

# A Study on Images of the Elderly in Advertising

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**ABSTRACT.** *This article aims to study how well represented and portrayed the older people in print advertisements, how the manufacturers and marketers would like to utilize older persons in their advertisements, and consequently how these will affect the elderly's self-esteem and societal attitudes toward them. To find out these, a questionnaire survey is conducted. And seven sets of model images of aging and older people are selected out of approximately 100 advertisements collected in current print media in the UK. Finally, 30 respondents are recruited. The results have confirmed the seven categories of elderly images in print ads. The findings also show that the respondents' descriptions of either male or female elderly are in general positive. It concludes that the respondents' positive attitudes towards the images of elderly in the ads designated have mirrored the advertisers' positive attitudes towards the elderly.*

**Keywords:** *image, elderly, portrayal, advertisement, content analysis*

## 1. Introduction

The population in most part of the world is increasingly becoming older and larger numbers of marketers are making decisions to target this old group as their potential customers. Marketers are directing increased attention to older consumers [1]. Of course, older persons are important for goods and services whose demand patterns are correlated with age, such as recreational vehicles and lawn furniture [1]. They are also of significance for items which once appealed mainly to younger persons, such as home exercise equipment and personal computers.

Given the large size of this social group, one would expect the manufacturers and marketers would like to utilize older persons in their advertisements. To the contrary, as Peterson [1] points out, research indicates that numerous advertisements target younger customers, sometimes even for products which are directed at seniors. Cited by Roberts and Zhou [2], although older characters were not missing from advertisements, they were underrepresented in comparison with their proportion in the population [3]. The research done by Gantz and colleagues [4] also proves that the elderly, particularly women, appear to be underrepresented in magazine advertisements in comparison to the general population. They argue that

the scarcity of the elderly in magazine ads suggests that the elderly are not considered to play a major role in the consumer society.

In addition, when older people appear in advertisements, they are not often pictured positively, they are sometimes shown as uninformed, naïve, helpless, forgetful, or in some other unfavorable light [1]. According to Roberts and Zhou [2], the portrayal of 50 and older people in general audience advertising has traditionally not been positive. Their portrayals are often unfavorable-especially the portrayal of older women. They are also portrayed as having suffered a decline in physical activity level, needing health aids, and placed in scenes at home or in nonworking settings with little social interaction. Peterson [1] believes that such a role depiction is not likely to appeal to seniors and could bring about unfavorable reactions to the advertisement. Further it has the potential of lowering the self-esteem of older persons. Roberts and Zhou [2] hold that unfavorable images of older characters in advertising could affect the elderly's self-esteem and societal attitudes toward them. They could also provide negative cues for the behavior of elders. Consequently, since elders may have negative feelings about their unfavorable images in advertising, some of them might even boycott the advertiser's products.

Miller and colleagues [5] have found in their study that there has been an increasing percentage of negative stereotypes and a decreasing percentage of positive stereotypes of elderly portrayals in print ads. Stereotypes consist of sets of belief about the characteristics of the members of social groups that influence attitudes and behaviours toward them. Miller and colleagues [5] cite a cluster analysis of the data that produced four positive-trait clusters: John Wayne Conservative, Liberal Matriach/Patriarch, Perfect Grandparent, and Sage, and eight negative-trait clusters: Despondent, Mildly Impaired, Vulnerable, Severely Impaired, Shrew/Curmudgeon, Recluse, Nosy Neighbor, and Bag Lady/Vagrant. Generally, many people, either older or younger, believe that increasing age is associated with loss of attractiveness and this is communicated by the visual images of age we see portrayed in the media. Generally, the literature suggests that advertisers' attitudes toward the elderly are consistent with the general public's attitudes toward the elderly. As overall attitudes change, those of advertisers might be expected to be altered [1]. Hence, if overall attitudes toward the elderly are negative, advertisements may mirror this viewpoint.

The purpose of this study was to ascertain the following research hypotheses:

- 1). The respondents' groupings of the ads designated to them should be more or less similar to our seven categories.
- 2). There is no difference in the respondents' descriptions of the models in the ads designated to them with respect to the images' sex.
- 3). Methodology

In this small study, a questionnaire survey was conducted. And seven sets of model images of aging and older people were selected out of approximately 100 advertisements collected in current print media in the UK by Williams and Ylanne-McEwen in their project (2003). Each set consisted of two pictures, which was

based on the seven categories summarized in the project. The seven categories are:

1). Overcoming old age. This category contains mostly positive images, where negative expectations of aging can be overcome through using particular product that is being promoted in the ad.

2). Comic, amusing and ridiculous. This category consists of advertisements that are mostly negative in terms of their images of old age and older people by contrasting youth with older age.

3). Glamorous Golden Ager. This category consists of advertisements that are positive. They mostly feature young-old women (who are in their 50s and 60s) holding claiming or holding onto youth and beauty.

4). Elders in a family context. In this category elderly people are portrayed within a family network.

5). Celebrity endorsers. Celebrity endorsers are well known, well groomed positive models and exemplars of how ideal old age should be.

6). Public endorsers. These are also positive images, but they are images of people that consumers might identify with as more realistic representatives of their aspirations.

7). Age incidental. In these advertisements, older people appear as almost incidental to the product or target audience. The images are not age salient and do not rest on any kind of stereotyping or negative expectations.

There were 30 respondents recruited, 20 of whom were part-time students in the Lifelong Learning Centre. There were 12 females, 8 males. And the eldest was 58, the youngest was 32. 10 respondents were full-time postgraduates in the Centre for Language and Communication Research. There were 9 females, 1 male. And the eldest was 31, the youngest was 24. All of them were asked to sort the seven sets of pictures into groups on the basis of similarity, and give each group a title, description and say why they thought they were similar. The 14 pictures had been randomly coded as 1-14. Pictures 13 and 14 belong to category 1: Overcoming old age; Pictures 1 and 9 belong to category 2: Comic, amusing and ridiculous; Pictures 8 and 11 belong to category 3: Glamorous Golden Ager; Pictures 5 and 6 belong to category 4: Elders in a family context; Pictures 2 and 3 belong to category 5: Celebrity endorsers; Pictures 7 and 10 belong to category 6: Public endorsers; and Pictures 4 and 12 belong to category 7: Age incidental. The analysis involved an examination of frequencies obtained from the respondents' groupings in comparison with the seven categories set forth above, in order to confirm if they were similar to each other. Content analysis was also utilized in data analysis.

### **3. Results and discussion**

Table 1 was a frequency table obtained from the respondents' groupings. The analysis of the frequencies was based on the seven categories proposed. The frequency of category 1 (pictures 13-14) is 11, which means that 36.6% of the

respondents classified the set into the same group. The frequency of category 2 (pictures 1-9) is 17 (with one data missing), which indicates that 58.6% of the respondents grouped them together. The frequency of category 3 (pictures 8-11) is 20 (with one data missing), which means that 68.9% of the respondents grouped them together. The frequency of category 4 (pictures 5-6) is 10 (with one data missing), which takes up 34.4%. The frequency of category 5 (pictures 2-3) is 13, which takes up 43.3%. The frequency of category 6 (pictures 7-10) is 19, which takes up 63.3%. Finally, the frequency of category 7 (pictures 4-12) is 9, which takes up 30%. The findings are encouraging, because high and desirable frequencies have been resulted except the frequency of the last category, which is below 10. The results of frequency have in general confirmed our seven categories of elderly images in print ads. Thus the first hypothesis has been accepted.

Table 1: Frequency of Ads Groupings in Pairs (N = 30)

Ads N	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1		7	11	7	4	5	3	7	<b>17</b>	7	8	15	14	11
2			<b>13</b>	8	8	3	9	19	8	10	15	6	6	10
3				4	6	6	7	14	13	6	9	10	10	9
4					13	5	9	5	4	14	8	<b>9</b>	4	11
5						<b>10</b>	20	7	5	17	4	5	3	6
6							7	2	4	4	9	2	10	6
7								9	5	<b>19</b>	7	9	6	8
8									9	7	<b>20</b>	10	6	13
9										4	8	14	11	6
10											6	10	4	8
11												9	11	18
12													10	11
13														<b>11</b>

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In testing the second hypothesis, content analysis was employed. The analysis was based on the decision rule of positive portrayal and negative portrayal of images in ads. In other words, the respondents' descriptions (adjectives) were coded into two manageable categories: positive adjectives and negative adjectives (see Table 2).

The findings in Table 2 have obviously shown that the respondents' descriptions of either male or female elderly are in general positive. Some of the adjectives are neutral, but the researcher still classified them into the positive group, e.g. humorous, bold and unconventional. And some were classified into the negative group, e.g. conventional. Therefore, the second hypothesis was also accepted.

Table 2: Images described in a positive or negative light

	Male			Female			
	No.	Negative	No.	Positive	No.	Negative	No.
Positive healthy	7	blatantly old	1	healthy	7	luxurious	1

looking young	3	luxurious	1	looking young	4	conventional	2
grandfatherly	1	conventional	3	sporty	2	aging	2
happy	5	shocked	1	beautiful	1	weak	1
lively	1	aging	4	gorgeous	1		
elegant	1	sad	1	grandmotherly	1		
powerful	1	strikingly old	1	happy	6		
confident	1	weak	1	lively	1		
		comfortable	2	elegant	1		
		leisurely	2	confident	1		
		humorous	1	comfortable	2		
		modern	1	enjoyable	2		
		bold	1	modern	1		
		homelike	1	famous	1		
		enjoyable	1	homelike	1		
		challenging	1	handsome	1		
		unconventional	1	unconventional	1		
total*:	31		13	total*:	34		6

*\*Here the total number refers to person-times.*

#### 4. Conclusion

The findings show that respondents' positive attitudes towards the images of elderly in the ads designated have mirrored the advertisers' positive attitudes towards the elderly. In some sense, they may have shown that many marketers are targeting this social group by devising appropriate promotion strategies and tactics, and they are realizing the importance of the elderly as their potential consumers.

Since this survey has been conducted on a very small scale, the results tend to be subjective and limited. In addition, some respondents have failed to do the questionnaire as appropriately as expected. Therefore, when a similar research is conducted in future, the questionnaire needs to be further refined. It is also apparent in reviewing the literature that although researchers and marketers have begun realizing the importance of the elderly as potential consumers, this social group appear relatively infrequently in print advertisements, especially in TV commercials. Age role portrayals in print advertisements still need further study.

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