

Portrayals of Maturity in Australian Television Commercials: A Benchmark Study

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Abstract

Although Australia's population is ageing, there has been no research on the portrayal of maturity in advertising. The research reported in this paper presents a simple content analysis of a sample of Australian television commercials. The age profile of a sample of television commercials compared with Australian census data. In addition, the paper examines the nature of mature role portrayals in advertising. The paper concludes mature people are not only under-represented, but they are also misrepresented in television advertising.

Introduction

Age is a major demographic variable used in marketing segmentation. Consequently, marketing researchers have been very interested in age-related research. Mature segments have been described as the wealthiest cohort in history (Nelson, 2002). In Australia, compulsory superannuation combined with robust economic conditions mean that the baby boomer generation have relatively high disposable incomes and a willingness to spend on consumer goods and services. Indeed marketers coined a new term, "grey power" to describe the spending of mature market segments (NATSEM, 2002).

In spite of their apparent disposition to spend, mature audiences often believe that they are marginalised in mainstream media (Davidson, 2005). Older audiences are among the heaviest users of newspapers, television and radio, yet they are typically under-represented in the media. Some studies suggest that the media tend to problematise aging by presenting older people as a burden on health and social services, as victims of crime and as threats to future economic prosperity of developed nations (Davidson, 2005; Vesperi, 2003).

Consumer researchers make an important distinction between chronological age and cognitive age. There is no real consensus on the chronological cut off point that defines the "elderly" or the aged. Previous research use age ranges from 45 – 65 years, although the majority seem to settle on 55 years and over. Demographic and social changes have had a profound impact on personal experiences of ageing. Advances in health and diet have contributed to general well being contributing to longevity. As a consequence, people in their fifties and sixties do not see themselves as old. In spite of changing attitudes to change, the media tends to perpetuate stereotypical images of the mature consumers.

Literature Review

There is a rich body of literature, spanning more than three decades investigating the portrayal of the elderly in media and advertising. Empirical studies of the media's portrayal of the elderly can be found in diverse bodies of literature –including the gerontological literature, psychology, social geography as well as marketing and media studies, including journalism.

Tables 1 and 2 present a chronological/cross cultural record of content analyses carried out over the past 30 years. Due to space constraints, this summary has been confined to content analyses of advertising only. It should, however, be noted that there are more than 30 empirical studies of television programming and editorial content in the print media. Content analyses, of both advertising and editorial content, report that older people are seriously under-represented in advertising when compared with the population. Many studies also

report that the degree of under-representation is more marked among older females (Ursic, Ursic and Ursic, 1986; Vesperi, 2003, p.5).

The following literature review, the most comprehensive published to date, has enabled us to identify three distinct evolutionary stages:

1. Descriptive analysis of media's representation of mature people
2. Investigation of mature audiences' experience of the media
3. Strategy and Policy Development for appropriate representations of maturity

Phase One: Descriptive Analysis of Representation of Mature People (1970 +)

The first phase, which emerged in the early 1970s and is of continuing scholarly interest, focussed on describing the incidence and portrayal of mature persons in both editorial and advertising content. Given that these studies focus on the communications message itself, content analysis is the most commonly used approach. (Gantz, Gartenberg and Rainbow, 1980; Lerman and Callow, 2004; Pollay, 1987; Potter and Levine-Donnerstein, 1999). However, one recent study used a social stereotyping technique drawn from the social psychology literature (Miller, Leyell and Mazachek, 2002)

These empirical studies raise two important issues. Firstly, all studies agree that mature people are seriously under-represented when compared to the population. Without exception all studies report that mature females are more seriously under-represented than mature males (Gantz, Gartenberg and Rainbow, 1980). Most studies also point out that where older characters appear in advertising, they are relegated to minor or peripheral roles (Davis and Carson, c. 2000; Greco, 1993; Peterson, 1992; Zhou and Chen, 1992).

The second issue concerns the realistic characterization of mature persons. It has been argued that role portrayals in the media contribute to both role expectations and social learning (Gerbner, *et al.*, 1980; Langmeyer, 1993; Pollay, 1987). Active and engaged roles are treated as positive influences while passive and disengaged roles are treated as negative (Festervand and Lumpkin, 1985; Vesperi, 2003).

On this second issue, the literature is considerably more divided. Empirical findings point to both positive and negative attributes. Several studies found relatively neutral portrayals in advertising (Greco, 1993; Hiemstra, *et al.*, 1983). Only six of the studies included in the literature review found that older persons are positively portrayed (Balazs, 1995; Carrigan and Szmigin, 1999; Harwood and Roy, 1999; Langmeyer, 1993; Miller, *et al.*, 1999; Roy and Harwood, 1997; Schreiber and Boyd, 1980). By far, the majority of studies have shown that that mature models were portrayed in a negative fashion (Harris and Feinberg, 1977; Langmeyer, 1983; Peterson, 1995b; Peterson, 1992; Peterson, 1995a; Smith, 1976).

Examples of positive roles, cited in the literature, include such things as advisory or expert positions; although it should be noted that all studies report that mature males are much more likely to be cast in advisory roles than mature females (Greco, 1993; Harris and Feinberg, 1977; Harwood and Roy, 1999; Moore and Cadeau, 1985; Swayne and Greco, 1987). In addition, one study found that older characters are more likely to be associated with up-market or expensive products (Ursic, Ursic and Ursic, 1986). Miller, Leyell and Mazachek's (2002) detailed longitudinal study of advertising stereotypes points to the emergence of a new image, that of the "adventurous golden ager" during the late 1980s. In spite of the ongoing

debate over positive versus negative role portrayals, some commentators have argued that even positive role portrayals are themselves a form of stereotyping and therefore unrealistic

Examples of negative roles, outlined in the literature, include: more physical/mobility problems (Carrigan and Szmigin, 1998; Peterson, 1999; Zhou and Chen, 1992), health problems (Harris and Feinberg, 1977; Hollenshead and Ingersoll, 1982; Smith, 1976), confused or agitated states (Hollenshead and Ingersoll, 1982; Swayne and Greco, 1987), sedentary or inactive postures (Roberts and Zhou, 1997; Zhou and Chen, 1992) Strong and active (Greco, 1993; Harwood and Roy, 1999; Langmeyer, 1993; Roy and Harwood, 1997), alone or isolated (Roberts and Zhou, 1997; Zhou and Chen, 1992)

Six longitudinal studies provide some useful insights on trends in role portrayal. Ursic *et al's* (1986) study of advertising from 1950-80 found a decrease in positive roles over time. Roberts and Zhou's (1997) dedicated analysis of advertisements appearing in *Modern Maturity* magazine, also showed a decrease in positive role portrayals over the outlook period, 1956-1980. Miller *et al's* study (1999) of consumer magazine advertising during the period, 1956-96 found relatively negative role portrayals. However, their later study found somewhat more positive role portrayals (Miller, Leyell and Mazachek, 2002). England, Kuhn and Gardner's (1981) study, focussed primarily on the incidence of mature persons, found modest increases in the mean age of both men and women over the review period, 1960-79. Collectively, these studies suggest that small incremental improvements in positive role portrayals can be observed over five decades. However, it should be noted that changes in advertising's characterization of mature persons occurs slowly and appears to lag well behind changes to the demographic and social landscape.

Phase Two: Mature Audiences Experiences of the Media (1980+)

From the mid 1980s the literature moved into a second phase as researchers moved beyond simple descriptive analysis of message content. Instead research began to focus on mature audiences' actual experience of the media. Covering a diverse range of issues impacting on the audiences, this literature identifies key issues as: the impact on purchasing and information seeking behavior (Festervand and Lumpkin, 1985; Powers and Travick, 1996), consumer self-image (Korzeny and Neuendorf, 1980; Nelson and Belk-Smith, 1988; Smith, Moschis and Moore, 1984) as well as information processing activities including persuasion and recall (Healey and Ross, 2002; Langmeyer, 1984; Phillips and Stanton, 2004; Robinson, *et al.*, 2003; Stephens, 1981; Stephens, 1982).

Particularly germane to our current study is the issue of consumer responses to mature models in advertising. Yet there is a dearth of research to illuminate this issue. In contrast, considerable research has investigated consumers' responses to the racial identity of advertising models (Barban and Cundiff, 1964; Bush, Gwinner and Solomon, 1974; Bush, Hair and Solomon, 1979; Cagley and Cardozo, 1970; Cohen, 1992; Fujioka, 1999; Lee, Fernandez and Martin, 2002; Muse, 1971; Schreiber and Boyd, 1980; Tolley and Goett, 1971).

Our literature search uncovered just six empirical studies investigating the issue of older consumer responses to mature models (Festervand and Lumpkin, 1985; Greco, Swayne and Johnson, 1997; Langmeyer, 1984; Milliman and Erffmeyer, 1990; Nelson and Belk-Smith, 1988; Robinson, *et al.*, 2003). This body of literature offers a divided account of the extent to which consumers "buy-in" to stereotypical role portrayals.

Two studies suggest that mature consumers exhibit negative responses. Festervand and Lumpkin (1985) found that older audiences believe they are not accurately portrayed in advertising. Further that this belief contributes to a broader disenchantment, possibly distrust of advertising messages. (Robinson, *et al.*, 2003) experimental study utilizing “offensive” imagery found negative impacts on purchasing intention.

Four studies on mature consumer responses found neutral through to positive impacts. Schreiber and Boyd found (Schreiber, 1980) that older audiences were generally content and believed that they were realistically portrayed. Nelson and Smith’s experimental study (1988) found that both middle aged and older consumers, irrespective of their cognitive age, identified with mature models. More recently, (Milliman and Erffmeyer, 1990) found that older models were perceived to be more believable. Finally, (Greco, Swayne and Johnson, 1997) found no significant relationship between model age and advertising impacts.

Phase Three: Strategy and Policy Development (1990+)

The third stage, which appears to have emerged around 1990, appears to be concerned with informing public policy development. Literature in this phase considers a range of issues- from the impact of stereotypical representations, its causes as well as suggesting remedies. Clearly, the audience for such articles consists of advertisers, broadcasters, publishers and government legislators. (Carrigan and Szmigin, 2000; Davidson, 2005; Henley and Pettigrew, 2002; Milliman and Erffmeyer, 1990; N.P.O.E., 2004; Nelson and Curry, 1997; Szmigin and Carrigan, 2000).

Our literature review has identified a rich stream of empirical research on images of maturity in advertising. Yet, there are no studies focussing on the Asia-Pacific region. Specifically, there has been no Australian research documenting the presence of mature people in advertising. Instead, Australian research has been preoccupied with gender (Milner and Higgs, 2004). To some extent, the prevalence of research on gender reflects broader preoccupations with sex and female beauty. The current paper attempts to redress this gap by providing some benchmark data on maturity in television advertising.

Table 1 U.S. Content Analyses on Maturity in Advertising			
Region/ Study	Medium	Segment/ Incidence of Mature Characters	Main Study Focus
Francher, 1973	TV	Aged ¹ : 8% (b)	Youth culture and mature disenfranchisement
Harris and Feinberg, 1977	TV	60 +: 10.6% (a)	Incidence and role portrayal of mature persons
Gantz, Gartenberg and Rainbow, 1980	Magazines	65+: 5.9% (a)	Incidence and role portrayals
England, Kuhn and Gardner, 1981	Magazines	50+: 4% 70+: 0%	Longitudinal analysis of roles, 1960-79
Hollenshead and Ingersoll, 1982	Print	56+ 1967 : 1.25% 1977 : 0.60%	Incidence and value orientation of older females
Kvasnicka, Beymer and Perloff, 1982	Magazines	65+: 4.1%	Incidence of representation only
Hiemstra, <i>et al.</i> , 1983	TV	50+: 11.5% 60+: 3.1% 70+: 0.3% (a)	Incidence and role portrayal
Langmeyer, 1984	TV	60+: 13.3% (b)	Role portrayals in prime-time TV commercials
Ursic, Ursic and Ursic, 1986	Magazines	60 + (b) Range : 6.5-19.7% (a)	Longitudinal analysis of role portrayals (1950-1980)
Swayne and Greco, 1987	TV	65+: 7.0% (a)	Role Portrayals
Peterson, 1992	Magazines	45-64: 13% 65+: 5% (a)	Incidence/ Role portrayals with emphasis on competence of characters
Bailey, Harrell and Anderson, 1993	Magazines	56+: 10.0% (a)	Incidence and portrayal of older women
Greco, 1993	TV	65+: 7% (a)	Role portrayals and level of involvement
Langmeyer, 1993	TV Mags	60+ TV : 12.3% Mags : 7.1% (b)	Incidence and role portrayals
Peterson, 1995a	Magazine	65+: 8.8% (a)	Hotel and Motel advertising portrayals
Peterson, 1995b	Newspapers	45-64: 9.3% 65+: 0.06% (a)	Bank advertising portrayals
Roy and Harwood, 1997	TV	60+: 6.9% (a)	Incidence and role portrayals
Peterson and Ross, 1997	TV	45+: 23% (a)	Longitudinal study (1956-96)
Roberts and Zhou, 1997	Magazines	50-64: 47.7% (a)	Longitudinal content analysis (1950-64) of ads in <i>Modern Maturity</i> Magazine
Miller, <i>et al.</i> , 1999	Magazines	55+: Range : 6.6- 12.2% (b)	Longitudinal analysis of stereotypes (1956-96)
Miller, Leyell and Mazachek, 2002	TV	Visual signs of ageing: 4.7% (b)	Longitudinal study (1950-1990)
Stern and Mastro, 2004	TV	Senior adults: 4.4% (a)	Portrayals of women across the lifespan
<p>(a) refers to proportion of advertising characters (b) refers to proportion of advertisements</p> <p>For comparative purposes and wherever data permitted, frequency of representation was recalculated using characters as a base. However, in a small number of articles, the presentation of the data did not facilitate such manipulation.</p>			

¹ Francher's early study did not define age. Coders were instructed to look for visible signs of ageing such as wrinkles, grey hair or use of mobility aids, etc.

Table 2: Content Analyses Outside the USA			
Region/ Study	Medium	Segment/ Incidence of Mature Characters	Main Study Focus
Canada			
Moore and Cadeau, 1985	TV	65+ : 8.19% (a)	Incidence and role portrayal
Zhou and Chen, 1992	Magazines	50+: 5.1% (a)	Incidence and role importance
Davis and Carson, c. 2000	TV	60+:10.0% (b)	Content analysis of award winning television Canadian commercials, 1973-1997
United Kingdom			
Carrigan and Szmigin, 1998	Print	50+ Mags: 13% News: 18%	Incidence and role portrayal
Carrigan and Szmigin, 1999	Print	50+: 16% (a)	Incidence and role portrayal
Carrigan and Szmigin, 2000	Print	50+ Mainstream: 15% Older Audiences: 70%	Comparative incidence in mainstream publications and those targeted at older audiences
Cross-Cultural Studies			
Javalgi, Cutler and Malhotra, 1995	Print	US: 3% Japan: 7%	Cross cultural role portrayals
Harwood and Roy, 1999	Magazines	60+: N.A (c)	Cross Cultural Role Portrayals
(a) refers to proportion of advertising characters (b) refers to proportion of advertisements (c) indicates that data in original article are not reported in a manner that facilitates comparisons			
For comparative purposes and wherever data permitted, frequency of representation was recalculated using characters as a base. However, in a small number of articles, the presentation of the data did not facilitate such manipulation.			

Methodology

This study is concerned with images of maturity in advertising. Content analysis was used to analyse a sample of television advertisements. Although content analysis has been used since the 1950s, it continues to enjoy widespread currency for evaluating advertising messages (Kassarjian, 1977; Mahtani, 2000).

The protocol established by Gilly (1988) was the foundation for the current study. Commercials broadcast during a Tuesday between the hours of 8:00 am and 4:00 pm plus a Wednesday evening between 7:00 pm and 11:00 pm during 2002 were taped to provide the sample. The highest rating Melbourne network, Channel 9, was selected. Network promotions and duplicated advertisements were discarded. This resulted in 328 usable advertisements being collected. Tables 3 and 4 summarise advertising demographics from the sample.

Adult characters were included in the analysis providing that they had either one line of dialog or a screen appearance for at least three seconds. One male and one female coder, naïve regarding the purpose of the study, assessed the commercials. Inter-rater reliability was over 90% on all dimensions; high inter-rater reliability was no doubt facilitated by the fact that the raters could replay a commercial as many times as necessary in order to ensure an accurate judgment. Consensus was used to settle coder discrepancies.

Data collected from the television sample were compared with population data collected in the Australian Census (A.B.S, 2001). Obtaining population profiles by age can be achieved without complication by consulting basic community profiles, which are freely available to any member of the public.

Objectives

Given the absence of empirical research on portrayals of maturity in the Australian context, the objectives of this study are twofold:

- (1) To document the incidence of mature characters in television advertising; and
- (2) To describe the nature of mature character role portrayals

Discussion of Findings

The sampling frame yielded 328 television commercials containing 241 adult characters. Of these, less than 14 percent of all characters were aged 50 and over. The ratio of male to female characters in the sample is similar to that of the Australian population where there are 47 males to every 50 females.

Commercials (number)	Commercials per hour	Adult Characters number	Male: Female Characters	Ratio of Characters to Commercials
328	27.3	241	49:51	.73

The first objective of this study was to document the incidence of mature characters in television advertising. Table 3, which summarises these findings, indicates that more than 55 percent of characters in television commercials are aged under 35 years. Less than 14 percent of all characters are over 50 years of age. Moreover, the incidence of mature characters is considerably lower for females (less than 2 percent of all female characters) than for males (26 percent of all male characters). It is also worth noting that women aged 50-64 years are entirely absent from the advertising sample.

Age	Adult Characters in Advertising Sample					
	Male		Female		Persons	
	<i>Count</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>%</i>
15-34 years	61	51.3	72	59	133	55.2
35-49 years	27	22.7	48	48	75	31.1
50-64 years	29	24.4	0	0	29	12.0
65 years+	2	1.7	2	1.6	4	1.7
Total Persons aged 15+	119	100	122	100.0	241	100.0

Characters in the advertising sample were compared with population data taken from the Australian census (A.B.S, 2001) and the results summarised in Table 5. People aged 50 years and over account for 26.2 percent of the population, yet they make up only 13.7 percent of advertising characters. Clearly, both male and female characters in their mature years are under-represented in the sample. However, this difference is considerably more marked amongst adult females, who account for almost one third of the population yet they comprise less than two percent of all advertising characters. This data is consistent with prior studies in

North America and Europe where characters aged 50 and over are significantly under-represented in television advertisements.

Age (years)	Males (%)		Females (%)		People (15 years+)	
	TVCs	Population	TVCs	Population	TVCs	Population
15-35	51.3	36.5	59	34.8	55.2	35.6
35-49	22.7	28.4	48	28.0	31.1	28.2
50-64	24.4	20.8	0	19.7	12.0	20.2
65 +	1.7	14.4	1.6	17.5	1.7	16.0
Total (15+)	100	100	100.0	100	100.0	100

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Census 2001*, Catalog 2001.0

The second objective of the study was to describe the nature of role portrayals. The low numbers of mature characters in the advertising sample created some difficulties for meaningful quantitative analysis. Consequently, a simple test of independent proportions (Z-score) was the only analysis conducted. The results are summarised in Table 6.

Quantitatively, there are statistical differences between the two age cohorts in a number of dimensions. Our study provided no evidence that older persons are depicted as isolated, debilitated, frustrated or confused. However, there were differences noted with activity. Older models were more likely to be portrayed in passive roles. Such findings are broadly consistent with those from the United States, United Kingdom and Europe.

Overall, the portrayal of mature characters is relatively neutral. A number of differences suggest that mature models are valued as symbols of seniority and wisdom. They are more likely to be shown in senior managerial roles, more likely to be spokespersons and more likely to be celebrities. However, it should be noted that male models are more likely to be portrayed as spokespersons than are older females. Although wisdom is itself a positive image, it tends to ascribe older persons into a narrow range of suitable roles. This does little to reflect the diversity of senior's lived experience.

Variables		Under 50s		Over 50s		Significance	
		<i>Count</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Z</i>	<i>0.05</i>
<i>Employment</i>	Employed, at work	48	3	18	55	3.75	*
	Employed, not at work	29	14	6	18	0.66	n.s.
	No visible signs of employment	131	68	9	23	3.86	*
<i>Occupation</i>	Top Executive	3	4	7	29	5.17	*
	Middle Level Manager	25	33	3	13	2.33	*
	Non Prof- White collar	13	17	0	0	2.59	*
	Non Prof- Blue Collar	13	17	4	17	0.29	n.s.
<i>Voice</i>	Spokesperson	74	36	19	58	2.37	*
	Not Spokesperson	134	65	14	42	2.42	*
<i>Other Factors</i>	Product Authority (vs Product User)	42	57	10	53	0.45	n.s.
	Provider of Help (vs Recipient of Help)	14	7	1	3	0.52	n.s.
	Giver of Advice (vs Receiver of Advice)	14	7	0	0	1.53	*
	Role dependent on others (vs role independent of others)	93	45	0	0	4.9	*
	Active role (vs inactive role)	23	11	0	0	2.01	*
	Appears frustrated vs appears not frustrated	16	9	3	9	0.07	n.s.
	Celebrity	19	9	15	46	5.5	*

Limitations and Further Research

A major limitation of this study lies with the sampling strategy, which may have been sub-optimal. Although Gilly's protocol is well known and widely adapted, it was originally designed for research on gender. The small number of television hours recorded failed to capture large numbers of mature characters, imposing serious limitations for quantitative analysis. A related consideration is that content analysis methodology is inherently subjective (Potter and Levine-Donnerstein, 1999).

Conclusions

This benchmark study documents both the incidence and portrayal of older models in television advertising in the Australian context. The major findings are that older characters, especially women, are seriously under-represented in advertising. Our findings suggest that their role characterization is relatively neutral. Older persons are used primarily as symbols of wisdom and seniority.

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