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The Last Act: Performing Ageing and Celebrity in the TV Series *The Kominsky Method*

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Abstract

Population ageing has reshaped contemporary Western societies and transformed the media landscape. While older individuals have historically faced underrepresentation or stereotyping in media, streaming platforms and prestige television have increasingly embraced complex narratives of later life, deploying ageing celebrity icons as central cultural resources. This article brings together celebrity studies, television studies, and media/platform studies to analyze how the Netflix original series *The Kominsky Method* (2018–2021) negotiates the dynamics of age, fame, and media history. Drawing on a dual qualitative methodology combining thematic analysis and visual narrative analysis across all 22 episodes, the study investigates how the show leverages the friction between real-world star images and fictional characters. The analysis reveals how the series exposes the physical realities of biological decay, demystifies celebrity labor within the entertainment industry, and activates audience cultural memory through intertextual nostalgia. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates how streaming platforms transform post-stardom vulnerabilities into lucrative, globally circulating prestige content.

Keywords: ageing; celebrity; cultural memory; Netflix; The Kominsky Method

1. Introduction

Population ageing is a defining demographic trend across Western societies, driven by declining fertility and rising life expectancy (OECD, 2024). OECD data indicate that the share of people aged 65 and older nearly doubled, from 9.5% in 1980 to 18.8% in 2023 (OECD, 2024). This structural transformation has significant social and cultural consequences, including heightened demand for pensions, healthcare, and long-term care, as well as shifting intergenerational relations and patterns of social participation (Phillipson, 2013). While older adults face systemic risks of inequality and social exclusion, they also contribute through caregiving, volunteering, and civic engagement, underscoring the need for policies that promote active ageing and age-friendly communities (Walker, 2002).

Alongside these demographic shifts, older and ageing characters have gained heightened visibility across popular culture—in cinema, literature, comics, and television—from the early 2000s through 2026, even as age-related stereotypes and gendered inequalities persist (Gullette, 2004; Markov & Yoon, 2021). Scholarly research documents a gradual shift from portrayals centered on dependency and physical decline to multifaceted narratives that highlight autonomy, intergenerational solidarity, sexuality, memory, and emotional resilience (Woodward, 1999; Jermyn, 2012; Reul et al., 2023). In literature, novels such as Elizabeth Strout's Olive Kitteridge (2008) and Fredrik Backman's *A Man Called Ove* (2012)

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foreground the psychological depth of later life. Similarly, newspaper comic strips like *Pickles* and contemporary graphic memoirs depict ageing as an ordinary, ongoing life stage rather than an exceptional condition (Chivers, 2011). In cinema, films ranging from *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (2011) and *Amour* (2012) to *Nebraska* (2013), *45 Years* (2015), *The Father* (2020), *Nomadland* (2020), and *Thelma* (2024) frame later life as a complex terrain of identity, loss, care, and resilience (Ng et al., 2015).

As audiences age, global streaming services—most notably Netflix—have actively expanded their catalogs to include long-form serial narratives that cater to older viewers and engage broader cultural debates about health, grief, mortality, and identity in later life. This shift mirrors a broader transition identified by cultural gerontologists: a move away from framing old age strictly as biological loss toward nuanced portrayals of social participation, adaptation, and emotional agency (Gullette, 2004; Katz, 2005). Streaming productions such as *Grace and Frankie* (2015–2022), *After Life* (2019–2022), *The Two Popes* (2019), and *The Chair* (2021) challenge traditional stereotypes of older adults as passive or socially irrelevant. Through niche aggregation and digital distribution, streaming infrastructures enable stories centered on family, mortality, and intergenerational relationships to achieve global circulation (Lobato, 2019). Consequently, contemporary media culture increasingly treats later life not as a marginal topic but as a vibrant site of cultural imagination and shared social experience.

A crucial dimension of this cultural turn is the prominent revival of mature Hollywood stars within prestige television (Tirino & Castellano, 2026). Series such as *The Morning Show* (2019–), starring Jennifer Aniston and Reese Witherspoon; *Only Murders in the Building* (2021–), featuring Steve Martin and Martin Short; and *Shrinking* (2023–), featuring Harrison Ford, demonstrate the renewed industrial and symbolic capital of veteran performers. This phenomenon extends beyond nostalgic recovery; ageing stars function as living cultural archives, embodying professional capital, historical authenticity, and long-standing audience attachment (Dyer, 1979; Marshall, 1997). While media scholars highlight how contemporary celebrity culture increasingly negotiates tensions between physical ageing and public visibility (Holmes & Redmond, 2006; Jermyn, 2012), this visibility remains uneven, as female performers face disproportionate pressures concerning appearance, desirability, and career longevity. Nonetheless, the prominence of mature actors reflects both a demographic transformation in viewership and a broader redefinition of what ageing represents in modern popular culture.

This article addresses this still largely unarticulated dynamic through a focused case study of Netflix's The Kominsky Method (2018–2021), a series whose casting of Academy Award-winning veteran actors Michael Douglas and Alan Arkin renders the friction between real-world star biography and fictional ageing analytically explicit. The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 develops an integrative theoretical framework combining Celebrity Studies, Television Studies, and Platform Studies; Section 3 formulates the research questions and details the dual qualitative methodology; Section 4 presents the results of thematic and visual analysis of the series; and Section 5 discusses the findings, before addressing the study's limitations.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The existing academic literature on this topic has largely developed along two distinct, parallel tracks. On one hand, gerontological and media scholars have evaluated representations of old age in film and television, focusing on ageist stereotypes (Gullette, 2004), gendered inequalities (Woodward, 1999), the ideological ideal of "successful ageing" (Rowe & Kahn, 1997), physical vulnerability (Calasanti & Slevin, 2006), ageing masculinities (Twigg, 2020), and media (in)visibility (Amaral et al., 2019; Westwood, 2023). On the other

hand, Celebrity Studies has examined the industrial construction of stardom, celebrity labor, authenticity, nostalgia, and the evolution of fame across the life course (Dyer, 1979; Marshall, 1997; Holmes & Redmond, 2006). These two tracks, however, have rarely been brought into dialogue: gerontological media studies seldom engages with the star-specific mechanisms of image construction and celebrity capital, while Celebrity Studies has paid comparatively little attention to the demographic and biological specificity of later life. Consequently, how platformed television mediates the intersection of ageing bodies and celebrity capital—a question of direct relevance to the sociology of ageing and celebrity—remains largely unaddressed.

Addressing this gap requires an integrative framework combining Celebrity Studies, Television Studies, and Platform Studies.

2.1. Celebrity Studies

Central to this integrative model is Dyer's (1979, 1986) seminal conceptualization of the star persona. Dyer established that a celebrity in media studies is not merely a biological individual, but a semiotic text—a complex, constructed star image compiled from all publicly available materials surrounding that persona. Dyer outlined three foundational mechanics that govern the star persona:

1. Structured polysemy: a star image contains multiple, potentially contradictory meanings and values (polysemy), yet these associations are systematically organized around core cultural themes and societal contradictions;
2. The four pillars of construction: this structured polysemy is continually constructed and renegotiated across four media registers: official promotion (studio press kits, talk shows); uncontrolled publicity (tabloid coverage, paparazzi, personal health struggles); creative works (film and television roles that bleed into the actor's public identity); and critical commentary (reviews, academic analysis, fan discourse);
3. The paradox of authenticity: stardom operates on an ongoing tension between the extraordinary (glamour, exceptionality) and the ordinary (relatability, human vulnerability). The audience is invited to look past the manufactured facade to catch glimpses of the "authentic" individual underneath.

Building on this foundation, Marshall (1997) posited that the celebrity body serves as a hyper-visible public sign through which broad societal anxieties and ideological conflicts are negotiated. When applied to ageing stars, this framework exposes the friction between dominant cultural ideologies of youth, hyper-productivity, and physical perfection, and the biological realities of late-life decline (illness, cognitive loss, sexual change). As Turner (2004) noted in his analysis of the post-stardom commodity, transitioning legacy stars from high-concept cinema to serialized television strips away their traditional untouchable aura, converting them into relatable cultural avatars for audience anxieties regarding mortality and marginalization.

This medium-specific shift directly connects with Holmes's (2005) work on television stardom. Unlike cinema, which historically depended on distance and aura, television is an intimate, domestic, and fragmented medium that relies on an affect of proximity. Television textually constructs a "performance of authenticity" by staging an unmasking of the star persona. Furthermore, as Cashmore (2006) demonstrated, modern celebrity culture is an omnipresent industrial system sustained by continuous celebrity labor. Depicting the daily professional struggles of ageing performers demystifies Hollywood, reframing stardom from an unassailable state of privilege into precarious, ongoing labor.

Finally, understanding how veteran actors reposition themselves within digital streaming networks requires integrating the concept of celebrity capital—the accumulated media visibility that can be converted into economic, social, or cultural capital (Driessens, 2013).

As Carrillat and Ilicic (2019) argued in their celebrity capital life cycle framework, fame fluctuates through distinct phases: acquisition, consolidation, slow decline, and potential redemption or resurgence. Streaming television provides a vital mechanism in the late stages of this life cycle, converting the physical vulnerabilities of post-stardom into renewed cultural distinction and commercial value.

2.2. Television and Platform Studies

While the semiotic friction between a star image and a diegetic role generates narrative depth, it requires an industrial ecosystem capable of supporting it. The commercial viability of mature-led narratives today stems from the intersection of serialized narrative complexity and platform economics. According to Mittell (2015), contemporary television is characterized by complex television, a narrative mode that balances episodic storytelling with long-form seriality. Complex television prioritizes character-centered storytelling, drawing narrative momentum from psychological interiority, relationship shifts, and emotional realism. This structural flexibility allows television texts to explore the gradual, unvarnished realities of biological decay, grief, and vocational obsolescence over extended seasonal arcs.

However, this character-driven complexity depends on the material infrastructure of streaming platforms like Netflix (Re, 2026). Unlike linear networks constrained by broadcast schedules, platform operators utilize algorithmic recommendation systems that reconfigure taste engineering, allowing them to aggregate highly niche, geographically dispersed audience segments—including mature viewers with substantial cultural capital (Hallinan & Striphas, 2016). Simultaneously, platforms rely on prestige branding and "discourses of distinction" to establish market authority and subscriber retention (Tryon, 2015). Casting legacy cinematic icons whose star images carry decades of cultural prestige immediately signals high quality.

These prestige texts are structurally engineered for bingeability, an interface and consumption mode that alters traditional broadcast flow and deepens viewer intimacy with the characters' ongoing struggles (Jenner, 2016, 2018). Coupled with Netflix's infrastructure of global circulation, universal themes of ageing and mortality anchored by internationally recognizable stars bypass localized syndication constraints to achieve immediate global reach (Lobato, 2019).

By synthesizing Celebrity Studies with Television and Platform Studies, this framework evaluates ageing stars not simply as actors, but as intertextual cultural resources through which streaming television negotiates demographic ageing, media memory, and late-life visibility.

3. Research Questions and Methodology

This study investigates how age and celebrity are performed in contemporary television series within a platform-dominated media ecosystem. It addresses three core research questions:

RQ1: What are the main issues in the representation of ageing in contemporary popular TV series?
RQ2: How is the status of older celebrities renegotiated and reinterpreted in contemporary TV seriality? What diegetic and extradiegetic elements are involved in these processes?
RQ3: How do older stars activate the audience's memory and cultural capital?

This study adopts an intensive qualitative single-case study design (Yin, 2018) focused on *The Kominsky Method*. Created by Chuck Lorre and distributed globally by Netflix as an original series across three seasons and 22 episodes (2018–2021), *The Kominsky Method* is a high-profile comedy-drama set in contemporary Los Angeles that explores the physical, social, and emotional dynamics of late life through the lens of Hollywood culture. The plot

centers on Sandy Kominsky (Michael Douglas), a once-promising actor who now runs a respected local acting studio while grappling with career obsolescence, prostate health issues, and financial precarity. Alongside him is Norman Newlander (Alan Arkin), Sandy's longtime agent and wealthy confidant, whose storyline is initially defined by intense grief following his wife's death, family estrangement, and a cynical, unvarnished confrontation with his own mortality. The series features a high-profile, multigenerational ensemble led by Academy Award winners Michael Douglas and Alan Arkin, alongside Sarah Baker, Nancy Travis, and Kathleen Turner.

Contextually, the series operates as an industrial and cultural pivot point: produced during a demographic shift in television audiences and distributed via platform infrastructures reliant on niche aggregation and prestige branding, the show leverages the real-world celebrity capital and star histories of Douglas and Arkin. By framing bodily decay, vocational decline, and bereavement through a self-reflexive, metatextual setting, *The Kominsky Method* transforms late-life vulnerability into globally circulating prestige content that actively engages audience cultural memory.

The Kominsky Method was selected as an empirical case study for three key reasons:

1. It foregrounds the biological and sociocultural realities of older protagonists, offering a rich text for evaluating representations of late-life visibility (RQ1);
2. Casting 74-year-old Michael Douglas and 84-year-old Alan Arkin creates an explicit semiotic bridge between fictional roles (diegetic elements) and real-world star histories (extradiegetic elements), providing a clear lens through which to analyze celebrity renegotiation (RQ2);
3. The show's self-reflexive setting—an acting class—directly dramatizes celebrity labor, acting technique, and Hollywood history, actively engaging audience memory and media cultural capital (RQ3).

The methodological framework of the study relies on an interdependent, dual qualitative approach that systematically connects thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and visual narrative analysis (Rose, 2016) to investigate how ageing and celebrity are performed in platformed television. Operating in tandem, thematic analysis provides the macro-level structure by identifying recurring content classes across the series' dialogue and narrative arcs, while visual narrative analysis offers micro-level empirical grounding by examining frame-by-frame compositional choices, lighting, and bodily performance within isolated key sequences. This multimodal integration allows the researchers to decode the semiotic friction between the diegetic narrative—what characters say and experience—and the extradiegetic star image of legacy actors such as Michael Douglas and Alan Arkin. By cross-validating verbal statements against visual staging, the approach reveals how television intimacy and platform aesthetics perform an authentic unmasking of the star persona.

The operationalization process involved six concrete steps.

(1) Data familiarization and transcription: The sample encompasses 22 episodes across three seasons. We watched all episodes repeatedly. We transcribed dialogue, key narrative actions, and extradiegetic materials verbatim into a centralized database. Initial reflective notes were logged regarding recurring motifs of ageing, medical issues, references to past classic movies, and depictions of Hollywood's labor market.
(2) Generating initial open codes. Applying Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic framework, both researchers coded the transcriptions line by line independently. Codes captured both diegetic markers (e.g., "prostate health jokes," "grief over spouse," "fear of career irrelevance") and extradiegetic markers (e.g., reviews discussing Michael Douglas's real-life health battles or references to his 1980s star image).
(3) Theme clustering and conceptual mapping: codes were collated and clustered into broader content classes mapped directly to the research questions independently by

both researchers. We then compared the content classes that emerged inductively from the content analysis with the predefined framework (9 content classes for Researcher No. 1, 11 content classes for Researcher No. 2). Based on this comparison, the researchers revised the classification, ultimately identifying 8 shared content classes, each composed of homogeneous content.

(4) Visual sampling and sequence isolation: the purposive sampling of key sequences for visual narrative analysis (Rose, 2016) was governed by three formal, aesthetic-compositional criteria. First, scenes were selected based on cinematographic and lighting foregrounding, prioritizing sequences where high-definition camera work, naturalistic key lighting, and unretouched close-up shots systematically emphasized the physical textures of biological ageing—such as wrinkles, skin tone, and markers of illness—over traditional Hollywood glamorization. Second, selection required proxemic and spatial configuration, targeting scenes defined by specific spatial setups—most notably fixed medium shots within enclosed, intimate spaces like car interiors or quiet residential rooms—where physical proximity and static framing intentionally concentrated viewer focus on subtle bodily performance, gaze, and micro-expressions. Third, scenes were chosen for temporal pacing and editing continuity, selecting extended, semi-static takes and slow tracking shots that deliberately altered standard comedic rhythm, slowing narrative momentum to visually amplify moments of grief, vulnerability, or late-life reflection. By grounding the sampling process exclusively in formal visual parameters, these criteria provided a consistent, objective basis for isolating sequences across the dataset, ensuring that the visual narrative analysis systematically complemented the thematic coding.

(5) Compositional and bodily decoding: isolated visual sequences were analyzed frame-by-frame across spatial composition, lighting/color palette (high-definition aesthetics emphasizing wrinkles and physical frailty), and bodily performance (gaze, posture, pacing);

(6) Synthesis and intertextual integration: outputs were synthesized into 8 final content classes, pairing textual themes with visual representations to map how diegetic traits frictionally collide with extradiegetic star personas.

Procedures were double-checked jointly to ensure intercoder reliability (ICR). ICR is a core methodological standard in quantitative media content analysis. Adopting ICR strengthens the credibility and reproducibility of coding by identifying ambiguities and reducing the influence of individual researcher subjectivity. In this view, it enhances transparency, analytical robustness, and confidence in qualitative interpretations while complementing, rather than replacing, researchers' interpretive judgment.

4. Results

To ensure structural consistency with the theoretical framework, the findings are organized into three thematic sections corresponding to the research questions: Section 4.1 examines representations of late-life vulnerability (RQ1); Section 4.2 analyzes the renegotiation of celebrity status and occupational obsolescence (RQ2); and Section 4.3 addresses the activation of audience cultural memory (RQ3) (see Table 1).

Table 1. Content classes emerging from the thematic analysis, with a representative key scene.

Content Class	Definition	Key Scene
Bodily decline	Physical/biological ageing (illness, incontinence, mobility loss, cognitive change) represented as an ordinary, shared condition rather than an exceptional pathology.	Norman's Kegel-exercise scene with Sandy in the car (Ep. 1x03).
Sexuality and masculinity	Renegotiation of desire, potency, and masculine identity in later life through humor, medicalization, and vulnerability.	Sandy lists his medications before intimacy with Lisa (Ep. 1x05).
Mortality	Confrontation with death and terminal illness as a structuring horizon of the characters' later life.	Norman's death revealed via the coffin photograph that opens Season 3 (Ep. 3x01).
Grief	Socially and emotionally regulated processes of mourning and loss following bereavement.	Sandy's toast to Norman at Musso's restaurant (Ep. 3x01).
Friendship	Peer solidarity functioning as an emotional support structure that counterbalances physical and social precarity.	Sandy's confession, "I need you. You're my best friend" (Ep. 1x06).
Family	Intergenerational conflict and reconciliation shaping identity and moral accountability in later life.	Norman's confrontation and reconciliation with his daughter Phoebe (Ep. 2x04).
Professional obsolescence	Renegotiation of celebrity and professional status tied to ageing bodies within the entertainment industry.	Sandy is passed over for a sitcom audition for being "not ethnic enough" (Ep. 1x01).
Nostalgia, memory and platform capital	Intertextual mobilization of star history and generational cultural memory as a mechanism of audience engagement and platform prestige.	Norman watches *Cocoon* (1985) and remarks that it feels different now that he shares the characters' age.

4.1. Representing Late-Life Vulnerability and Relationality

Consistent with RQ1, this section examines how *The Kominsky Method* stages later life against the gerontological literature reviewed in Section 2: it neither confines old age to the discourse of physical loss critiqued by Gullette (2004) and Calasanti and Slevin (2006), nor endorses the depoliticized ideal of "successful ageing" (Rowe & Kahn, 1997), instead depicting bodily decline alongside forms of social participation—friendship, caregiving, and family repair—that Walker (2002) identified as constitutive of active ageing.

4.1.1. Bodily Decline

The two main characters in the series are acting coach Sandy Kominsky (Michael Douglas) and wealthy talent agency owner Norman Newlander (Alan Arkin). The way the two portray ageing directly addresses the theme of physical decline. Ailments, illnesses, and health issues are constant topics of conversation between them, serving a dual purpose: sharing the experience of late life lightens the psychological burden of growing old, while frequent humor wards off existential fears of mortality.

Sandy's difficulty urinating, caused by benign prostatic hyperplasia, functions as a recurring motif in the first season. Norman jokes about his friend's interrupted stream ("I urinate in Morse code now. Dots and dashes") (Ep. 1x02). In the episode where the condition reaches a crisis point (Ep. 1x03), Sandy—filmed from a low angle in a tight close-up as he addresses his genitals—reveals the full extent of his physical suffering. Following a date with Lisa (Nancy Travis), Sandy urinates on a bush in his garden (a moment secretly observed by Lisa's teenage son, Matthew). In the urologist's office, Sandy's

somatic discomfort is metaphorically expressed through a close-up of a dripping water dispenser. Norman similarly uses dark humor regarding Sandy's prostate biopsy, noting the sole benefit of finally discovering the source of blood in his stool (Ep. 1x04).

More broadly, the car serves as an intimate space where their friendship deepens, specifically through shared self-deprecating humor regarding bodily decay ("We are passengers on boats slowly sinking," Sandy remarks). Filmed in a classic medium shot from the windshield perspective, the two characters perform Kegel exercises together to strengthen their pelvic floor muscles (Ep. 1x03).

Mobility issues constitute another recurring motif. Visually, numerous scenes depict the protagonists attempting to move with youthful agility, only for their biological limitations to intervene: Norman attempts to mount a horse unassisted and fails (Ep. 2x02); Sandy tries to lift an intoxicated Lisa, but is forced to drag her, resulting in an acute back injury (Ep. 2x04).

Furthermore, physical decline impacts social relations. In one sequence, Sandy invites Norman out, receiving a terse refusal because Norman has already fallen asleep twice before 10:00 p.m. Consequently, Sandy attends a nightclub alone, where a long tracking shot emphasizing young patrons underscores his bitter realization that he is the oldest person in the venue (Ep. 1x04).

Finally, the series engages the more sensitive domain of cognitive decline. At a mundane level, cognitive slip-ups manifest as word-finding difficulties, which both characters acknowledge with frustration (Ep. 2x01). However, cognitive vulnerability is also dramatized in severe form. After his wife Eileen (Susan Sullivan) dies, Norman repeatedly converses with her ghost, triggering deep concern from Sandy (Ep. 1x03). Norman's grief-induced hallucinations reach a crisis at a charity gala: after consuming excessive alcohol, he is confronted not only by his wife's ghost but also by those of his mother and grandmother. The auditory and visual hallucinations become so overwhelming that he wanders the streets until he is detained by the police, requiring Sandy to retrieve him (Ep. 1x08). Another instance of psychological vulnerability occurs during a conversation between Sandy and Norman's partner, Madelyn (Jane Seymour), who is in her seventies. During a funeral reception, Madelyn confides that she and Norman plan to have a child as soon as his medication regimen concludes, revealing to Sandy that Madelyn struggles with untreated psychiatric conditions, including schizophrenia and severe depression.

4.1.2. Sexuality and Masculinity

Physical decline is directly linked to the dimensions of sexuality and masculinity. The value audiences attribute to Michael Douglas's masculinity—and, by extension, to that of his elderly character—depends to varying degrees on their memory of his star persona as an intertextual construct built around decades of performances in film and television (explored further in Section 4.3).

The topic of sex in late life—which has gained increasing visibility across Western audiovisual media—is explored in the series through various semiotic and narrative nuances as the characters renegotiate their ageing masculinity. The prevailing tone is humorous and self-deprecating. For example, following his first sexual encounter with Lisa (Nancy Travis)—filmed in a conventional overhead shot—Sandy lists for his partner the array of daily medications he must routinely ingest to ensure sexual performance, concluding with sildenafil (Viagra) (Ep. 1x05). Similarly, when Lisa attempts to persuade Sandy that sex may diminish in importance at his stage of life, he insists he remains capable of performing—provided he receives sufficient advance notice to administer his medication (Ep. 2x04).

However, Lisa's argument gradually impacts the acting coach: when his student Darshani (Jenna Lyng Adams) flirts with him, access to Sandy's psychological interiority is mediated through a subjective point-of-view shot (which optically distorts Darshani's face) paired with voice-over narration. Engaging in self-pity, Sandy reflects that while he previously would have exploited the advances of a young, attractive woman, his current prostatic condition leaves him longing for the conversation to end so he can use the restroom. Similarly, a spontaneous encounter with Yvette (Natasha Hall), a younger, sexually receptive woman, culminates in an acute back strain (Ep. 3x01). Norman likewise engages in self-deprecating humor: exhilarated by an unexpected sexual encounter with Madelyn at his advanced age, he uses the humorous metaphor "Egyptian obelisk" to describe his erection (Ep. 2x03).

Beyond the comedic framing, the reimagining of Norman's masculinity gives the series an avenue to explore romantic tenderness in later life. The delicate, affective dimension of late-life intimacy is dramatized in a sequence where Norman and Madelyn exchange a tender kiss, expressing mutual emotion and disbelief—tempered by gentle awkwardness—at the unexpected opportunity to experience romantic connection again while honoring the memory of their deceased spouses (Ep. 2x02).

Finally, the challenge of navigating evolving contemporary sexual practices extends to digital adult media and linguistic registers. In a humorous sequence, Sandy expresses discomfort with the algorithmic categories digital platforms use to classify adult content (Ep. 1x04). Linguistically, he struggles to define his relationship with Lisa, finding the term "lovers" overly weighted with romantic and physical melodrama, while "friends with benefits" strikes him as an alienating contemporary colloquialism ill-suited to his generation's relational vocabulary (Ep. 1x05).

4.1.3. Mortality

Given the protagonists' advanced age, mortality constitutes an overarching thematic motif throughout the series, explored through varied narrative perspectives and functions.

As an inevitable consequence of ageing, death is frequently defused through self-deprecating irony. When Sandy proposes repaying a substantial loan—granted by Norman to settle Sandy's back taxes—in monthly installments of $1000, the talent agent quips that such a schedule guarantees he will die long before the debt is fully amortized (Ep. 1x07). Similarly, Norman frames the high frequency with which the two men attend peers' funerals as an integral component of their late-life social itinerary. Yet, this routine simultaneously affords him a cynical satisfaction in his own survival ("Every time one of my friends passes away, I feel like I won a contest, like, 'Ha ha, I lived longer, I beat you,'" Norman remarks) (Ep. 2x01).

Caring for terminally ill loved ones forces a confrontation with personal mortality and the psychological difficulty of processing grief. From this perspective, Sandy's extreme reluctance to visit Eileen (Susan Sullivan) during the terminal stage of her cancer is identified by his daughter, Mindy (Sarah Baker), as a displaced fear of his own death (Ep. 1x01). This existential dread is amplified when illness strikes Sandy directly. A key sequence illustrating this occurs after the acting coach receives a prostate cancer diagnosis: as he walks through a park, diffuse spring lighting illuminates a sequence shot from Sandy's subjective point of view, transitioning from a young couple kissing to an infirm elderly man in a wheelchair—a figure in whom Sandy perceives an ominous harbinger of his own bodily decline (Ep. 1x05). Later, upon discovering he has developed lung cancer, Sandy opts to conceal the diagnosis from Mindy, fearing that illness will reduce him to an object of pity or alter his social relations (Ep. 2x05). Emblematic of this dynamic is the episode "A Hand Job Is Forgiven" (Ep. 2x07), which opens and closes with Sandy fainting: although

framed through grotesque comedy, Mindy and Lisa's insistence that he move in with them underscores the structural nexus connecting ageing, illness, and spatial dependency, forcing Sandy to confront his fragile state.

The most jarring narrative disruption regarding mortality occurs at the onset of the third and final season. While the second season concludes with Sandy experiencing acute health complications, the opening shots of Season 3 reveal Norman's photograph beside a coffin—a major plot twist that aligns the audience's shock with the grief and disorientation Sandy and Norman's inner circle experience (Ep. 3x01). The final season is further defined by the gradual decline and death of Sandy's ex-wife, Dr. Roz Volander (Kathleen Turner). Leukemia treatments, emergency room visits, and hospice care mark a painful trajectory that culminates in a dramatic sequence: having reconciled with Roz, Sandy arrives at the hospital bearing sweets, only to be confronted—under the cold fluorescent lighting of the room—by Mindy slumped in an armchair beside an empty, stripped bed (Ep. 3x06). This stark visual depiction of bereavement brings their shared narrative arc to a somber resolution, compelling Sandy to confront his legacy as an actor, husband, and father.

4.1.4. Grief

The series explicitly addresses the psychological and social dimensions of coping with grief and bereavement in late life. In the first season, this thematic thread centers primarily on the narrative arc surrounding Eileen's (Susan Sullivan) death. When Norman receives messages from Eileen's friend Diane (Ann-Margret), he confides in Sandy his anxiety about how others might perceive his pursuit of new social connections (Ep. 1x08). The socially regulated nature of grief—which deems certain coping mechanisms culturally acceptable while sanctioning others—resurfaces when Norman decides to dispose of Eileen's wardrobe as a tangible manifestation of his existential despair (Ep. 2x01). Norman's reaction to losing his wife of over four decades illustrates the intersection of bereavement dynamics and the psychological conditions of ageing.

Repeated close-ups of domestic objects and family photographs within their home—which appears visually cavernous following Eileen's death (Ep. 1x01)—function as visual metaphors for Norman's psychological void. His grief manifests initially through explosive frustration at a funeral home, where he vehemently demands a coffin made of recycled wood or salvaged shipwreck timber; later, during a highly unconventional memorial service featuring appearances by the real Jay Leno and a Barbra Streisand impersonator (Ep. 1x02), Norman candidly admits: "I honestly do not know how to carry on without you." Norman's grieving process is further dramatized in a mundane, domestic setting: while picking up dry cleaning, he suffers an emotional breakdown when the shopkeepers gently remind him to retrieve one of Eileen's garments (Ep. 1x03). His advanced age and the deep temporal duration of his marital bond—where Eileen's absence materializes as a luminous, ghostly presence—render the assimilation of loss exceedingly painful.

This confrontation with mortality transforms late life into a primary locus for existential life review. This reflective dynamic is visually constructed in a sequence where Norman and his partner Madelyn (Jane Seymour), whom he had been engaged to fifty years earlier, sit beside a quiet artificial pond, evaluating their pasts. Natural key lighting, semi-static camera setups, unhurried blocking, and hushed vocal delivery frame the sequence as a serene interlude, allowing Norman to articulate his disbelief at finding happiness after Eileen's death (Ep. 2x02).

Following Eileen's passing, Norman's eventual death becomes the narrative's central exploration of grief. The series' visual strategy relies on classic melodramatic cues: in a tight close-up, Sandy—visibly heartbroken, his eyes rimmed with tears—succumbs to acute grief (Ep. 3x01). A sudden cut introduces a flashback to a seaside setting where

the two friends share a churro, slowly savoring their time together—a scene in which Norman explicitly voices gratitude for their lifelong bond. Sandy's subsequent return to his empty home is marked by deliberate, somber actions (illuminating the room, loosening his tie, stepping onto the terrace for air) set against the chiaroscuro lighting of the Los Angeles skyline accompanied by a melancholic jazz score, preparing the audience for a second flashback to one of their frequent lunches at Musso & Frank Grill (Ep. 3x01). At the restaurant, with their longtime waiter Alex (Ramon Hilario) assisting, a tearful Sandy raises a solitary toast to Norman with his signature drink—a mix of Jack Daniel's and Diet Dr Pepper—positioned opposite the untouched glass of whiskey his deceased friend traditionally ordered (Ep. 3x01).

4.1.5. Friendship

The homosocial bond between Sandy and Norman constitutes the foundational narrative pillar supporting the series' exploration of ageing and celebrity status. Consequently, their late-life camaraderie provides the overarching symbolic framework for the entire plot, while key sequences explicitly interrogate it. For instance, following a visit with the terminally ill Eileen (Susan Sullivan)—who asks Sandy to care for her husband after her death—Sandy offers Norman an awkward embrace. Their rigid, unnatural physical gestures illustrate the historical and cultural barriers older generations often experience regarding public displays of same-sex affection (Ep. 1x01).

Throughout the series, the automobile functions as an intimate heterotopia and safe space where the characters articulate their psychological interiority. Returning from a substance abuse rehabilitation center where they admitted Norman's daughter, Phoebe (Lisa Edelstein), Norman confides his profound disillusionment and despair to Sandy (Ep. 1x06). Seeking to restore his friend's sense of purpose, Sandy articulates his emotional dependency: "I need you [...] You're my best friend, and your guidance and support is crucial to... to my continued well-being." Similarly, in the vehicle's interior, Sandy discloses the philosophical core of the "Kominsky Method"—that articulating existential dread mitigates social isolation (Ep. 1x08). In this same setting, Norman urges Sandy to disclose his cancer diagnosis to Mindy (Ep. 2x06) and announces his intention to embark on a spiritual pilgrimage (Ep. 2x08).

Consistent with the show's tragicomic register, the protagonists' relationship is multifaceted and complex, structured around shared homosocial rituals (such as regular lunches at Musso & Frank Grill accompanied by standardized drink orders), reciprocal teasing, and protective cynicism. A clear example is the financial bailout Norman provides to save Sandy's acting school from Internal Revenue Service (IRS) seizure: Norman converts the loan into a gift, primarily to assert symbolic dominance and later leverage his magnanimity in banter (Ep. 1x07).

Following Eileen's passing, their bond deepens as both men navigate late-life vulnerabilities, breaching traditional norms of emotional privacy. Throughout the second season, they serve as primary sounding boards for one another on sensitive, age-related challenges: Sandy seeks counsel about the considerable age gap between his daughter Mindy and her middle-aged partner, Martin Schneider (Paul Reiser), while Norman solicits advice about his sudden romance with Madelyn (Jane Seymour). The fragility of their connection is highlighted in a night scene on Norman's porch as they contemplate the passage of time. With soft, warm key lighting, the cinematography mirrors the decelerated rhythm of late life, emphasizing the preciousness of time. The slow backward tracking shot as the camera departs from the actors serves as a respectful, affectionate visual farewell to their intimate bond (Ep. 2x08).

Finally, the narrative depicts friendship as a force capable of transcending physical mortality. Reflecting his contradictory, gruff yet philanthropic nature, Norman bestows two final legacies upon Sandy: the first appoints Sandy as trustee over the financial inheritances of Phoebe and his grandson Robby (Haley Joel Osment); the second secures an audition with director Barry Levinson (playing himself), ultimately leading to Sandy landing the lead role in a film adaptation of Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. A sequence showing Sandy listening to voicemail messages encapsulates this shift: after hearing demanding messages from Norman's heirs—to which Sandy responds with an exasperated "Thanks, Norman"—he hears the confirmation for the Levinson meeting, uttering a heartfelt "Thanks, Norman" in dynamic contrast (Ep. 3x04).

4.1.6. Family

Family relationships directly affect individual life balance and psychological well-being in late life. Both Norman and Sandy must navigate complex familial dynamics while coming to terms with past mistakes, personal shortcomings, and historical absences.

Norman continues to negotiate a strained relationship with his daughter, Phoebe (Lisa Edelstein). After describing her to Sandy as "a selfish, pill-popping mess" (Ep. 1x02) and admitting an inability to love her unconditionally (Ep. 1x03), Norman harshly confronts her regarding her complete absence during her mother's terminal illness. The trajectory of this father–daughter relationship is mediated primarily by two female figures. First, Madelyn (Jane Seymour)—witnessing Norman's severe treatment of Phoebe—prompts him to reflect on his unacknowledged grief and misdirected anger (Ep. 2x03). This intervention leads Norman to reconsider his stance, offering Phoebe an opportunity for redemption during a grotesque confrontation at the frozen yogurt shop where she works part-time (Ep. 2x04), before ultimately apologizing for his emotional outbursts (Ep. 2x06). Later, as father and daughter embark on mutual reconciliation and acknowledge their respective failings during a cemetery visit, it is once again Eileen (Susan Sullivan)—appearing as a spectral projection—who urges Norman to believe in Phoebe's capacity for personal transformation while encouraging Phoebe to grant her father grace (Ep. 2x07).

Sandy's familial conflicts, conversely, center on his daughter, Mindy (Sarah Baker), and his ex-wife, Dr. Roz Volander (Kathleen Turner). Initially, the bond between the acting coach and Mindy appears exemplary: they maintain mutual caretaking practices, foster a productive professional partnership, and Mindy intervenes to salvage the acting studio from Internal Revenue Service (IRS) repossession ("This place wouldn't be here if it wasn't for you," her father acknowledges) (Ep. 1x07). However, Mindy's romantic involvement with Martin Schneider (Paul Reiser)—a man significantly older than her—precipitates an existential crisis for Sandy (Ep. 2x01), earning him accusations of ageist hypocrisy and regressive double standards from his ex-wife (Ep. 2x02). Beneath these interpersonal frictions, Sandy is driven to reckon with his past parental deficiencies—which Mindy occasionally highlights through playful irony—and his history of emotional superficiality. In this context, his confrontation with Roz culminates in gradual acceptance and affective reconciliation, illustrated in a quiet night scene where he confides that he has been cast in *The Old Man and the Sea* (Ep. 3x03), and in subsequent sequences where he hosts the terminally ill Roz on set (Ep. 3x05). Nevertheless, this late-life reconciliation is achieved only through the painful acknowledgment of his legacy as a selfish and emotionally neglectful husband.

4.2. Professional Obsolescence: Renegotiating Stardom and Labor

Addressing RQ2, this section transitions from the biological register of Section 4.1 to an industrial framework, tracing how the series reframes stardom as precarious, ongoing labor (Cashmore, 2006). It dramatizes the "slow decline" phase of the celebrity capital life

cycle (Carrillat & Ilicic, 2019; Driessens, 2013), converting Turner's (2004) concept of the post-stardom commodity into a recurring narrative device.

In the series, professional obsolescence assumes metatextual significance, directly interrogating the polysemic star persona of Michael Douglas (see Section 4.3). *The Kominsky Method* draws fundamentally on this intrinsic metatextuality: by depicting the final years of a former actor turned acting coach through a series of late-life rejections and failures, it addresses both the erasure experienced by ageing media professionals and the audience's intertextual engagement with Douglas's broader artistic and personal biography. Excluded from elite industry circles, Sandy reacts with frustration when Norman informs him he was passed over for a sitcom audition because "CBS wanted to go more ethnic"—canceling a scheduled lecture on sitcom acting while disparaging contemporary series such as *The Big Bang Theory* (Ep. 1x01). Norman initially tries to soften these professional setbacks by claiming that Sandy's prominent reputation as an acting instructor intimidates casting directors, but Sandy quickly dismisses the rationalization (Ep. 1x05). In a rare moment of interpersonal conflict, a visibly tense Norman accuses Sandy of alienating major industry producers. Sandy defends his legacy ("I had a Tony Award when I signed with you. I was hot"), counter-accusing his agent of professional neglect (Ep. 1x07).

Within this metatextual frame, Sandy's acute awareness of fame's transience leads him to repeatedly caution his students about the precarity of industry success, even as they remain committed to breakthrough success despite significant personal sacrifices.

Sandy also anticipates the eventual end of his instructional career. When Mindy proposes hiring professional actors as guest instructors to accommodate his cancer recovery, he reacts defensively. This insecurity culminates in a clash over acting technique with Allison Janney (playing herself)—an Academy Award winner for Best Supporting Actress for *I, Tonya* (2017)—during a masterclass at his studio (Ep. 2x08).

Furthermore, Sandy experiences profound alienation within the contemporary hyper-competitive industry landscape. Mirroring Douglas's own historical trajectory—he came of age in 1970s New York amid an ethos of artistic solidarity—Sandy advises his student Margaret (Melissa Tang) to share news of her casting in a major television series with her peers. However, Margaret counters that fierce competitive envy pervades the studio, noting that prior announcements met with palpable hostility and indifference from classmates (Ep. 3x02).

To a lesser extent, Norman also confronts his own obsolescence. As head of a profitable talent agency whose management he has long delegated to his employees, he decides to return to work after Eileen's death. Watching his agents through the conference room windows, however, he asks his secretary when people stopped talking and began communicating solely through their smartphones. During the subsequent meeting, he admits to her that he understands neither the platforms the agents are discussing nor their bewildered reaction to his request that Sandy be given work and asks her to explain everything later (Ep. 1x05). Although he urges Martin to keep working, on the grounds that retirement leads to death, Norman's own career appears to be nearing its end: at the close of the second season, he raises the possibility of selling his shares in the agency to his partners.

4.3. Nostalgia and Memory

Addressing RQ3, this section shifts the analytic focus from labor and industry (Section 4.2) to reception-oriented mechanisms: it examines how Dyer's (1979, 1986) framework of structured polysemy is mobilized textually and paratextually to activate viewers' cultural memory and generational taste communities.

The themes of cultural memory and artistic legacy are structured across three intersecting analytical levels that link the series' diegetic and extradiegetic dimensions.

The first level comprises pervasive allusions to the star system and pop-cultural landscape of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. This dense intertextual network functions both as a diegetic world-building device and as an affective hook for older demographic cohorts, prompting them to activate shared lived experiences. The inevitable ageing of both celebrity personae and viewers is softened through shared cultural coordinates, names, and events, creating a nostalgic locus of emotional comfort. This mechanism is initiated as early as Eileen's funeral, where—in accordance with her final wishes—comedian Jay Leno (playing himself), R&B icon Patti LaBelle (playing herself), and a drag performer impersonating Barbra Streisand give tribute performances (Ep. 1x01). Across the three seasons, explicit references span acting luminaries such as Faye Dunaway, Diane Keaton, and Jessica Lange (whom Sandy claims as former students) (Ep. 1x02); popular music classics including Billy Joel's "Piano Man" (1973) (Ep. 1x04) and Sonny & Cher's "I Got You Babe" (1965) (Ep. 1x08); rock groups including the Allman Brothers, the Rolling Stones, and Jethro Tull (cited by Martin as his high school band's repertoire) (Ep. 2x05); countercultural figures such as Lou Reed and Leonard Cohen (whose alleged contributions to an original cocktail recipe Sandy recounts to Barry Levinson) (Ep. 3x04); and veteran screen actors David Carradine (Ep. 2x01) and Andy Devine (Ep. 2x04).

Cinematic references similarly evoke a specific era of classic Hollywood and New Hollywood cinema. For example, returning from the rehabilitation clinic following Phoebe's admission, Norman confides vague suicidal ideation while behind the wheel. Sandy, dozing off in the passenger seat, dreams of the climax of Ridley Scott's Thelma & Louise (1991), with the two men positioned as the titular duo. Shared cultural memory functions as a key relational glue between characters. The invocation of musician Jimmy Durante, actor Walter Brennan, the 1969 Woodstock festival, and the "Miracle Mets" 1969 World Series victory enables Sandy to construct an affective bond with Martin Schneider (Paul Reiser), his daughter's older partner (Ep. 2x02). Conversely, Mindy's exclusion from these cultural coordinates highlights generational fractures: in a telling sequence, Martin confesses to his mother-in-law, Roz (Kathleen Turner), that his attempts to introduce Mindy to Phil Collins failed (prompting Roz's dry response, "Well, it's a little before her time"), before resorting to reciting lyrics by contemporary rapper Megan Thee Stallion to connect with her (Ep. 3x02). Furthermore, divergent cultural references illustrate historical class and subcultural divides of the 1960s: when Sandy notes that Martin attended Woodstock—the defining countercultural event of the era—Norman counters that he attended the Newport Jazz Festival to hear Miles Davis, asserting a distinctly liberal, middle-class, urban intellectual identity (Ep. 2x05).

The second level examines how the representation of ageing celebrities engages broader sociocultural processes, particularly the renegotiation of masculinity, bodily charm, and platform distribution strategies. While physical decline, sexual dysfunction, bereavement, and professional obsolescence permeate the narrative—serving as the show's "intrinsic norm" (Mittell, 2015)—they are integrated into a broader aesthetic strategy that reframes late life as culturally "cool." This renegotiation relies heavily on fashion and sartorial styling as devices for resemanticizing elderly figures (Pesce, 2023). Sandy Kominsky (Michael Douglas) counters bodily decay and economic precarity through a dynamic style blending smart-casual, dandy, and hipster aesthetics—unbuttoned flannel shirts, scarves, and flat caps—effectively "vintage-izing" mid-century subcultural codes to project continuous charisma. Conversely, Norman Newlander (Alan Arkin) serves as Sandy's sartorial and behavioral counterpoint, adopting an understated, classic style reflecting established Hollywood privilege, stability, and control. Through costume design, the staging negotiates the tension between anti-ageing imperatives and realistic acceptance of physical decline. This

formulation of ageing masculinity does not conceal frailty or decay, but incorporates them into a complex, updated grammar of desirability.

The third level explores how the series constructs celebrity capital through direct intertextual links between fictional characters and the real-world personae of its lead actors. Sandy Kominsky is constructed in conversation with Michael Douglas's broader star text. Historically, Douglas built his celebrity persona around dominant, high-flying figures whose social mastery eventually collapses—most notably Gordon Gekko in *Wall Street* (1987) or Professor Grady Tripp in *Wonder Boys* (2000). Sandy Kominsky represents an endgame iteration of this star arc: a once-promising actor reduced to hosting acting classes and starring in regional commercial spots (Ep. 1x06). The narrative explicitly incorporates Douglas's off-screen biography: Sandy's battle with prostate cancer echoes Douglas's widely publicized real-life struggle with stage IV cancer, while the subplot involving Norman's daughter Phoebe mirrors Douglas's public family challenges surrounding his son Cameron's addiction and incarceration.

While Sandy manages his ageing crisis through sartorial flair, Norman Newlander (Alan Arkin) draws on a distinct lineage of radical honesty, cynicism, and Jewish-American comedic performance. Rather than masking decline, Norman weaponizes it, using caustic wit and *chutzpah* (unvarnished candor and irreverence) to strip away social taboos regarding death and bodily malfunction. Arkin's performance draws on his historical roots in Chicago's Second City improvisational theater and off-Broadway dark comedies, as well as a star persona—evident in *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006) and *Argo* (2012)—rooted in sharp, irritable, yet deeply humane performers such as Groucho Marx, Walter Matthau, and Jack Albertson. Finally, the series routinely deploys real-life Hollywood figures playing self-deprecating or compromised versions of themselves: Elliott Gould pitches an absurd senior action movie before appearing in a financial product commercial (Ep. 1x05); Eddie Money performs his own hit song in a budget hotel while pretending to be a cover artist to evade tax liability (Ep. 1x06); and Morgan Freeman appears as a rival acting instructor consumed by his own iconic image (Ep. 3x04).

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This study set out to examine how ageing and celebrity are jointly performed in platform-era television, addressed here through an intensive single-case analysis (Yin, 2018) of *The Kominsky Method*. Read jointly, the findings indicate that the series does not simply represent later life but actively renegotiates it: it stages biological vulnerability as an ordinary, rather than exceptional, condition (RQ1); it reframes stardom as precarious labor by exploiting the friction between Michael Douglas's and Alan Arkin's star personas and their fictional counterparts (RQ2); and it converts this friction into an intertextual resource that solicits viewers' cultural memory and sustains platform loyalty (RQ3).

Regarding RQ1, the thematic analysis reveals a departure from both ageist stereotypes of decline and the depoliticized ideal of "successful ageing" (Gullette, 2004; Rowe & Kahn, 1997). *The Kominsky Method* constructs a dual representation of later life that holds together physical vulnerability—prostate dysfunction, cancer, cognitive change—and relational resilience enacted through friendship and family repair. Rather than pathologizing bodily decline or romanticizing old age, the series treats it as an ordinary, ongoing dimension of social life, consistent with Walker's (2002) account of active ageing as a balance of risk and participation. Sexuality and masculinity are renegotiated along the same lines: Sandy and Norman perform late-life intimacy not through youthful virility but through self-deprecating humor, medical management, and emotional vulnerability (Pesce, 2023; Twigg, 2020).

Regarding RQ2, the series sustains a continuous semiotic friction between diegetic narrative and extradiegetic star history. Drawing on Dyer's (1979, 1986) concept of structured polysemy, it systematically contrasts Michael Douglas's historical star image—built on hyper-masculine, authoritative screen roles—with Sandy Kominsky's fragility, financial insecurity, and professional obsolescence. Holmes's (2005) account of television intimacy sharpens this tension further: by relocating a legacy film star to the domestic, serialized space of streaming television, the medium performs an "authentic unmasking" of the star persona. By grounding Sandy's routine in teaching and auditions, the series also dramatizes celebrity labor (Cashmore, 2006), demystifying stardom as precarious, ongoing vocational work rather than an unassailable status—an empirical illustration of the "slow decline" phase of the celebrity capital life cycle (Carrillat & Ilicic, 2019; Driessens, 2013).

Regarding RQ3, the series functions as an intertextual archive that positions viewers to draw on cultural memory and generational taste. Through references to 1970s counterculture, classic Hollywood figures, and period soundscapes, The Kominsky Method solicits viewers' paratextual literacy; whether and how this textual invitation is actually taken up by audiences—as distinct from what is encoded in the text—remains an empirical question the present design cannot resolve (see Section *Limits and Further Directions*). Within the text itself, nonetheless, nostalgic activation is constructed as a device of emotional comfort that builds a shared cultural horizon between the ageing characters and Netflix's ageing subscriber base. Netflix's distribution strategy converts this mechanism into platform capital (Hallinan & Striphas, 2016; Lobato, 2019). In this light, deliberate aesthetic and narrative choices form part of Netflix's strategy to create a product that speaks directly to older audiences. By capitalizing on a segment of the audience's nostalgia for a fading cultural world and showbiz era, the platform aligns production and distribution decisions to combine the comfort of memory with the emotional realism associated with old age and mortality. Moreover, the platform's strategy is reflected on a metatextual level within the series itself: while watching *Cocoon* (1985) on TV—a film in which elderly retirement home residents regain youth, health, and vitality after swimming in a pool containing ancient alien cocoons—Norman remarks that "it's a whole different thing when you're in the demographic."

Furthermore, at the industrial level, the series illustrates how platformization reshapes the cultural valuation of ageing. Streaming infrastructures such as Netflix operate through niche aggregation and global distribution, allowing long-form serialized narratives to bypass linear broadcast constraints and target specific taste cultures (Hallinan & Striphas, 2016; Lobato, 2019; Re, 2026). Casting veteran stars serves a dual industrial function: it supplies immediate symbolic distinction for the platform's prestige catalog (Tryon, 2015) while converting the late-stage celebrity capital of post-stardom actors—itself a Bourdieusian category of accumulated, convertible capital (Driessens, 2013)—into commercial value (Carrillat & Ilicic, 2019).

These findings suggest that platformed television does not merely reflect demographic ageing but actively manages the collective anxieties it generates (Phillipson, 2013). By framing late-life vulnerability through comedic reflexivity and a distinctive aesthetic of ageing (Pesce, 2023), the series normalizes public discourse on mortality, caregiving, and bodily decline, turning the ageing celebrity body into a symbolic site where anxieties about health, loss, and social relevance are processed and, ultimately, converted into prestige content.

Limits and Further Directions

Several limitations qualify these conclusions and delimit their scope. First, as a single-case study of an American prestige comedy-drama, the findings are analytically rather than statistically generalizable (Yin, 2018): they illuminate a mechanism—the conversion

of post-stardom vulnerability into platform value—whose prevalence across other genres, national contexts, and media forms remains to be evaluated through comparative research (e.g., European or Asian streaming productions, or ageing-themed pure dramas rather than comedy-dramas).

Second, this study is strictly textual. Claims regarding the "activation" of audience memory and the generation of emotional comfort describe what the text structurally invites and makes available for interpretation, rather than how actual viewers—who possess heterogeneous age profiles, national cultural repertoires, and relationships to the referenced stars—receive, negotiate, or resist these textual cues. Empirical audience research (e.g., semi-structured interviews, surveys, or reception ethnographies with older media consumers) is necessary to substantiate these audience-centered claims and would usefully complement this textual analysis.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the single-case design facilitated the fine-grained, scene-level analysis required by the research questions. Furthermore, it establishes an integrative framework—bridging Celebrity Studies, Television Studies, and Platform Studies—that subsequent comparative and audience-centered research can operationalize and extend.

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