Alina DUDUCIUC*

Age-friendly Advertising: A Qualitative Research on the Romanian Silver Consumers

Abstract

As consumption has become a major aspect that characterizes the life of people currently aged 55 and older, fervent public and academic debates have been raised around the accurate portrayal of seniors in advertising. While most of the previous quantitative and qualitative research highlighted the inappropriate ways of representing elders and the unsuitable framing of advertising claims, little research has been done so far to understand which are seniors' expectations regarding their portrayal in current advertising campaigns. Based on in-depth interviews with Romanian adults of the 55+ generation, this paper investigates how seniors understand ageing with respect to the manner in which they have been depicted in nowadays advertising and what are the detailed features of the offensive or inoffensive advertising campaigns targeting them. The findings revealed that participants that lost their status during ageing favor the use of chronological rather than cognitive images of their age. Additionally, the running of the natural surroundings in advertising were found as empowering for both the young and the older adults of our research.

Keywords: advertising, ageing, silver consumers, qualitative research

Introduction

The nowadays under-representation of elderly people in mainstream advertising has been the subject of ongoing criticism. On argument, often voiced by critics, is that the 20th century advertising seemed to be obsessed with the cult of youth, as proved by how often the juvenile features of the models used in ads were emphasized. Since 1950, the presence of the ageing models in media productions and printed advertising has been rather an exceptional occurrence than common for both marketers and target consumers. Consequently, the current modalities of advertising products (i.e. cosmetics, clothes, new technologies, tourism services) follow the same pattern of age differentiation: they advertise brands and, implicitly, identity models targeting mostly the young population.

With the demographic shift to an ageing society worldwide, advertising and media industries began to renew their interest in silver consumers and to prospect the potential of their purchasing power and longevity. Still, the presence of the "greyed models" in certain adver-

* National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Romania,
alina.duduciuc@comunicare.ro

tising campaign (i.e. *Dove*; *Dolce & Gabbana*; *Marks & Spencer*) has been a isolated phenomenon within a “myopic youth centred marketing” (Wassel, 2011, p. 357), segmented only by age, product or service category. In this context, over the past three decades, the accurate portrayal of people aged 50 to centenaries has become a recurrent theme of the academic and public debate.

In this case, the manner in which media advertising portrays ageing and the perspective of growing old has been largely investigated in media and ageing studies using both quantitative (Kay & Furnham 2013; Kohlbacher & Chéron 2012; Furnham & Paltzer 2010; Zhang, Harwood, Williams, Ylänne-McEwen, Wadleigh & Thimm, 2006; Miller, Leyell & Mazachek, 2004) and qualitative methodologies (Chen 2015; Marshall & Rahman, 2015; Loose & Ekström, 2014; Flatt, Settersten, Ponsaran & Fishman 2013; Brooks 2010; Calasanti 2007; Calasanti & King 2007). In all these approaches – whether qualitative or quantitative – the scholars have highlighted the inappropriate ways of portraying elders (i.e. as unattractive persons; not up to date; confused; physically frail and financially dependent persons) and the unsuitable framing of advertising slogans (i.e. the anti-ageing ad claims that neglect natural ageing). When targeting silver audience, “the bold and the beautiful” (Panic, Cauberghe & Verhoye, 2011, p. 133) images are often endorsed two-fold: as “heroes of ageing” who are “positive” about ageing, with “youthful” habits and demeanour, on the one hand, and as physically frail and traumatized people who are not able to take care of themselves, on the other.

Theoretical background

Previous research has shown that both younger and older adults share the same idea regarding offensive and inoffensive portrayal of seniors in advertising and that both age groups (younger people and seniors) are aware of the use of stereotypes in commercials (Robinson, 2008, p. 248). The mature consumers (50 +) approve or disapprove the use of advertising models that are similar to their chronological age. The elderly people appreciate the advertisements in which the persons of their age are represented as autonomous, friendly, competent, educated and motivated to find out new things (Ahman 2002, p. 354). Other senior consumers prefer models similar to their cognitive age, which is 10-15 years younger than the real self.

Recent studies also showed that seniors preferred models that resemble with their subjective age rather than their chronological age (Yoon & Powell, 2012, p. 1324; Robinson, Gustafson & Popovich, 2008, p. 236). The similarity with the age of the models has several effects as the attention toward ads, the credibility of the source and the likelihood of purchasing the product increase. Other explanations for these results might be related to the trend in today’s society, characterized by a fear of ageing and a strong need to stay and look young. Not only do seniors like models who match their subjective age, they also find them more trustworthily (Panic et al., 2011, p. 142).

While the quantitative approach on ageing in advertising tracks the media representations and stereotypes, the qualitative framework (Chen, 2015; Marshall & Rahman, 2015; Flatt et al., 2013; Brooks, 2010; Calasanti, 2007; Calasanti & King, 2007; Coupland, 2010) is more focused on how seniors perceive and interpret the meaning of advertising messages as well as how cultural ideas about modifying or controlling ageing spread through advertising claims or how advertising shapes the social attitudes toward successful ageing. The anti-ageing ads

are using stereotyped images and claims of old age as tools to promote products that promise the empowerment (Calasanti, 2007). Calasanti (2007, pp. 335-337) notes that a whole society is based on the logic that the younger counts more in a certain point of time than the older people and thus it legitimates ageism. The exclusion of the elder people from job market, family or status groups, not only as a consequence of ageism, but also as a result of the way in which the society is structured (e.g. social groups, life stages), creates opportunities for unequal distribution of resources and power. Thereby, the rhetoric of anti-ageing advertising reinforces the cultural constructs of ageing, bodies and gender.

Advertising was criticized because its textual and visual messages are rallied with the dominant discourse of the society, favoring the discriminatory treatment of seniors in society (Carrigan & Szmign, 1999). Consequently, most of the data research on elderly people, when the latter were in favor of the image of “rejuvenated” old age, were attributed to the “hard” effects of advertising on the attitude and life style of the audience. However, based on the statistical data, several advertisers and marketers sustain that, in general, seniors preferred to be depicted ten years younger than their real chronological age (Yoon & Powell, 2012, p. 1324; Robinson, et al., 2008, p. 236). Such assumptions, as Gilleard and Higgs (2011, p. 369) pointed, are made based on erroneous methodologies, which segmented silver population as a residual and homogenous group, and on the characteristics pertaining to age or product category. Moreover, previous similar studies were rarely involved seniors as respondents (Gilleard & Higgs, 2011).

Although the findings of the previous research on traditional media advertising are largely available for the state of knowledge, little research has been done so far to understand the attitudes of seniors regarding advertising and how the means of executions (in this case, the cognitive versus chronological illustrations of old age; the selected models; situation to portray, etc.) can empower or disempower the older adults. However, questions about the relationship between personal experiences of older adults and the emergence of new ways of representing ageing in advertising remain unanswered due to the prevalence of youngsters in the research sampling. In marketing and consumer research, the silver consumers have been treated as a homogeneous segment of the population (Moschis, 2012), based on their chronological age. Although the gerontologists and the ageing studies have emphasized that there is no “typical” senior consumer, and that they are rather heterogeneous, the concept of ageing as cultural construct is often ignored in many advertising strategies (Loose & Ekström, 2014).

While some important steps have been made in regulating the standards of portraying seniors in advertising, certain ad execution styles often reflect the implicit cognitions regarding seniors, i.e. “high in warmth and low on competence” (Cuddy, Norton & Fiske, 2005, p. 278). Possibly stemming from these stereotypes, people of the 65+ group are often assigned a domestic role (as “eternal grandparents”) or as health service requester in advertising scripts, but rarely as businessmen or as an applicant for a job on the labour market.

When representing old age, the Romanian advertisers sometimes follow the same pattern as observed in the Western culture: ageing is often neglected, and advertising messages have been framed accordingly. Therefore, this paper intends to examine advertising models and techniques considered to be appropriate for senior consumers. The substantial growth of the ageing population worldwide, the use of older adults as comic relief in Romanian commercials as well as the diversity of the silver consumers’ life styles and needs are some of the premises of this study. As far as we know, the research on how the Romanian advertising has portrayed seniors is limited (Stoica, Miller & Ardella, 2011); the research presented here seeks

to address several aspects of this topic: How do seniors understand and represent old age? How do seniors describe their age group? How does the advertising industry constrain seniors to relate to age-advertising models? Do silver consumers favor the cognitive or the chronological representations of their age in advertising? In our case, we are interested what 55+ people think of their age and their point of view with regard to the legitimate and accurate modalities of portraying old age in advertising. Furthermore, this research aims to gather data on the opinion of elders regarding their portrayal in current advertising campaigns and their aspirations with respect of this depictions.

Method

The socio-demographic category investigated by this research is represented by people in the 55-84 age group, retired Romanian living in the urban area (respectively, Bucharest-Ilofov). Twenty three people (19 women and 4 men), aged between 55 and 84, were interviewed during February-March 2017 in order to answer the previously stated research questions. Since the interviews were semi-structured, further questions were addressed in order to expand the research scope. Subsequently, the answers were encoded in keeping with a theme analysis grid: old age representation – old age metaphors; cognitive age – the preference of younger or older models or of models of the same chronological age; visual executions in advertisements – the elders' amnesic processes; social comparison with senior models in advertisements; "optimum" old age in advertising.

At the time the interviews were conducted, the interviewees were in good health and were not affected by any terminal disease. Relevant to our discussion was the fact that during their active life most of the interviewees held jobs traditionally associated with the *middle class* category on the labour market, for which a secondary school education was requested, e.g. seamstress, manicurist, administrator, superintendent, carpenter, electronic specialist. People were recruited by the snowball sampling method. Interviews lasted an hour on average and were recorded with the participants' consent.

Findings

Cognitive age: metaphors and context

The first two questions of the interview guide were designed to help the participants familiarize themselves with the structure of the interview-type communication. We tried to provide a non-directive feedback, to facilitate the participants' compliance with and disclosure of the topics advanced for discussion. Thus, the first question was developed based on the *expressive* technique: the participants were asked how they would draw or photograph their current age. The purpose of this question was to engage the respondents generate analogies and metaphors related to the social meanings of old age. Then, their answers allowed us to explore the similarities between representation (objects, things, people, etc.) and the target topic (old age). According to the interviewees, old age is "a state of mind". They used metaphors and analogies that reflect their current status (*My current age? ... near the flowers in the pot – the children, friends and family*), and most of them compared the theme of the

metaphor (i.e. old age) with positive vehicles that refer to topics like nature (*flowers and trees in bloom*). One of the participants, a 61-year old woman, said that she saw her old age as a “helpless little child”, thus expressing the social perception of old age “like a second childhood” (Hockey & James, 1995, p. 140).

Age-related perceptions are in general positive, with interviewees stating they’ve accepted ageing gratefully. But, when looking at the responses in terms of losses and challenges that occurred throughout their life course, the metaphors of old age used by the participants are not so homogeneous. Those interviewees who have lost their partner tend to have a more negative image of old age, such as *a tree, not quite bloomed. Like a tree because sometimes I feel lonely* (man, 63 years, widower); *Like a small child, helpless* (woman, 61 years); *Like autumn...* (woman, 64 years, widow); *Near an old tree* (woman, 84 years, widow).

Thus, the findings of our research are similar to the gerotranscendence theory (Tornstam, 1996), according to which the more individuals approach the third age the more their self is more cosmic. The labels the participants attached to old age reflect to a certain extent the fact that individuals redefine time, the sense of life, space, life and death as they approach a later stage of their life.

Ageing self and social comparison

The next question of the interview – a transition question – dealt with the ingroup members. Starting from the premises of the social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), the participants in this study were asked to say how they saw the others similar to them, the ingroup members of the same age, how they felt about and how they were treated in society. The participants’ answers indicated that, in general, they compared themselves with inferior members and that they had a negative image of the members of the same age group, often stereotypical, approving the society’s dominant attitudes towards the old people. No interviewee referred to chronological age or to noticeable, physiognomic features, which are central to, the perception of or the interaction with people, regardless of age.

People my age are very often rejected by society. Family usually accepts you, and sometimes not even them. Actually, because of our age we are more than often rejected (man, 78 years).

The healthy ones are very energetic and full of life, willing to do something, to socialize. The suffering ones have the strength to find a balance with the help of the TV, crossword puzzles, treatment with natural remedies. Neither of them is apathetic (woman, 71 years).

I stay away from them. What I have noticed is negative: they are marginalized and that is why I stay away from them (woman, 60 years).

Everyone sees himself/ herself as they feel. It does not matter how society treats you, what you feel matters. In the bus people said they refused to sit near old people because they whined. And this is what I myself do: I do not pair off with whining people (woman, 59 years).

The interviewees spoke about others like them, referring to dimensions like health condition, financial situation and social status. In their statements they pointed to the consequences of the health condition and of the social status on interpersonal, intergenerational and work relationships.

In my time, when I was working at the Institute for Design... That team included several generations, about ten people from each generation. When one generation retired, the young generation had what to learn from the experience of those going into retirement. Nowadays this is no longer valid. The young people consider themselves omniscient, while the old people live in fear of being laid off. They no longer share their knowledge with the young ones, they leave taking it with them. There is no more respect for the old generation. The old people are sad, tired, and poor. They are depressed because of poverty (woman, 70 years).

When they characterize those of the same age with them, the interviewed seniors ignore the negative aspects of themselves, namely physiognomic features of old age and appearance. Perhaps, the reference to the outward appearance of old people (which are immediately available, i.e. wrinkling, balding, greying) occurs without conscious awareness and it is internalized when they evaluate age. From our point of view, the absence of reference to physical signs in their discourse of ageing could be explained by the internalization of the stereotype that old age diminishes attractiveness and that it is unpleasant, which is enforced by the mainstream society, no matter the age (Cuddy, Norton & Fiske, 2005). Seniors understand their biological changes, but they do not speak about them. Furthermore, this lack of reference to physical changes of ageing in the public discourse is a symptom of the present-day society, where the anti-ageing social practices have been institutionalized. At a formal social rhetoric level, in public policies and scientific research, words like *old people*, *old age* and *elderly* were replaced by much more neutral concepts – e.g. *ageless* – precisely to avoid the explicitly negative connotation of the word *old* (Settersen Jr. & Angel, 2011, p. 7) and the labelling of the seniors based on the prejudices about age (Ivan, 2015, pp. 65-66).

It depends on age! The almost 80-year olds have health problems, they are abandoned, they are alone because their children went abroad (woman, 66 years).

They are sloppy, marked by needs. Others can afford to go on trips and to beauty salons, but there are a lot of them in distress (woman, 57 years).

Third age people are, most of the time, alone and useless. They are older than they actually are, mean spirited, frustrated, and that is why I believe that they are not well received by the society. There are exceptions, of course, (woman, 70 years).

They are poor and depressed because of the society that does not receive them too well (man, 60 years).

Society does not treat them right, they are seen as a burden. Old people do not have money for medicines, they have small pensions, bitterness and sadness can be seen on their faces. Neither does society accept them, nor do they have a positive state of mind (man, 63 years).

While the first question pursued a more abstract discussion about the participants' old age, the second one was contextualized to the old age of the others in the same age group. Obviously, the answers received led to two contrasting, paradoxical concepts related to the meanings that the participants assigned to old age: on the one hand, their own old age has a cosmic dimension, linked to everything that changes into nature (plants, flowers, trees), while others' old age is about social marginalization, economic difficulties and health frailness; on the other hand, both themselves and the others are *ageless* in terms of facial and bodily changes. *I feel young but this isn't me* emphasised a 67-year old interviewee, thus expressing the dualistic concept of ageing. Seniors' subjective feeling (*this is not me*) cannot be ignored when

they attend to the mainstream idea of looking young. It is very difficult to manage the “young mask of old age” (Hepworth, 2004, pp. 20-25) because in the heart of social thinking lies the illusion of youth later in life. The participants in our study used negative terms only when talking about others’ old age and not about their own, so as to adjust their self and avoid the emotional discomfort regarding their own ageing and future old age.

Seniors talking about how they should be depicted in advertising

The interviewees either approved or disapproved the casting of young models in advertisements for seniors or the unrealistic messages of certain ads regarding the characteristics of various products.

People my age are not seen in advertisements, and when I see a product for me, glasses, for example, I do not see myself in the people advertising them, they do not represent me. People my age should show their real age in ads (woman, 84 years).

I do not see myself at all in the people advertising products. For instance, in the spot X I like the ambience. The people my age wearing make-up for ads in order to look younger are nonetheless ridiculous, pompous. They should be more genuine (man, 67 years).

I like the ads on other TV channels, not ours, from abroad, which show us how beautifully people age. People my age look relaxed in ads, are well spirited, like in Neckermann. In Romania, old people promote only pharmaceuticals for digestive disorders. They are gross! I do not see myself in these ads with elderly people (woman, 64 years).

I do not see myself at all in the people appearing in ads. They look very cheerful, energetic, smiling. They should be closer to their real age for which the product must be used, in keeping with the age (man, 78 years).

Some of the participants in this study were not necessarily critical. They treated advertising and its executions techniques “as such” and they perceived them as a social fact, without exercising opportunities or constraints on their age.

In an ad for a medicine, urinary products, for my age there is a beautiful, joyful woman. She is shown from profile with a cream coloured jacket... younger... I like her. In all ads women look younger (woman, 66 year)

The people in ads are photogenic... Thinking of the ad on mineral water X, pharmacy Y... those old people look good and are well-known people, actors, folk music singers, so that people should recognise them. They represent us only formally. I think people my age should appear in an ad only if they are presentable, good-looking, and not decrepit. When I see someone looking good, this encourages me, makes me confident (man, 66 years).

The people who promote denture fixing gels, for instance, which I use, look good, younger! They want to convince us, and they succeeded, we use this product and we look better (woman, 66 years).

Two of the participants in this study stated that it was an absolutely new field for them, that they did not think whether the seniors in the ads were presented adequately or inade-

quately [*I have never given a thought to whether I saw myself in the people in the advertisements (man, 57 years). I do not see people my age in ads too often. I do not know what to say (woman, 84 years)*].

The question about the ways old people should be depicted in advertising was a projective type of question. During the interview, the participants were asked to imagine that they were consulted by advertising representatives in order to make recommendations on how advertising executions for silver consumers should be made. The answers revealed multiple representations of the ageing self, rather than a single stereotype labelling, as advertising sometimes uses. Although only one out of the 23 interviewees said that the people in ads were representative, most of the participants recommended the use of aspirational type models, of cognitive young age rather than real, chronological age.

They should show the age the product is designed for. I do not mind. I like to see them younger. Were they older, confined to bed or wheelchair and advertise nappies for adults, they would depress me (woman, 60 years).

They should be dressed nicely, smartly; they should know how to communicate. They should be younger. An old person is depressing. An old person will not make you buy the product (man, 63 years).

Firstly, they should look good, even if they are old (woman, 66 years).

I like people my age who look younger, and they should be in ads because they enchant me. Were their real age shown I would be depressed, I would be in a bad mood (woman, 71 years).

They should be cheerful, serene; they should not show their age. They should not show their age because if we always look bad it is nice to see faces looking good in the third age (woman, 66 years)

Some of the participants were critical towards to the use of younger models in the commercials that target seniors. In their portrayals and in their recommendations regarding cognitive age, the central feature they referred to was age and less the social roles usually associated with seniors.

They should be real, show their age. Old age does not bother me. It is not humiliating to have an infirmity. Old people should be accepted as they are: at their real age, their real social status in society (woman, 59 years).

I would recommend them just as they are... because we do not have to imitate anybody. It is too pompous for them to look so young (woman, 67 years, electronic specialist).

For other interviewees, the major goal of advertising is to actually inform people about product characteristics. They were indignant at the fact that advertisements were deceitful sometimes, and less critical about the physical aspect of the old models promoting the product.

They should be more understandable. Many of them are disguised. For instance we are deceived. We order the product and receive something else (woman, 64 years).

They should be honest as regards the content of the product and its effects (woman, 71 years)

Honest as regards the product, true to life (woman, 67 years).

Ads should be real. They should show exactly what the cream, product, shower gel consist of.

For Maria, a former employee in telecommunication, senior age is associated rather with a social role and she recommends that the elderly people in ads should be portrayed *showing more confidence in them. Children should gravitate around them and not vice versa. It should be understood that we are who we are today also thanks to our parents* (woman, 70 years).

Discussion and conclusion

Within the group of elderly adults interviewed, we have found are two contrasting images of old age depiction in advertising. These are similar to the modalities of depicting old people in nowadays advertising: on the one hand, as “heroes of ageing” (Featherstone, 2005, p. 231), forever young and able to keep alive a “young” and functional ageing, having the same appearance, the same habits and wishes as the hordes of young people; on the other hand, as physically frail “to the extent of being incompatible with and disguising their inner selves, the so-called mask of ageing” (Featherstone, 2005, p. 231). The younger seniors (56-70 years) included in our research proved to be “age sensitive”, as compared to the older seniors (over 70 years). Our study showed that several respondents thought that advertising images of “young seniority” are more desirable. Seniors often avoid thinking of their age in order to maintain an *ageless* identity, and this could serve as a *coping* strategy to diminish stress and threat of physical changes occurring with ageing.

From our point of view, the debate does not consist in deciding how to represent old age in advertising, i.e. depicting the chronological or the cognitive age of the population; the real issue is contained in why these two options – “the young and the old”/“the bold and the beautiful” – are dominant in advertising executions. Moreover, these two operate by exclusion and inclusion, determining the orientation of the silver consumers towards one side or the other. Thus, our interviewees’ suggestions about the portrayal of old people in advertising fell within the two dominant trends in cultural ageing: there are some who deny old age and uphold a successful ageing in terms of youthfulness, and others who disapprove the mask of ageing and are in favor of more realistic portrayals of older people in advertising. Advertising has standardized ageing within these two dimensions – to look young or to not be young, and people often compare themselves consciously or unconsciously only with these two options.

Nevertheless, most of the interviewees feel as cognitive young. Seniors were asked whether they prefer to be depicted showing their real chronological age or younger than their age. We encoded the answers given by those who experienced a stressing event in their life, such as the loss of their life partner. As previous research has shown, the elderly people who lost their social status (married, employed, etc.) are more prone to express negative feelings about their age, they have a lower self-esteem and they tend to rarely take part in social and cultural events as compared to those who have not gone through a “catalytic” event (Stephens, 1991, pp. 38-39). In this regard, our findings support the following idea: the widowed interviewees wish to be portrayed in ads showing their real age, while they express their aversion to the advertising that emphasizes only the juvenile features of the seniors.

They should be real, they should show their age. Old age does not bother me. It is not humiliating to have an infirmity. Old people should be accepted as they are: at their real age, their real social status in society (woman, 59 years, retired nurse).

As they are, because we do not have to imitate anybody. It is too pompous for them to look so young (woman, 67 years, retired electronic specialist).

If the ad depicted them as being disabled, confined to bed or in a wheelchair and advertising nappies for adults, this would be normal... I would like to be shown another reality (man, 60 years, widower, retired military).

People in ads should look closer to the age for which the product is meant, consistent with the age (man, 78 years, widower).

Recommendations for advertising executions

Last but not least, the findings of this research allow us to advance a number of recommendations regarding advertising for seniors and to answer questions such as: How should old people be portrayed in advertisements (showing their chronological or their cognitive age)? What are those “slices of life” that attract and organize senior consumers’ attention? First of all, an ad that contains neutral elements, which are not related to age, such as images of natural surroundings (nature, trees, flowers) are better accepted than those featuring old people. No interviewee referred to himself/ herself in terms of their biological age and age-related physiognomic signs. Thus, we recommend the running of the natural surroundings in advertising executions that could be empowering for both the young and the older adults of the silver consumer category. At the same time, seniors prefer those advertisement casts that portray them as active people who play an important part in the lives of those close to them (i.e. grandchildren and children) and in society, in general (i.e. mentoring young people on the labour market).

In relation to these two recommendations, there is another important idea that steams from our findings. The participants display resistance to persuasion, especially to those images with emotional content. The interviewed seniors prefer the rational framings, which present real facts about product characteristics or prices, rather than those with *emotional appeal*, such as “anti-wrinkle cream for everlasting skin youth and freshness”.

Finally, the findings of our research support the idea that the younger seniors (up to 75 years) should be depicted at their (*young*) *cognitive age*, this being a self-adjustment strategy on entering a new age stage. As for the ads of *chronological appeal* emphasising biological old age, they are approved by older consumers (over 75 years) and by seniors who have lost the social status that was dominant during their past self (e.g. they lost their job, their life partner, a beloved person).

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