (Lin *et al.* 2004). Interestingly, the mass medium of popular music has been explored to identify how age and ageing is represented, however, to date only unpublished studies have been located (Abrahamsson 2011, Rini & Agustinus 2011).

## Popular music

Music as a medium is worthy of attention as it is an essential part of life in almost every society, more recently

because, music can be played virtually anywhere due to advances in technology (Ahmadi 2011). While music can be manipulative, influencing negative behaviours and tendencies, for example, violent music can produce aggressive thoughts and behaviours in children and teenagers and suicidal themes can nurture suicidal tendencies, several authors suggest, however, that when music is used in a therapeutic relationship or an individual's private life, it can enhance existing reserves and add positively to the perception of well-being, quality of life and mental health (DeNora 2007, Ruud 2008, Bonde *et al.* 2013). MacDonald *et al.* (2013) provide examples of these benefits, specifically in individuals with Autistic spectrum disorder it can support and improve communication. When played together, music is capable of decreasing potential for conflict and enhancing vitality. A social activity, it can alleviate social isolation, a hazard for morbidity and mortality. Music has shown success in increasing tolerance to and distraction from pain, in reducing anxiety and in people with dementia in stimulating memory. In other age-related conditions, it has rehabilitative effects in stroke recovery and in enhancing movement in individuals with Parkinson's disease. According to MacDonald *et al.* (2002), there is no doubt that music also has a significant role to play in our continuously changing and socially negotiated identities.

Music is very important in the lives of older people because it is through music that they come to know and reflect on their own personhood and as such music is a symbolic representation of 'who' the participants are and how they would like to be perceived by others (Hays & Minichiello 2005). Music can play an active role in the construction of people's personal and social lives (DeNora 2000) and can influence personal and social identity (Crozier 1997). Music is capable of conveying positive and negative emotion towards ageing. Having a positive outlook provides both short-term benefits and has been proven to help people live longer. Previous research found that just feeling positive about getting older can add as much as seven years to life. Negative emotions like bitterness and hostility are connected to poor health overall (Wrosch & Renand 2011), especially cardiac health (Johnson 2014). Popular music is a powerful instrument in itself as it is a vehicle for the establishment of social norms, introducing new concepts and helping individuals to identify themselves across the spaces. Popular music is vital to the cultural learning process and is a mechanism by which differences within cultures can be highlighted (Leyshon 2004). As the name suggests, popular music is assured of an audience. 'Popular' indicates something that appeals to people and is accepted by the general public (Shuker 2012). Vocals are

the leading force of popular music. Music is often structured to fit lyrics. Types of vocals include screaming singing, rapping and the spoken word. 'Pop' music usually refers to a specific music genre, whereas popular music is just music that is universally listened to (Shuker 2012). Popular music, unlike for example, art music is conceived for mass distribution and often sociocultural heterogeneous groups of listener. Despite the excellent medium which popular music text offers for exploration of the representation of age and ageing identities, studies in this important area are very sparse.

## The study

### Aim

The aim of this study was to critically explore the representation of ageing identities in popular music texts.

### Design

A qualitative approach to discourse analysis was utilized for this study as an appropriate method for examining the language that depicts the identity for older people in popular song lyrics or texts. Discourse analysis draws on a wide range of textual sources including conversations, interviews, diaries and publications, through to photographs, images and music (Fairclough 1992). The purpose of discourse analysis is to reveal intentions, values and the sense during and after the interaction between individuals, which can have a spoken, non-verbal or written form, so as to increase the understanding of how through language people are forming the world around them (Parahoo 2006). Specifically, empirical discourse analysis was used as it seeks to identify broad themes and functions of language in action using genre analysis or the study of recurrent patterns. Representing a public discourse about the identity of older people constructed in popular song lyrics, songs were not interpreted as a combination of music and lyrics, but only the textual language was analysed and the patterns across the texts.

### Sample

A heterogeneous sample of popular music lyrics archived in online music lyric databases was selected using a purposeful sampling strategy. To minimize potential for bias several databases with global reach was favoured. The online databases were chosen on the basis of their popularity gauged using metrics calculated by the website analytics company –

*Alexa*. The inclusion criteria were that the lyrics had to be based on music lyrics, the lyrics had to be available in English language texts and all had to relate to the phenomenon of age or ageing. Music pieces ranging from energetic to calm and soothing pieces were included. There were no time limits imposed on the lyric database search. In keeping with the notion of popular music as being not merely confined to pop music, the sample encompassed all music genres appealing to a wide taste and mass audience. The only selection exclusion criteria were foreign language music lyrics and instrumental pieces of music.

### Data collection

In July 2014, a search was completed across a range of music lyric websites, specifically, The Music Lyric Database, Songfacts, The Macronium and Absolute lyrics. These music lyric databases were chosen on the basis of the best rated Internet collection of music lyrics. A search of these databases was conducted using the search words 'age', 'aging', 'old' and 'older'. We had considered using additional search terms such as slang words related to old age, for example 'geezer' or 'pop'. We also explored the use of search words associated with the perceived roles of older people, for example 'retirement' or 'grandparents'. We concluded that such slang words were more likely to be associated with people in the age range of 40s to 50s and that adults could be in retirement and be grandparents before the age of 65. The combined search using the above mentioned search terms yielded a total of ( $N = 1, 231$ ) hits.

### Ethical considerations

The local institutional ethics committee was consulted, seeking advice on any possible ethical challenges in this study. As all materials used in the study were already available in the public domain and therefore posed no ethical issues, a full ethical review was deemed not necessary.

### Data analysis

Micro and macro analysis of the data was completed during the period May to August 2014 by the first and second researchers (JK, RW), both ranging in ages to avoid any bias, that is respectively 48 and 60 years old. This was achieved in the first instance by recording of the retrieved lyric titles on an MS EXCEL sheet and transcription of lyrics deemed to be relevant. Transcriptions were then iteratively analysed. The analysis was structured to permit categories and major themes and subthemes to emerge from the

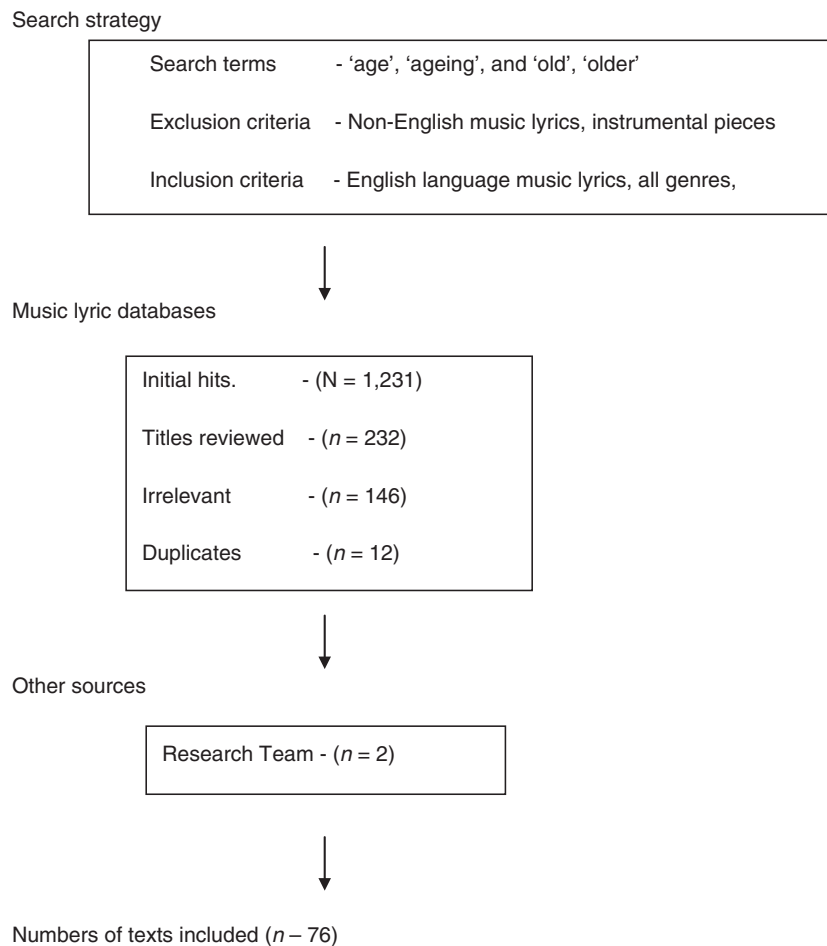
data. Major themes were identified when the same item was mentioned more than at least twice throughout the data. In the analysis of the texts, we were interested in the presence of latent meanings of the popular music texts. We acknowledged the possibility that other researchers may interpret the data differently. To minimize bias we sought to confirm our analysis through publicly available latent meanings of the lyrics.

### Rigour

Strategies to enhance trustworthiness included triangulation of the results of the independent reviews about inclusion of lyrics and the identification of themes and subthemes (Lincoln & Guba 1985). Reliability of the data was ensured by the involvement of two teams of researchers, one who conducted the search, and one who independently identified themes and subthemes (Lincoln & Guba 1985). The researchers communicated regularly to confirm the identified categories and worked together to resolve any inconsistencies.

### Findings

Texts ( $N = 232$ ) were retrieved and reviewed for eligibility for inclusion in the study. Irrelevant ( $N = 146$ ) and duplicate ( $N = 12$ ) texts were discarded. From their knowledge of music lyrics and the phenomenon of age and ageing, the research team also added ( $N = 2$ ) further relevant music lyrics texts. Following this exercise (Figure 1), ( $N = 76$ ) popular songs relating to phenomenon of age and ageing were chosen for depth analysis. From the texts compiled on an MS Excel spread sheet, data were extracted which included year and country of release of the song together with the genre of music and the recording artist. The study sample comprised of music lyrics recorded in the 1930s to the present day (Table 1). With the exception of the 1930s where only one music lyric was found and none in the 1950s, the average number of music lyrics released in each decade was approximately nine, however a stark increase was noted in the 2000s, where 27 relevant texts were identified, indicating an increase in interest in the issue of age and ageing. The texts originated mainly from the USA (55%), followed by the UK (32%), with the remaining texts originating between 1-3% each from Canada, Ireland, Sweden, Germany and Wales. A variety of music genres were evident in the sample, including, Country, Dance, Electronic, Folk, Lounge, Jazz, Metal, new wave, Pop, Rhythm and Blues, Rock, Soul and Soundtrack. The most common genre was Rock (40%) followed by Pop at (27%) with the



**Figure 1** Music lyric search strategy and result.

remaining genres less well represented each at between 1-5. In these texts, comprising a mixture of energetic and soothing pieces, two broad categories were established, namely positive and negative representations of age and ageing. There were more music lyrics in the negative category ( $N = 55$ ) than in the positive ( $N = 21$ ) category. Themes which emerged from the positive category related to expressions of contentedness and esteem and the negative themes revealed concerns with how age and ageing was viewed by society, the negative feelings age and ageing evoked and the adverse changes which were thought to inevitably accompany age and ageing (Figure 2).

### Contented and celebrated aged

The positive theme of contentedness was evident in the texts and while there were expressions of loss of innocence with ageing, it nevertheless brought a sense of contentment and clarity about life as evident in Dusty Springfield's

*Goin' Back* 'I think I'm goin' back to the things I learned so well in my youth. I think I'm returning to those days when I was young enough To know the truth. Now there are no games to only pass the time No more colouring books No Christmas bells to chime. But thinking young and growing older is no sin and I can play the game of life to win'. The texts also revealed messages that people in old age were content to age happily at home, while others advocated resisting any inclination to change their outlook on life and were content to remain active, agile and positive as evident from Bob Dylan's *Forever Young* 'May your hands always be busy. May your feet always be swift. May you have a strong foundation, when the winds of changes shift. May your heart always be joyful. And may your song always be sung. May you stay forever young'. The positive theme of esteem was the most frequently occurring message in the music lyrics. The main thrust of this theme was that people felt comfortable with increasing age. One of the main reasons for this it seems

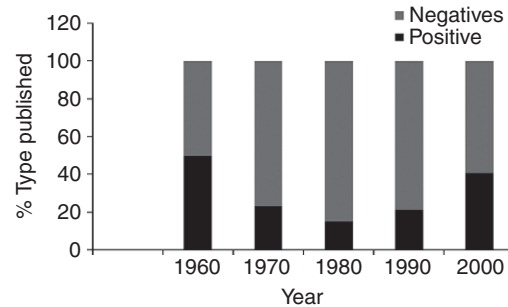
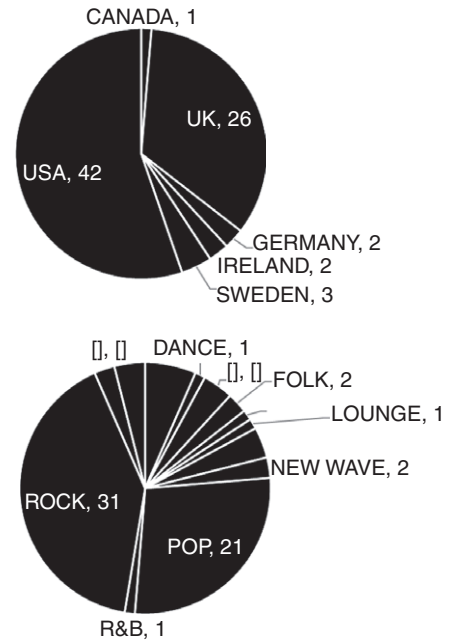
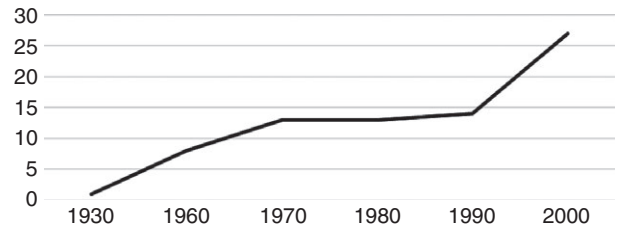
**Table 1** Categories, themes and subthemes.

Negative (55)	Viewed as (7)	Pitiful	
		Boring	
		Ugly	
		Crabbit	
		Vulnerable	
		Feelings (32)	Fear
			Ignored
	Loneliness & Loss		
	Inevitable		
	Pessimism		
	Unwanted		
	Resistance		
	Changes (17)		Frail
			Confusing
			Death
		Restricted	
		Loss	
Problem			
Positive (21)		Contentedness (8)	Optimism
			Admired
			Respect
			Wisdom
	Esteem (12)	Reminiscence	
		Otherness	

was the elevated esteem, respect and admiration old age conferred on them as result of extensive life experiences as contained in Sophie Tucker *Life begins at Forty* ‘You see the sweetest things in life grow sweeter as the years roll on Like the sweetest smoke is from a mellow, broken and old pipe And the sweetest tasting peach is one that’s mature, round and ripe’. In these selected texts, there was a welcomed sense of contentment and clarity about life which was not available prior to old age. It was evident from the music lyrics that people felt comfortable ageing, engaged in activities or just ageing happily at home. There were pronounced expressions of optimism about ageing in the light of the positive esteem maturity granted.

**Pitiful and petulant pensioners**

Apparent in the texts was a counter discourse offering negative themes relating to messages on how society views age and ageing. In many instances, older people were viewed by society as self-pitying and lacking in self-esteem as evident in Kris Kristofferson’s *Feeling Mortal* ‘Wide awake and feeling mortal At this moment in the dream That old man there in the mirror And my shaky self-esteem Here today and gone tomorrow. That’s the way it’s got to be’. It was also discoverable in the texts that old age identity was asso-



**Figure 2** Number of age-related song lyrics per year, country and genre

ciated with embarrassing physical decline and unattractiveness and that old age was associated with being unlovable as evidenced by The Beatles *When I’m Sixty-four* ‘When I get older losing my hair many years from now will you still be sending me a valentine birthday greeting, bottle of wine If I’d been out till quarter to three would you lock the door Will you still need me Will you still feed me When I’m sixty-four’. Another text suggested old age was associated with pitifulness in romantic situations as evidenced by Leonard Cohen’s *Because Of* ‘Women have been exceptionally kind to my old age. They make a secret place In their busy



lives And they take me there. They become naked In their different ways and they say, “Look at me, Leonard Look at me one last time.” Then they bend over the bed And cover me up Like a baby that is shivering’. Older people were designated by society as being crabbit or petulant as evidenced by Green Day *The Grouch* ‘I was a young boy that had big plans. Now I’m just another shooty old man. I don’t have fun and I hate everything. The world owes me, so freak you. Glory days don’t mean shoot to me. I drank a six pack of apathy. Life’s a bitch and so am I’.

### Frail and flagging old folks

Evident in the negatively themed texts was the subject of change. In relation to old age, change was identified as unenjoyable, mainly because old age was revealed to be associated with uncertainty as evident in Colbie Caillat *Older* ‘Over my shoulder, its tough getting older Yeah, yeah. . . . . Seems like nothing is black and white anymore Shades of grey and I feel a weight over my shoulder it’s tough getting older’. Old age and ageing was identified as being associated with physical decline. Physical decline included attributes of increasing loss of physical function, disability and frailty and not being able to participate in social activities as this may cause illness and even death. With ageing, therefore change was associated with restrictions as evidenced by Fred Wilcock’s *Oldest Swinger in Town* ‘When you walk into a disco and they offer you a seat You’re the oldest swinger in town You prefer a pint of shandy to Bacardi and Coke The sounds are too loud and there’s too much smoke You’d like another dance but you’re afraid you’ll get a stroke’. The feelings evoked in the negative themes in terms of change were associated with both the fear of getting old and especially feelings of loneliness while ageing as evidenced by Celion Dion *All By Myself* ‘When I was young I never needed anyone And making love was just for fun Those days are gone Livin’ alone I think of all the friends I’ve known When I dial the telephone Nobody’s home All by myself’. Other messages offered up in the texts were feelings of inevitability around ageing meaning this was something that was out of their control. These feelings contributed to the creation of a pessimistic identity for older people as evidenced by Death Cab for Cutie’s *No Sunlight* ‘With every year that came to pass More clouds appear until the sky went black And now there’s No sunlight, You disappeared with the same speed The idealistic things I believed The optimist died inside of me No sunlight’. In this category of texts, older people felt ignored, unwanted and alienated, which combined, culminated in a sense of otherness as evidenced in Dexy’s Mid-

night Runners *Old* ‘Old have memories to keep all cold away. What is that you say? No sense to dwell. Old, are you ridiculed and fumed away, No attention paid? I thought as much’. The texts revealed how people coped with old age and the ageing process through reminiscence, one where people seen to wistfully lament the romantic idealism of their youthful past as evidenced by Mary Hopkins *Those Were the Days* ‘Those were the days, oh yes those were the days Then the busy years went rushing by us We lost our starry notions on the way If by chance I’d see you in the tavern We’d smile at one another and we’d say Those were the days my friend’. These texts revealed an identity of older people as one of frailty and feebleness and that ageing was associated with an inevitable forfeiting of previously enjoyed activities and abilities and level of reverence in society.

### Discussion

Analysis of the representation of ageing identities in the medium of popular music addresses an important gap in the literature in relation to social and cultural aspects of age and ageing in contemporary society, specifically ageing identity. In our analysis, it was not surprising to discover that the majority of English language lyrics on the subject of ageing identities originated from the US and the UK, however it is noteworthy that the number of music lyrics relating to ageing was significantly lower in remaining English-speaking countries such as Canada and Australia. While the identification of relevant studies relied on English texts and therefore English-speaking countries and communities, it was felt by the researchers that a music text could have been missed, however, had the text had a significant resonance with people, it would plausibly have been translated and therefore identifiable in our search strategy. It was felt that while music lyrics exhibited bespoke cultural influences, the findings of this study nevertheless seem to have transferability for all jurisdictions as music is universally consumed. Previous research is in agreement with the findings of this study that discourse culminating in ageing identity is categorized as both as optimistic and pessimistic, with the latter category dominating (Lin *et al.* 2004). Pessimistic discourses in this study producing the ageing identity as one of ‘frail and flagging old folks’, were consistent with previous studies in that they offered identities of older people as fearful, frail, inactive and generally posing health risks which were in need of support and management (Wright 2002, Westerhof & Tulle 2007, Horton *et al.* 2008, Ylanne 2012). Discourses were also revealed in this study in the negative

category resulting in the identity of 'pitiful and petulant' which lead to older people being viewed as unattractive and crabbit leading them feeling brushed aside. These discourses were consistent with reports by (Murphy 2004, Martin *et al.* 2009, Williams *et al.* 2010). Alternatively, optimistic discourses, discovered in the identity of 'contented and aged' showed consistencies with findings available in Lin *et al.* (2004) study in that old age conferred wisdom and clarity which in turn was rewarded by society with respect and admiration. However, other positive discourses in Lin *et al.* (2004) study which point towards an identity of older people as one remaining physically fit, socially involved, intellectually active and engage in risky behaviour embracing freedom of age and avoidance of withdrawal from active society, were not revealed in our study of music lyrics.

For healthcare professionals, it is concerning in this and other studies that negative themes of old age persist and dominate in mass media, especially popular music texts, as negative emotions experienced by older people are connected to poor outcomes in mental and physical health, particularly cardiac health (Johnson 2014). Recommendations from these studies suggest more sensitive, positive, inclusive and less stereotypical media reporting of issues and activities relating to ageing and older people. While it may prove an impossible task and an infringement on free expression to censor all negative expressions of old age, it is important nonetheless that awareness is raised and some efforts exerted to suspend stereotypes and negative age and ageing identities in popular music due to the penetrating effects of melody and lyrics on peoples' mindsets. While it cannot be denied that the likelihood of physical decline and infirmity is high as people advance in years, perhaps the negative ideas people harbour about old age can be altered. To this end, encouragement might best be given to emphasizing positive ideas around relationships, pursuits and coping. With young peoples' negative impressions of old age having dominated in popular music for many decades perhaps, older people or transgenerational generation of music texts ought to be encouraged, to achieve a more balanced and older person generated public script on age and ageing.

### Limitations of the study

It is also important to point up in the limitations of this study the fact that music lyrics presented in this study addressing age and ageing have been written mainly by young people or at least by people who were not classified as older people, and from young people's perspective and

their imaginings of old age. However, the study has been useful to revealing the ageing identities as constructed in popular music lyrics.

### Conclusion

Popular music is a powerful form of mass media which has potential to have a penetrating effect on the psyche of people who are exposed to it. From this study, it is evident that mainly negative representations of age and ageing are available in popular music texts. It is imagined that the negative representations of age and ageing can be dispiriting and confidence and esteem lowering for older people and that more scrutiny of these texts by censorship boards should be exercised. However, while evidence exists that negative and positive emotions can influence health and well-being, further research is needed to explore what impact precisely the negative texts have on those experiencing ageing, perhaps in the form of qualitative exploration. The findings suggest that negative popular music texts can have a detrimental impact on the ageing experience and have negative health sequelae. These harms could arguably be avoided if this was raised to public consciousness. Other efforts could include sponsorship or facilitation by music therapists of older people to create music texts from an older person's perspective.

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### Conflict of interest

No conflict of interest was declared by the authors in relation to the study itself. Note that Roger Watson is Editor-in-Chief of JAN but, in line with usual practice, this paper was subjected to double blind peer review and was edited by another editor.

### Author contributions

All authors have agreed on the final version and met at least one of the following criteria [recommended by the ICMJE (<http://www.icmje.org/recommendations/>)]:

- substantial contributions to conception and design, acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data;
- drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content.



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