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The Portrayal of Older Adults in Advertising

A Cross-National Review

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From a multinational perspective, this article provides an overview of a number of research programs examining portrayals of older adults in advertising. The research described includes both quantitative and qualitative analyses of the place of older people in advertising and the ways this is associated with older adults' place in society. This article is organized around three central themes: an overview of the major theoretical perspectives surrounding advertising and aging; an overview of research conducted in the United States, Great Britain, Germany, China, and India; and a final critique.

Keywords: images of aging; stereotypes of older adults; advertising; United States; United Kingdom; Germany; China; India

Television viewing and magazine and newspaper reading have long been major leisure activities for people around the globe, including older adults (J. D. Robinson, Skill, & Turner, 2004). Advertising is ubiquitous in the general interest media and, hence, is an inescapable part of consumers' media experiences. Statistics from the United States indicate that an average person views about 714 television commercials per week, or 37,000 per year (Bretl & Cantor, 1988). In combination with other forms of media, we are exposed to approximately 500 advertisements per day, 182,000 per year, and millions in a lifetime (Wilson & Wilson, 1998). In line with these statistics and

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motivated by a general interest in media's roles in society and in people's lives, social scientists have studied the content and effects of advertising (Lin, 1993; Morgan & Reichert, 1999; Pollay, 1983; Scott, 1994; Zandpour, Chang, & Catalano, 1992).

Guided by a perspective that advertisements are not just about selling products, brand names, and services, researchers studying the content and effects of advertising are mainly concerned with the social influence of advertising, such as the images of different social groups (e.g., age, gender, and cultural groups) perpetuated by media ads and their potential influence on consumers' perceptions and attitudes toward these social groups (D. Miller, Leyell, & Mazachek, 2004; P. N. Miller, Miller, McKibbin, & Pettys, 1999; Roy & Harwood, 1997; Swayne & Greco, 1987). Moreover, the demographic growth of the older adult population in the past two decades in almost every nation, and an increased concern for older adults' social, psychological, and physical well-being, have stimulated research specifically targeting media representations of older adults. Research in this area has examined advertising in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, China, and India. This article addresses each of these cultural contexts, but first we review relevant theoretical perspectives.

Theoretical Perspectives

Two major theoretical perspectives are relevant to research on aging in advertising—a broad socialization perspective (e.g., Rosengren, 1992), including cultivation theory (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986), and the ethnolinguistic vitality theory (e.g., Abrams, Eveland, & Giles, 2003; Harwood & Anderson, 2002; Harwood & Roy, 1999). The major premise of cultivation theory is that the more time individuals spend consuming media (e.g., watching television), the closer their views are to the "world" created by media. In other words, repeated and extensive exposure to media images influences viewers' perceptions of social reality in the direction of the world constructed by media (see Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, & Morgan, 1980). In the long run, Gerbner and his associates stated that media, particularly television, have the ability to homogenize individuals' divergent views. Cultivation theory assumes divergence between social reality and the television world; however, when the world created by television and the real world echo, resonance occurs and cultivation is even stronger (Gerbner et al., 1986). Although cultivation theory has received criticisms (see Potter, 1993), its major principles remain intact. Hence, cultivation theory has served as an important theoretical rationale for research on aging and media (e.g., Gerbner et al., 1980; Harwood, 1999; Harwood & Anderson, 2002). Other socialization theories also emphasize in broad terms how people, especially children, learn about the world (e.g., sex roles, age stereotypes, and cultural values) through cumulative exposure to media (Rosengren, 1992).

A second relevant theoretical framework speaking to the importance of aging and media research is ethnolinguistic vitality theory (Giles, Bourhis, & Taylor, 1977;

Harwood, Giles, & Bourhis, 1994). Ethnolinguistic vitality theory considers the strength of various groups in society, as defined by their status, institutional support, and demographics (e.g., are they demographically numerous, are they concentrated in a particular geographic area, are they involved in high-level governmental decision making, are they disenfranchised?). In terms of ethnolinguistic groups, vitality has been identified as a key factor influencing group and language survival (McConnell, 1991). More generally, though, for all groups, vitality can be understood as crucial to understanding the position of a group in society—Is this group valued and worthy of respect and attention? One key dimension of vitality in the original conception is institutional support and particularly support and representation in the media. Hence, recent work has begun to explore media presence and portrayal of groups from a vitality perspective (Abrams et al., 2003; Harwood & Anderson, 2002; Harwood & Roy, 2005). At its most basic, such work suggests that the presence or absence of a group in the media is an indicator of that group's level of objective vitality in society. This theoretical approach contrasts with socialization approaches in that it considers the merit of examining content qua content, rather than understanding it as significant only in terms of the effects that it may have. The vitality approach brings a somewhat more macrosocial perspective to understanding why portrayals of groups in the media are worthy of attention.

Guided by these theoretical approaches, research on aging and the media has focused on the question of whether media perpetuate age stereotypes and the potential impacts advertising has on perceptions and attitudes toward older adults and the aging process (P. N. Miller et al., 1999; D. Miller, 2004; Palmore, 1990; Smith, Moschis, & Moore, 1984; Vasil & Wass, 1993). Specifically, research has established that television viewing influences viewers' age identity and attitudes toward their own and those of other age groups (Harwood, 1999). In addition, research has shown that heavy viewers' estimates of the demographic figures of the real-world population in terms of age, gender, and sex are closer to the television population than the actual figures (Gerbner et al., 1980, 1986). These findings reinforce a belief that understanding the prevalence of older adults and portrayals of aging images in advertising has central significance to older adults' health. In Western culture, aging has been predominantly viewed as negative in physical, social, and psychological ways (Kite, Deaux, & Miele, 1991). Studies show that older people are perceived as incompetent, fragile, complaining, socially unskilled, overly self-disclosive, and dominating (Kite et al., 1991; Kite & Johnson, 1988), though they are also perceived positively in some ways, such as kind, supportive, and wise (Hummert, Garstka, Shaner, & Strahm, 1994; Schmidt & Boland, 1986).

The research programs reported here have examined some fundamental issues—the nature of presence/prevalence, role prominence, relational context, and age images/stereotypes of older adults in advertising. Given that these portrayals have significant social consequences, findings could potentially address whether advertisers are socially responsible—whether advertising gives adequate attention to the

older population and perpetuates age stereotypes (both positive and negative). In the following sections, research on aging in advertising across various cultural contexts is described.

Portrayals of Aging in Advertising in the United States

Presence of Older Adults in Advertising

Motivated by an interest in examining whether older consumers are receiving adequate attention from marketers, many studies have investigated the prevalence of older adults in advertising. Individuals older than 65 represent approximately 13% of the total U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). Previous studies examining the prevalence of older characters in advertising in various media forms have yielded a rather consistent finding: Older characters, especially older female characters, were underrepresented compared to census figures (Gantz, Gartenberg, & Rainbow, 1980; T. E. Robinson, 1998; Roy & Harwood, 1997). For example, Gantz et al. (1990) content analyzed U.S. advertisements from seven national magazines (i.e., *People*, *Reader's Digest*, *Time*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Playboy*, and *Ms.*) and found that only 5.9% of advertisements contained one or more older individuals. More recently, Raman, Harwood, Weis, Anderson, and Miller (2006) found a slight increase (9%) in magazine representations of adults aged 65 and older; however, older women were dramatically underrepresented relative to older men in U.S. magazine ads (see also P. N. Miller et al., 1999).

Research on the presence of older adults in television commercials has similar findings (Hiemstra, Goodman, Middlemiss, Vosco, & Ziegler, 1983; D. Miller et al., 2004; T. E. Robinson, 1998; Swayne & Greco, 1987). Hiemstra et al. (1983) found that only 3.1% of television commercials contained individuals older than 60. Their findings also indicated that older women (less than 1% of the total number of the characters) and older minority characters were almost invisible in the sample. Roy and Harwood's (1997) study provided additional support that older individuals were underrepresented in television commercials. Specifically, they found that the television population of older adults in television commercials was 6.9%.

Role Prominence of Older Adults in Advertising

Another dimension examined in aging and advertising research is role prominence—whether the characters play a major, minor, or neutral/background character and whether they serve as information providers, receivers, or neither. Swayne and Greco (1987) found that 56% of the older characters played minor roles, 31.6% played major roles, and 12.3% were background roles in television commercials. Among

these, 65.2% of older characters were portrayed as advisors and 15.2% were infor-mation receivers. In addition, they found no advertisements targeted specifically at older adults. Roy and Harwood's (1997) study on television advertising found that the percentages of older characters in major roles were similar to those in Swayne and Greco. However, Roy and Harwood had different findings for the minor and background roles of older characters. Specifically, their findings indicated that 19.5% of older adults were portrayed as minor characters, and 52.8% played back-ground roles. Their findings also indicated that older characters were portrayed as advisors in 45.3% of commercials, 12.5% of older characters were portrayed as information receivers, and 42.2% were classified as neither.

Although T. E. Robinson's (1998) study did not address the character portrayals as advisors or information receivers, it examined major, minor, or background roles in relation to the target audience of the commercials. In commercials aimed at the older market, 44.5% were major roles, 28.3% were minor, and 27.2% were back-ground roles. Obviously, research on role prominence of older adults in television commercials is still it its infancy, and findings reflect some inconsistencies. The majority of the older characters are cast in minor or background roles, although the percentages of older adult characters in major roles increases in commercials targeted at the older market (Raman et al., 2006; T. E. Robinson, 1998).

Aging Images in Advertising

Research has established the importance of examining the portrayals of older characters. Personality traits or characteristics, cognitive abilities, physical features, and age stereotypes of older characters have been examined in this line of research. Research findings have provided evidence that older adults in general are portrayed in positive ways, although less positive than other age groups (D. Miller et al., 2004; T. E. Robinson, 1998; Swayne & Greco, 1987). Roy and Harwood (1997) examined older adults' physical features (e.g., strong/weak), personality traits (e.g., happy/sad, comical/serious), and cognitive abilities (e.g., lucid/confused) in television commer-cials. Their findings indicated that older adults were generally shown positively. The majority of the commercials showed older individuals as strong, active, happy, and lucid. T. E. Robinson (1998) examined whether the older character was seen as mean, irritable, or grumpy, focusing on facial expressions, personal characteristics, and behaviors. Robinson also examined the portrayal of older individuals in relation to the target audience. Findings indicated that in advertisements targeted at the older market, older individuals were most frequently portrayed as happy/content (39.1%), sick/feeble (22.8%), and active/healthy (16.3%). In commercials targeted at all con-sumers, older individuals were most frequently portrayed as happy/content (65%) and competent/intelligent (12.5%). These findings indicate an overall positive por-trayal of older characters in television commercials, although older characters are portrayed more positively in commercials targeting all consumers.

Peterson and Ross (1997) content analyzed 1,044 commercials to determine whether older characters were desirable (mentally and physically competent) or undesirable (mentally or physically incompetent). Their results indicated that older models (i.e., those older than 65) were shown less favorably than younger models; commercials that were targeted at people older than 45 depicted individuals older than 65 as being helpless, impaired, weak, lazy, or less informed than their younger counterparts.

Dimensions used to measure older adult portrayals include physical (e.g., active/healthy, sick/feeble, strong/weak), sociobehavioral (e.g., happy/content, angry/disgruntled, happy/sad, humorous/disgruntled), and cognitive traits (e.g., competent/intelligent, lucid/confused; T. E. Robinson, 1998; Roy & Harwood, 1997). These traits are subsets of the age stereotypes found in Hummert et al.'s (1994) study. Hummert et al. have demonstrated that both positive (golden ager, perfect grandparent, John Wayne conservative) and negative (severely impaired, despondent, shrew/curmudgeon, recluse) aging stereotypes exist in our society.

Using categories from Hummert et al. (1994), P. N. Miller et al. (1999) examined age stereotyping and age stereotypes of older adults in magazine advertisements (a total of 1,944 ads) from 1956 to 1996. Of the ads that contained older adults, they found that only 4% portrayed older adults negatively (e.g., impaired). Positive stereotypes appeared more often: Golden ager appeared in 37% of the ads containing older adults, perfect grandparent 14%, and John Wayne conservative 9.3%. D. Miller et al. (2004) examined stereotypes of older adults in U.S. television commercials from 1950s to the 1990s (a total of 1,662 commercials), finding that 78.2% of the older characters were portrayed as at least somewhat consistent with a positive age stereotype and only 11.9% of the characters were portrayed as somewhat consistent with a negative stereotype. These two studies further confirmed the positive portrayal of older characters in advertising. However, there continue to be concerns with the overwhelming association of aging with ill health in advertising. Even positive portrayals of older adults often reference ill health or occur in advertising for health-related products (e.g., Raman et al., 2006).

Social Contexts and Physical Settings
of Older Adults in Television Commercials

Research has also examined the social contexts and physical settings in which older characters are placed in television commercials (T. E. Robinson, 1998; Roy & Harwood, 1997; Swayne & Greco, 1987). This research helps us to understand how older characters are portrayed socially on television, which in turn provides insights to age stereotypes in advertising (T. E. Robinson, 1998).

Swayne and Greco (1987) found that in television commercials, older individuals appeared alone in 14%, with their peers in 8%, and with children in 4% of the commercials. Older people appeared with multiple age groups in 75% of the commercials.

Similarly, Roy and Harwood (1997) found that older characters appeared with multiple age groups in 76.4% of commercials, followed by only appearing with older adult characters (13%), then alone (10.6%). However, commercials with older characters and children were not present. Swayne and Greco also found that older characters in television commercials were predominantly placed at home (56%), followed by in business settings (18%) and other settings (14%). Rather than looking at the overall setting for advertisements with older individuals, T. E. Robinson (1998) focused on the settings of older individuals in commercials targeted at the older age group. In those commercials, the dominant settings included outdoor (63%), studio (16.3%), and home (8.7%).

Cultural Values Presented in Television Advertising Featuring Older Adults

Although individuals hold their own sets of personal values, cultural values are defined as "the governing ideas and guiding principles for thought and action" (Chan & Cheng, 2002, p. 388; Srikandath, 1991). The cultural values appearing in advertisements provide consumers with standards and justifications for their purchasing decisions and, hence, are powerful forces influencing consumers' value systems (Balazs, 1995; Mueller, 1992; Pollay, 1983; Zhang & Harwood, 2004). Using a content analysis approach, several cross-cultural studies examined cultural values in U.S. television commercials (Lin, 1993, 2001; Pollay & Gallagher, 1990). Across a broad range of advertisements, the dominant cultural values identified in the United States include enjoyment, youth, independence, economy, modernity, technology, utilitarian values, and achievement (Caillat & Mueller, 1996; Cheng & Schweitzer, 1996; Cho, Kwon, Gentry, Jun, & Kropp, 1999; Lin, 2001). Recently, Zhang and Agard (2004) examined cultural values presented in television commercials ($N = 341$) featuring older adults. They identified seven value themes presented in television commercials featuring older adults. Among these, health appeared most frequently (29.6%), followed by utilitarian values (26.1%) and economy (21.7%). Although enjoyment appeared in 9.1% of the commercials, family was used only in 7.9%. The least frequent value themes manifested included technology (2.1%) and achievement (1.5%). These findings indicate that there is a very limited number of value themes manifested in television commercials containing older adults. Value themes (e.g., modernity, youth, achievement/success, technology) common in television commercials targeting other age cohorts in previous research appear with very low frequency in commercials featuring older adults.

Product category has been examined in almost every study of advertising. Research has found that older characters tend to appear in commercials where health products, food/drinks, services, and household products are promoted (Hiemstra et al., 1983; T. E. Robinson, 1998). Specifically, Roy and Harwood (1997) found that older adults were targeted for financial services and retail chains while ignored by

automobile manufacturers and travel agencies. Consistent with the literature, Zhang and Agard (2004) found that older adults predominantly promoted services (e.g., legal, financial, travel, insurance, and medical), as well as medicine, food/drink, health/beauty, and home improvement products. Similarly, Raman et al. (2006) found a massive overrepresentation of textual references to aging in ads for health-related products in magazine ads.

Aging and Advertising in the United Kingdom

Brief Overview of U.K. Research on Aging and Advertising

Unlike in the United States, research on aging and the media has been very scarce in the United Kingdom. Although there seem to be practically no studies specifically on aging and advertising in a British context, representations of old age in the media have been investigated. For example, Featherstone and Hepworth (1995) carried out a longitudinal case study of the *(Retirement) Choice* magazine. From its start in 1972, this magazine explicitly attacked the traditional ageist image of retirement in Britain, namely, that of uselessness and passivity. Instead, "the promotion of the benefits of an active, positive aging lifestyle where the consumption of goods and services has an integral role to play in the battle against ageism" (p. 40) has predominated, together with relatively glamorous, youthful, fit, and healthy images of middle-aged and older people.

Bytheway (2003; see also Bytheway & Johnson, 1998) analyzed the contents and imagery, including advertisements, in *YOURS* magazine targeting older readers. In the features, Bytheway found "familiar images of later life: reflection and fulfillment, travel and activity; and advice and support" (p. 44). The advertisements form the largest visual representations of later life that appear in the magazine, with clothing, travel/holidays/cameras, equity, and medicines/food supplements/cosmetics being the most frequently advertised products. In many of the advertisements, such as those advertising clothes, the models are younger than 50, but models in their 70s and beyond can also be seen, especially in ads for housing and equity release plans. Bytheway concluded that *YOURS*, through its imagery and other coverage, provides guidance for its readers on what active steps can be taken to fight the challenges and inevitabilities of old age.

Thematic Analysis of Portrayals of Older People:
Lay Perceptions of Themes

Previous research (Ylänne-McEwen & Williams, 2003) has indicated that portrayals of older people in U.K. magazine advertisements are only rarely age neutral or more accurately "age incidental" in that the age of the characters has little bearing on the purpose of the advertisement. More often, age of characters is used in a variety

of ways: Old age may be "set up" by the advertisers as a possible negative condition that can be overcome if only the consumer buys the product (see also Raman et al., 2006). Lifestyle products are prominent here, such as food supplements and health supplies. Similarly, glamour products are advertised by well-groomed older people on the "young" side of older. Old age may also be portrayed humorously as comic or amusing. The viewer of the advertisement may be encouraged to laugh with the character portrayed or may be encouraged to laugh at the character and older people in general. Of course, the latter type is more likely to appear in magazines aimed at a younger audience (Ylänne-McEwen & Williams, 2003). Elders are also portrayed rather traditionally surrounded by family—perhaps grandchildren or even several generations—often the message implies that it is your duty to stay well, fit, or financially viable for your family's sake. Finally, of course, older people are used to endorse products, and these can be celebrities or "ordinary" members of the public.

Following this, an unpublished pilot study by Ylänne-McEwen and Williams asked 32 undergraduate student participants to view a selection of the advertisements described above, sort them into similarity groups, and provide a label or summary title for each group. The most frequent groupings can be summarized as "young at heart" (depicting older people enjoying life), "glamorous/stylish" (depicting young-looking and sophisticated elders), "stereotypical" (depicting traditional roles or elders needing certain products: dependent, incapable), "family" (showing elders as grandparents or in other family roles), and "products for convenience" (depicting mobility or other life-enhancement products).

Products Promoted in U.K. Magazine Advertisements Featuring Older People

A current U.K. research team (Williams, Ylänne-McEwen, & Wadleigh) investigates images of older people in U.K. print media and TV advertising. The research examines how such images convey schemata of age and aging; lifespan and longevity; and issues that relate to social-, intergroup-, and self-identity within the current context of an aging population. A sample of 171 magazine advertisements was collected from 10 magazines *(BBC Good Food; The Economist; Family Circle; FHM [For Him Magazine]; Good Housekeeping; Marie Claire; Men's Health; Radio Times; Rugby World; Saga Magazine)*. The magazines represented a range of popularity, different target age groups, genders, and interests and covered a 5-year period (1999-2004). The research examined all advertisements including an older person (aged, approximately, 60 or older, appearing either individually or among people of different ages; advertisements using cartoon figures were not included in this sample).

Preliminary categorizations indicate that the largest category is of products that offer help and support to older people in their homes (e.g., walk-in baths, recliner chairs, and stairlifts: 48 ads). The second biggest category is food and drink (here, the older person is often featured as the founder of the company or symbolizes

long-standing expertise: 26 ads), and the third biggest is retirement housing (22 ads). These three categories account for 56% of the advertisements in this sample. Various kinds of medication, including vitamin supplements as well as medical equipment and medical services occurred ($n = 14$); electronic equipment, DVD movies, and computer-related products ($n = 10$) and charities, typically related to age-related problems or illnesses ($n = 8$) were also present. In addition, there were also advertisements featuring cosmetics and items for personal hygiene ($n = 6$), clothes ($n = 7$), security-related products (e.g., alarms; $n = 5$), health care insurance ($n = 5$), and financial products/services ($n = 4$). The remaining occurrences were comprised of miscellaneous other items including soap powder, airlines, college courses, and store cards.

Case Study of Olivio Advertising Campaign in U.K. Media, 1995-2003

This case study forms part of the project mentioned above. Here, the focus is on print media advertisements for Olivio margarine (later named Bertolli) from 1995 to 2003. We have identified four distinct phases in this campaign, evident in the layout of the advertisements, as well as in the content and amount of text, and visuals.

In the first phase, starting in 1995, the ads are primarily information-focused, educating the audience as to the benefits of a Mediterranean diet, including olive oil. The health benefits are foregrounded, and old people in the pictures symbolize longevity and healthy, active old age. The older people pictured here appear to violate expectations of negativity of old age. For example, an ad featuring an older man sitting outside next to a table laden with Mediterranean food and wine is captioned, "He may be 73, but you wouldn't want to spill his Chianti." The second phase continues the educational stance with specific information about the health benefits of a Mediterranean diet. Multigenerational families are pictured, alluding to longevity, and older people are positioned in positive grandparent roles, "handing down the secret of long life."

The third phase centers around named older individuals who are depicted engaging in youthful activities, such as driving a sports car or practicing yoga. The humor in the text relies on the ambiguity of the word *oil*, which could refer to either the advertised olive oil or to petrol, as in an ad featuring driving "Rosanna": "Thanks to the right oil she still goes like the clappers" (meaning "like clockwork"). The amount of text and health information about the benefits of olive oil decreases in this phase, and the text is minimal in the fourth phase. These ads center around the name change of Olivio to Bertolli, and the older people in these ads feature as individuals or romantically linked couples, themselves modeling new vocabulary, for example, "babe magnet, the new name for handsome fellow" (featuring a smiling old man leaning against a tree in Mediterranean countryside) and "arm candy, a new name for girlfriend" (featuring the same man holding hands with an older woman, standing by a golden field with olive trees in the background). What seems significant about these latter ads is that old people symbolize not just the Mediterranean ideal of

enjoying a longer, fuller life, as in the campaign as a whole (Holmes, McDonald, & Firth, 2002), but also new vocabulary, relationships, implied sexuality, and perhaps new ways of being old. These images and messages might reflect changing attitudes and stereotypes of old age, in turn affected by changes in the aging cohort group. Modern expectations of old age are constructed, with more focus on individuals, and old people are removed from exclusive grandparent roles. The same campaign was used also in Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands.

The Changing Landscape of Images of Older People in Advertising

The research outlined above represents a significant advance from previous research that tended to list number of "positive" versus number of "negative" representations of elders in print and other media. Instead, this recent research endeavor explores material that indicates current images of elders are multivalent. Positive images of glamorous and/or zestful globe-trotting elders exist alongside trite stereotypes. In addition, challenges to traditional taboos about elder romantic relationships and even sexual activity are becoming more evident. Advertisers are responding to new consumer markets created by the baby boom, healthy/active lifestyles, and longevity. One risk is the emergence of "approved" ways of growing old, which implies that older people have the responsibility for maintaining their own health, financial viability, and so forth. Elders who do not conform may be at risk of being marginalized, perhaps even being seen as responsible for their own demise.

Aging and Advertising in Germany

Germany underwent a radical generational change due to a very low birthrate (1.3 compared to France with 2.0). Forty years ago, less than 8% of the West German population was older than 65; by the year 2000, this number had jumped to 22%. By 2050, the number will rise to 31%. Specifically, 14% or 9 million of the German population will be 80 years old and above (Statistische Bundesamt, 2004). In addition to the population increase, the older generation holds 48% of Germany's wealth. This imbalance has led to tensions in intergenerational relationships, reflected by public discourse on injustice and problems for younger people in an aging society. Media coverage included belligerent phrases such as "war against the old" *("Krieg den Alten")* or "young against old" *("Jung gegen Alt").*

Old Age in German Media

Research on media representation of aging has become more prevalent (Thimm, 2000), with a particular focus on images of older adults on television (Kessler, Rakoczy & Staudinger, 2004), in print media (Lohmann, 1997), and in advertising (Thimm,

1998). These analyses show that the predominantly negative images from the 1980s and 1990s (Bosch, 1990) have been modified by a tendency for positive, age-complimentary images, especially in television advertising (Flueren, Klein, & Redetzki-Rodermann, 2002). There have been more advertisements for modern and attractive products (computers, insurance, banking) with positive old age traits such as attractiveness and agility (Thimm, 1998). Despite this trend, negative traits still occur in advertising.

Media and the Construction of Reality

Although substantial research has examined the representation of old age in various types of media, few studies have linked representation, perception, and evaluation by older adults themselves. Guided by the hypothesis that the media offer frames for old age, the Bonn research group performed two pilot studies (unpublished) to assess older people's perceptions of age-related images. They aimed to examine the range of representations of older people available in media resources and evaluate the ways in which older adults perceive certain age cues as relevant to the shaping of elderly images in the media. The following research questions were addressed:

1. Do older adults show a specific awareness for depictions of old age in the media?
2. What factors contribute to the construction of old age images?
3. Are there within-age-group differences? Do very old individuals, for example (70 and older), have a different perception on stereotypes than the young old?

Study 1 consisted of face-to-face interviews based on a standardized questionnaire. In this study, 28 older persons (70 or older; *M* age = 73), participated in 1-hour interviews. Study 2 consisted of online questionnaires of older Internet users of the SeniorWeb/University of Bonn. One hundred thirteen older adults (60+ years old) participated in the study (*M* age = 62). Both studies focused on issues of general media usage, perceptions of media representations of older people, perception of TV representation of relations between old and young, evaluation of selected older television celebrities, and perceptions of old age in advertising.

Findings from these pilot studies indicate slight media consumption differences between the two groups of seniors and the general population. For example, 92% of the participants watched television daily, whereas only 85% of the general public did so; only 47% of the respondents listened to the radio frequently, whereas 82% of the overall population did so. These differences echo other research indicating that older adults use more television and less radio than the general population (J. D. Robinson et al., 2004). Evaluation of the quality of personal intergenerational relations versus perceived image of intergenerational relations on television showed clear differences between the two groups. Whereas 42% of the online group judged the contact between old and young as positive, 35% as neutral, 39% as slightly negative, and 24% as very negative, they had a much more negative assessment of the depiction of intergenerational contact

in the media. Out of this group, 47% saw it as very negative, 15% as positive, and 35% as neutral. In the 70+ group, the difference was not as explicit in that 39% saw the relationship between old and young in real life as neutral, 37% as positive. The media image was judged as positive by 14%, as neutral by 64%, and as negative by 14%. When looking at images of negative versus positive age stereotyping in the media (such as bad health/frailty vs. activity/energy), 35% of the 70+ group saw frailty as an old age cue, but another 35% noted activity. The online group did not perceive the media presentation of old age to be characterized by frailty (60% explicitly disagreed).

Older adult participants perceived young characters on television as domineering: They saw some disrespect and noted that some topics were taboo for older adults, especially love and romance. Results of age awareness for advertising show a clear difference in respect of media type. When asked where they remember having seen age-related advertising, most named television: In the 70+ group, 53% recalled having seen age-related commercials, a much lower percentage remembered it in print media (38%), and hardly anyone in radio commercials (9%). Out of the online group, even more participants claimed to have seen or heard age-related advertising: Seventy-four percent remembered having seen commercials that had an age issue on television, 73% remembered print ads, and 4% recalled radio commercials. When asked for those old age cues in advertising, respondents mentioned the product (69%), the depicted persons (65%), and the language (42%).

The evaluation of age-related advertising was mixed. In the online group, 7% perceived it as very positive, 38% perceived it as slightly positive, 40% perceived it as neutral, but 21% perceived it as negative, and 2% as very negative. In the 70+ group, participants were more critical, where 14% regarded images of old age in advertising as very negative.

When asked about gendered images of old age in advertising, a surprising result was obtained: Both male and female respondents regarded older women as attractive and funny, but not as physically affected by age as older men. Older men were also seen as attractive, competent, and funny; however, 69% of female respondents and 12% of male respondents also perceived them as physically affected. Summarizing the results, it can be said that both groups perceived the reality of intergenerational contact as more positive than the media image. Very old individuals had a more positive perception of media constructions of intergenerational relations than younger old adults, whereas both age groups see the younger generation as domineering, especially on television. Interestingly, there is a surprisingly high level of awareness of age-relevant advertising, as there is of gendered images of old age.

Aging and Advertising in China and India

Similar to research on aging in advertising in the United Kingdom, this line of research has been rare in Asia. Although limited, studies related to aging in advertising

have been conducted in India and China in recent years (Cheng & Schweitzer, 1996; Raman et al., 2006; Roy & Harwood, 1997; Zhang & Harwood, 2004). Harwood and Roy (1999) content analyzed the presence and portrayal of older characters in Indian and American popular magazines (women's, sports, entertainment, news, and business). The results showed that older female characters were underrepresented in both cultures. In India, older female characters composed 25% of the older magazine population, whereas in the U.S. older female characters constituted 32% of the older characters. This pattern of underrepresentation of older female characters is consistent with studies conducted in the United States. Furthermore, Harwood and Roy (1999) also examined grooming, activity, facial expression, and health associated with the image characterization of older adults in advertisements. Older characters in these two cultures were positively portrayed as equally well-groomed, active, healthy, and happy, but the facial expressions of older characters in the United States were more positive than their Indian counterparts. Indian older characters were shown more often than their American counterparts in work situations.

Extending Harwood and Roy's (1999) study, Raman et al. (2006) conducted a cross-cultural study on portrayals of age in 1,464 Indian and American magazine advertisements (i.e., women's, sports, entertainment, news, and general interest magazines). They coded 1,445 characters on variables such as age, ethnicity, health, affect, and family role. Their results indicated that Indian ads underrepresented older adults to an even greater extent than the ads in the United States. Also, the Indian advertisements had a greater imbalance of older men versus older women than in the United States—older men outnumbered older women more than three to one in the Indian ads. The links between aging and health, however, seemed slightly less marked in the Indian ads, in part because advertisements for health products are much more common in the United States.

Other related studies examining cultural values in television commercials revealed the presence of age-related issues (e.g., the presence of filial piety/respect for older people) in television advertising in China (Cheng & Schweitzer, 1996; Lin, 2001; Zhang & Harwood, 2004). Cheng and Schweitzer (1996) as well as Lin (2001) examined cultural values reflected in Chinese and American television advertising and found that respect for older adults was salient in the Chinese commercials, which was supported by Zhang and Harwood (2004). These findings indicate that media advertising reflects local culture.

Conclusions, Summary, and Cross-Cultural Contrasts

There has been extensive research on aging in television that uses quantitative content analysis procedures in the United States. This work has shown that (a) older characters, especially female and minority older characters, are underrepresented relative to the population; (b) older characters are generally portrayed positively

in advertising from both the image portrayal and stereotyping perspectives; (c) older adults are predominantly and continuously portrayed in minor roles and background/peripheral roles; and (d) values presented in television commercials containing older adults and product categories promoted in such ads are very limited, indicating that commercials containing older adults may emphasize different cultural values. At times, these cultural values may reinforce negative perceptions of the aging process (e.g., an intractable association of aging and poor health), even while portraying individual older adults in a positive light.

Altogether these themes concerning the portrayal of older characters provide an equivocal picture of advertising and aging. On one hand, unlike some critics of advertising who suggest that older people are most often portrayed negatively (Abrams et al., 2003), advertising images of older adults in the past few decades have been quite positive. The positive portrayals are probably an effect of advertisers' motive of not alienating the older market or invoking negative affect in consumers. On the other hand, the underrepresentation and limited value themes and product categories in advertising containing older characters communicates the idea that older adults are not important and not contributing much to society (Roy & Harwood, 1997). These factors suggest that we must not be too optimistic about positive images of aging in advertising. Positive images serve important functions for older individuals, but if they are uncommon or inaccurate, they will lead to inaccurate feelings and perceptions of older individuals. Maintaining balance among accuracy, economic benefits, and social effects is a tough job for advertisers, but it is an ethical and essential obligation. The linking of positive images to negative stereotypes (e.g., smiling older adults in ads for health-related products) is a serious concern, and one that may fall below the radar of research that simply codes the affective portrayal.

Research on aging in advertising in the United Kingdom, Germany, India, and China is still in its infancy. Some of this work has taken rather different trajectories from the U.S. research, with more interpretive/qualitative research in the United Kingdom and work on older adults' perceptions of advertising in Germany. However, the work on India and China has followed the U.S. (quantitative, content analytic) approach. Over time, it will be useful to translate the methodological emphases from all of these research programs across cultures. The focus on specific campaigns adopted by the researchers in the United Kingdom (e.g., Olivio olive oil) could be usefully translated to the United States, where financial institutions, for example, are starting to focus on the aging baby boomers and feature increasingly diverse and positive images of older adulthood in their advertising. Likewise, the focus on audience responses is essential as this work continues. The descriptive content analytic work needs to be complemented by work that examines how people of all ages respond to these messages. Further work examining the linguistic content of the advertisements and the content of their messages about aging is also essential. Although the visuals of advertising are clearly important, the text is also revealing. Work such as that done in China and the United States on cultural values moves us closer to this goal.

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