Advertising and the elderly: Do magazine ads continue to reinforce ageism?

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ADVERTISING AND THE ELDERLY: DO MAGAZINE ADS CONTINUE TO REINFORCE AGEISM?

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

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ABSTRACT

Advertising and the Elderly: Do Magazine Ads Continue to Reinforce Ageism?

by

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The purpose of this study was to assess how the younger population views the elderly in magazine ads, as well as how mature adults view themselves through media depiction when they see elderly characters in print ads. A convenience sample of one-hundred university students and forty-eight retired teachers from the Nevada Chapter of Retired Teachers answered a questionnaire including: negative, neutral, or positive depictions of seniors in ads; whether or not seniors are portrayed accurately, and the frequency of senior minorities in magazine ads. Results suggest that a majority of the respondents agree that seniors are portrayed inaccurately in magazine ads. These inaccuracies also include an underrepresentation of minority seniors in magazine advertising.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ................................................................. iii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ........................................... vi

CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION ...................................... 1
  Purpose ................................................................. 3
  Conquering Gerontophobia ............................... 5
  The Cognitive Age of the Elderly .................... 7
  Elderly Minorities ............................................... 10
  Marketing the Elderly in Magazines ............... 12
  Conclusion ......................................................... 14

CHAPTER II METHODOLOGY ................................. 16
  Sample ................................................................. 16
  Instrument .......................................................... 17

CHAPTER III RESULTS ............................................. 21
  Demographics ..................................................... 22
  Hypotheses .......................................................... 22
  Table 1 ................................................................. 24

CHAPTER IV DISCUSSION ....................................... 25
  Limitations .......................................................... 26
  Suggestions for Future Research .................... 27
  Conclusion .......................................................... 29

APPENDIX I ............................................................. 31
  Human Subjects Protocol ................................ 32
  Letter to Participants ......................................... 33

APPENDIX II ........................................................... 34
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the United States, senior citizens have been stereotyped in advertising as being "severely impaired, shrew, reclusive, and despondent" (Hunnert, 1993, p. 218). Ethical advertisers recognize the inaccuracy of these messages, and can change the negative ways in which they present the elderly to society, through a "paradigm shift." Covey (1989) defines a paradigm as "the way we see the world, not in terms of our visual sense of sight, but in terms of perceiving, understanding, interpreting" (Covey, 1989, p. 23). Thus "paradigm shift" illustrates a change in one's behavior or attitude. These behaviors and attitudes influence the ways in which we create visual perceptions (e.g., negative elderly magazine ads). Now that the new millennium is here, advertisers view the "over 50" group as a lucrative consumer market because of its abundance of disposable income. Langmeyer (1993), in her article, "Advertising Images of Mature Adults: An Update," states:

The revisions are partially attributed to sensitivity to "ageism," partially to the graying of the American population, and, most of all, to the recognition of the current and projected market potential of the healthy and high income segment of the over 60 group. (p. 82)

This issue of marketing agencies addressing the elderly with fairness and respect can help dispel damaging stereotypes seniors have received in the past. Those same detrimental stereotypes of the elderly magnify and enhance the problem that, "image management of this category of person has perhaps the most potential for producing harm
to those least able to cope with psychological threats to their personhood” (Sokolovsky, 1994, pp. 91-92). Some elderly people, through the media, view themselves as mentally and physically fragile, but a vast majority of seniors do not view themselves in the same stereotypical ways as the younger generations view them.

This paper examines whether or not advertising companies in recent years have made significant changes in their marketing tactics regarding elderly representation in magazine ads. Many magazines, such as Modern Maturity, display ads that are geared toward seniors. Investment companies such as Merrill Lynch may advertise in these types of magazines to try to capture business from this equitable market segment. However, a majority of magazines not specifically directed toward the elderly tend to ostracize this group of people, keeping them far apart from the younger generations. Magazine ads from Details, Modern Maturity, Cosmopolitan, and People will be used as examples to validate several theories, which will be discussed later on in this paper.

A substantial amount of research written about the underrepresentation and stereotypes of Caucasian senior citizens exists, but the exploration of the lack of minority elders in magazine ads is virtually non-existent. Advertisers need to understand, both minority and Caucasian seniors require an equal amount of consistent representation in all types of magazines in order not to feel ostracized from society. These segmented groups possess a significant amount of disposable income, and if they feel unwanted or ignored by marketers, seniors can actually control the declining sales of a particular product.

Marketers need to become cognizant of the stigmatizing effects (e.g., depression, suicide, neglect) that accompanies old age in our culture, due to the stereotypical elder portrayals in the media. Advertising agencies must make a conscious effort, through education and awareness, to stop representing these people in a negative light for the sake of corporate profit.
Purpose

The purpose of this study is to analyze various magazines ads to determine if advertisers, since past research studies, have attempted to change how they negatively portray seniors in various advertising campaigns. This study will also examine and compare the cognitive communicative messages the younger and older generations receive from marketing companies when viewing magazine advertisements. The intent of this investigation is to develop an understanding of how stereotypes, and being uneducated about a certain segment group in our population can cause insurmountable damage to one’s self-concept and snowball from generation to generation. Sperry (1996) discusses gerontophobia and states, “our negative view of aging and its concomitant gerontophobia is based on lack of information and a limited perspective on history. Education is needed to replace this negative view and corresponding gerontophobia with a more positive view of aging” (p. 5).

This study is a comparative study paralleling attitudes toward advertising according to the younger generations (ages 18 to 54) and the older generations (55 and above). These ages have been chosen to represent the respondents in this study, because the researcher, for convenience purposes, wanted to conclude how university students view the elderly in magazine ads. The ages for the older generations were chosen according to the various categories determined by sociologists, which will be addressed later on in this paper. Developments of these cognitive perceptions concerning both market segments will also be discussed. Research presented examines the vast dispositions of the elderly and how they figure into the scheme of our current environment. Through the use of a questionnaire involving 148 participants, this study addresses the fact that there has been little change in the way seniors are represented in advertising, regardless of past efforts of a handful of marketing firms that tried to break the stereotypical mold of ageism.
There are several reasons which warrant this type of study. First and foremost, the twenty-first century will bring forth the largest senior population ever, most of whom will be the baby boomers of the 1960s. Approximately 34.9 million people will be over the age of 50 (Ward, 1988, p. 1). The baby boomers will demand to be taken seriously by the media. For example, Sperry (1996) indicates:

the powerful message that is being communicated is that the elderly are not worth writing about, nor are they interesting, beautiful, or sexy, nor do they deserve products created particularly for them. When the elderly internalize this negative image of aging, they cannot help but feel left out and worthless.
The message becomes, “you must be young to be worthwhile.” (p. 3)

Davis (1998) believes, as Ward does, that baby boomers will not take a backseat to the rest of society. She states, “as the large numbers of baby boomers continue to age, they are expected to carry their unique brand of social activism, a blend of consumerism and political radicalism with them, further changing what it means to be old” (p. 1).

Stereotyping is a human flaw that begins at an early age and continues to escalate throughout life, due partly to the messages created by the media. In Lippmann’s *Public Opinion* (1922), he states that “we are told about the world before we see it. We imagine most things before we experience them and those preconceptions, unless education has made us acutely aware, govern deeply the whole process of perception” (p. 59).

Lippmann also believed that stereotypical behavior is passed on through the generations from parent to child, and in fact may be biological (Lippman, 1922, p. 61). Although Lippman theorized this human behavior over seventy years ago, it is clear through this research that people still maintain and employ these similar ideas. Lippman (1922) goes on to state, “consequently the stereotype not only saves time in a busy life and is a defense of our position in society, but tends to preserve us from all the bewildering effect of trying to see the world steadily and see it whole” (Lippman, 1922, p. 75).
Hummert (1993), in her article on “Age and Typicality Judgments of Stereotypes of the Elderly: Perceptions of Elderly vs. Young Adults,” analyzes the stereotypes of old people by young adults and by the widespread aging society. Hummert (1993) indicates, “as predicted, the elderly adults saw the stereotypes as less typical of elderly individuals than did the young adults, although both groups agreed on which stereotypes were most typical of the general elderly population” (p. 217).

Conquering Gerontophobia

For decades, marketing agencies ostracized and underrepresented the elderly. Advertisers directed their efforts toward perspectives, valued by the consumer population as a whole, such as youth (Peterson, 1992, p. 702). Although the public might eventually learn to understand the elderly through education and information, growing old still has negative connotations (e.g., senility, being physically impaired, and vulnerable). Within the next decade, gerontologists intend to focus on “confronting gerontophobia and society’s fears about loss of meaning in life and, ultimately, death” (Katz, 1990, p. 158). People in the United States tend to value a “youth oriented” society, which advertising agencies portray in magazine ads. However, it could also be argued that just because advertisers are trying to reach younger readers, it doesn’t mean mature people shouldn’t be used in advertisements. Mature people can act as role models to the younger generation. These attitude shifts can serve to break the vicious circle and eliminate the negative attitudes young people have toward the elderly.

The ideology that seniors can serve as role models to the younger generations has been taken to heart by Coronet, a company that produces both print and film educational materials for young people. Coronet produced a booklet entitled Guidelines for Creating Positive Images of Persons and Groups. In this guideline booklet, Coronet lists suggestions for the treatment of older persons, such as older citizens being featured interacting in positive relationships with children.
Another main objective of Coronet is to show seniors passing on family traditions and values, while in the mean time, featuring the elderly as being vital, independent functioning adults who have interests that are shared by others (Davis and Davis, 1985, pp. 56-57).

Langmeyer (1993) touches on the socialization influence the media has on the elderly. She states that, "the media play an increasingly major part in forming and/or perpetuating role expectations, younger audiences’ role expectations of older people and aging, and older audiences’ role behaviors for themselves" (p. 81).

Many advertisers have not made an attempt to integrate the generations. Rather, they continue to cater to the needs of the youth. Advertisers in the past, and to a large extent in the present, have been callous to the image they project of mature adults. Peterson (1992) confirms this by stating "advertisers in their efforts to satisfy consumers, usually direct their efforts toward perspectives valued by the public at large" (p. 702). However, the elderly need to play more of a major role in consumer society and "we need to respect their attitudes and lifestyles, celebrate where they are in life and whisper about solutions to any problems rather than dwell on the problems themselves" (Ward, 1988, p. 19).

Although older models have increased in ads, the elderly appear proportionately underrepresented in today’s advertisements (Milliman and Erffmeyer, 1989, p. 32). Ward (1988) observed this problem and stated that advertisers lose touch with people over fifty, and they don’t give this market segment what they need, which is a reinforcement of self worth. This type of segregation and neglect is a form of “ageism.” Peterson (1992) points out "many advertisers may be committing a serious error by neglecting seniors in their advertisements, and by picturing them negatively. This is not an effective way to appeal to this market, which is affluent, large and growing" (p. 705).

Butler (1994) first defined “ageism” in 1968, as a "systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this with skin color and gender" (Butler, 1994, p. 137).
As stated earlier, the natural process of aging is made to be undesirable in America. Being old is made an unwanted state by the younger generations because of the conviction that it necessarily includes diminished participation in life events and diminished satisfaction. Such thinking may be a self-fulfilling prophecy. If one is convinced that a certain time of life is to be a bad experience, events may very well be manipulated to make it materialize (Davis and Davis, 1985, p. 59). However, marketers realize that by creating positive roles for elders, they can promote favorable images to “insure that older characters are seen as intellectually capable, physically healthy, and socially active” (Roberts and Zhou, 1997, p. 210). Davis and Davis (1985) indicate that, “using the media to change attitudes means that we are dealing with persuasive messages to influence opinion on a mass scale” (p. 59).

Cognitive Age of The Elderly

Today, some advertising practitioners and researchers study “cognitive age,” which assists them in understanding the elderly and then they convey that comprehension through the media. Cognitive age can be defined as the age one perceives one’s self. “Cognitive age has been studied most frequently, however, in the context of 55+ adults due to its obvious implications for this population” (Stephens, 1991, p. 38). In a marketing study conducted by Ogilvy and Mather, “nearly 40 percent of the respondents over sixty-five said that most advertising presents people in their age group as unattractive and incompetent” (Ward, 1988 p. 16). This type of attitude encourages an aged self-fulfilling prophecy reinforcing the elderly as devalued individuals in society.

Peterson (1992) insists that “there is a societal cost of neglecting seniors and of portraying them in an unfavorable light. Further, it may reinforce negative self images of many seniors who see themselves as neglected or deprecated in advertising” (p. 705). Other senior citizens express outrage and are insulted by advertising. Just like the public at large, “they don’t like being patted, patronized or threatened” (Ward, 1988, p. 15).
Stephens (1991), author of "Cognitive Age: A Useful Concept for Advertising?," finds through her study of the elderly and advertising that, "cognitive age is a potentially valuable concept for advertising targeting, creative decisions and media selection, when used in conjunction with chronological age" (p. 37).

Although many advertisers believe that they should consolidate the elderly into a homogenous group, other advertisers contend that the mature market remains heterogeneous. According to Hummert (1993), the elderly are segmented into categories: “the young-old (55 to 64), middle-old (64 to 74), and the old-old (75 and over)” (p. 22). This distinct separation of the aged surfaces in magazines. For example, the young-old models, especially in *Modern Maturity* “were portrayed as capable, important, healthy, and physically and socially active,” unlike the old-old models who appeared sedentary and fragile (Roberts and Zhou, 1997, p. 217).

For many advertisers, creating an effective market for the elderly has been an especially difficult challenge. Certain products may have appeal only to older persons, and certain products can appeal to a broader range of consumers. According to Davis (1985): in creating the copy, sensitivity has to be exercised since it is assumed that most people do not want to be appealed to through their age status primarily. Although being old is not something that bothers all people, it can be assumed being catered to or patronized because one is old is something that bothers most people. The advertising copy, as well as the visual images need to incorporate elements of appeal to all ages, or at least to a broad spectrum. Good advertising ideas appeal widely and override any associated age images. (p. 69)

The baby boomers carry the torch of graduating to the up-and-coming mature Americans in the twenty-first century. This group differs from its predecessors in the sense that they have an aggressive attitude and find it intolerable being categorized, segregated, or ignored.
Members of this generation view themselves as "perennially youthful," and plan to integrate themselves with the younger markets in what they watch and read (Goodman and Schaffer, 1991, p. 31).

Advertisers should take heed to the buying power of the elderly group, because it controls as much as half of America's discretionary income and 77 percent of the country's assets (Roberts and Zhou, 1997, p. 209). Elder buying power in the twenty-first century will be phenomenal, because there will be a "sizable number" of seniors who will purchase a variety of products, from "cars to cookies" (Haug, 1995, p. 4). Ward (1988) illustrates how advertisers should help the elderly market in, "Over 50s: How to Reach Out to An Ignored Consumer." In describing how advertisers can remedy the mistake of isolating seniors from the rest of the consumer market, Ward (1998) explains:

When it comes to products that they enjoy with the rest of us, we think there are two keys and overriding strategies that should be followed: celebrate the relationships that people over fifty have with the rest of Americans, and show how valuable they are in the grand scheme of things. (p. 21)

If other advertisers shared Ward's ideology ten years ago, this form of ageism might not exist today. In his article, Burnett (1991) discusses how the media portray the elderly, and how advertising practitioners and researchers are becoming interested in seniors as consumers, because of the profitability and the income of this segmented elderly market (p. 34). Many advertisers tend not to change their cognitive reconstruction strategies for psychological or sociological reasons. Instead, they do it for the money seniors can bring in for their clients' accounts. For example, "American Express solicits card members to become Gold Senior Members, not out of respect for the elderly, but because the company knows there is money in their pockets to be spent" (Haug, 1995, p. 4).
Several advertising agencies, such as Ogilvy and Mather, and Leo Burnett, know the seriousness of paying attention to the future elderly consumer market:

The older segment of the American population is projected to increase to more than one third of the population by the year 2020. Nearly 34 million Americans were age 65 and older in 1995, and will double by the year 2030 as the last of the baby boom generation passes age 65 (Roberts and Zhou, 1997, p. 208).

When advertisers target the elderly, they have overlooked an important and largely populated segment of elderly minorities. This group of aged people are even more underrepresented in advertising, especially in magazines. Roberts and Zhou (1997) concluded that "the lack of non-white characters points to an unrealistic reflection of the racial composition of the older American population" (p. 218). These two authors state that magazines, such as Modern Maturity, that cater to the elderly "need to make a conscious effort to attract non-white readers as well as advertisements that use non-white characters" (p. 218).

The lack of older minorities in advertising exists in other countries besides the United States. Canada, known for its culturally diverse society, also underrepresents aged minorities when it comes to giving this group equal advertising as white elders (Zhou and Chen, 1992, p. 351). Zhou and Chen's study (1992) concluded that "non-white older characters in magazines were not shown at all" (p. 348). As in the United States, Canadian advertisers focused more on the younger target audience.

Older black minorities basically have a "double-jeopardy" stereotype in the sense that they are considered by society to be underprivileged and unimportant. Rossman (1994) verifies, "one of the most pervasive myths is that almost all blacks are poor, so it's not worth targeting them" (p. 123). Statistically, this ideology of the insolvent older black senior doesn't coincide with the U.S. Census Bureau. According to the Census Bureau, around 60 percent of black households in 1991 had incomes of less than $25,000 compared to 40 percent of white households. However, only about 1/3 of the blacks
remain poor, and 2/3 are above the Census Bureau's poverty threshold index for 1991 (Rossman, 1994, p. 123).

The Urban Institute, a Washington, D.C., research firm, foresees black baby boomers increasing to about 38 million within the next decade (Rossman, 1994, p. 136). Aging minorities have the same concerns as aging whites. The issues of money, health and retirement remain at the forefront of the middle and upper-class African-American boomers.

In terms of dollars and cents, advertisers need to change their marketing strategies and reconstruct the advertising techniques used to target African-Americans. This minority segment has almost 32 million people with close to $300 billion in spending power. Rossman (1994) argues that African-Americans continue to represent a growing market, expanding to more than 12 percent of the total U.S. population (Rossman, 1994, p. 124).

Unlike their elderly white counterparts, aging blacks do not classify themselves as heterogeneous. They don't want to be "lumped together" with other segments of the population. Another false paradigm of advertising indicates that, blacks and whites can be reached through the same ads and the same media. In actuality, advertisers can succeed with African-Americans if they create ads that are relevant to their lifestyle, and reflect a positive image of them as a consumer. Rossman (1994) gives some advertising recommendations to marketers when she states, "when designing questionnaires, adapt issues so they are culturally relevant to the market and its segments. Surveys must be undertaken from the customer's perspective, and we need to design separate, relevant research questions for each subsegment" (pp. 144-145). The coined term "courtesy is contagious" holds true to elder minority advertising, in the sense that "if you reach out to the African-American market with respect and relevance, and cultivate ongoing relationships, you will see a greater return on your marketing dollar than you will with the general market" (Rossman, 1994, p. 126).
Various advertisers have constructed strategies to remedy the underrepresentation and covert discrimination of elderly minorities in magazine ads. First, market research techniques need to eliminate the stereotypes by placing elderly blacks in less subordinate positions (e.g., janitors), and show them in the same capacities as older whites (Rossman, 1994, p. 131). Secondly, marketing firms can improve their hiring practices by employing minorities that assist in effectively and ethically representing black elders in society. This tactic has worked for corporations like PepsiCo, where in the 1940s, the company “had hiring practices that included ethnic recruiting. PepsiCo was progressive not only from an ethnic standpoint, but also from a gender standpoint, hiring both male and female sales people to sell to the African-American community” (Rossman, 1994, p. 151).

Other aging minority groups that need acknowledgment include Hispanics, Asians, women, gays and lesbians. Marketers also underrepresent these societal segments in magazine ads. By the year 2020, the number of Hispanic residents in the U.S. will reach 39 million, and will eventually surpass the African-American population as the largest minority group. The number of Asians will increase to almost 22 million by 2020, and black immigrants from the Caribbean and Africa will triple from the 1 million that now occupy America (Rossman, 1994, p. 4). Unfortunately, researchers have not compiled enough data at this point in time to study how to effectively market all the elderly minority segments. Suggestions for future research regarding equal advertising for minority elders would include advertising firms surveying high minority communities and receiving their input on how to better serve their needs. There is no reason why minorities should not acquire an equal amount of advertising space as their white counterparts.

Marketing the Elderly in Magazines

Marketing the elderly has become somewhat of a new endeavor for advertisers. They still experiment with various and innovative ways to reach this profitable segment.
market. According to Morgan and Levy (1993) "there is no simple answer as to where to advertise to the mature market" (p. 183).

Many "mature" magazines have frequent elderly readers, because seniors can relate to the various issues these particular publications have to offer. When advertising various products, whether directly used by the elderly or the majority of the public, an issue facing marketing agencies is "whether to approach it in general mainstream publications, such as Reader’s Digest or in magazines such as Modern Maturity and New Choices for Retirement Living, which target the mature market specifically" (Morgan and Levy, 1993, p. 182).

The most popular of these magazines is Modern Maturity, a publication sent to members of the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP). Modern Maturity is the fourth largest magazine in circulation in America., with a circulation in excess of 8.5 million, it commands attention from those advertisers who wish to reach the older market (Davis and Davis, 1985, p. 69). Morgan and Levy (1993) examined the percentage of the elderly who read Modern Maturity, and discovered "an impressive 52 percent of our sample reports read Modern Maturity regularly. The circulation of Modern Maturity is so immense it dwarfs that of other senior publications" (p. 182). Other magazines, if marketed correctly, can create an increase in elderly readership, rather than resorting to degrading the aged. For example, news magazines such as Newsweek, Time, U.S. News and World Report, on several occasions verbally bashed the elderly, and referred to the aged as being "corroding, disintegrating machines" (Cirillo, 1994, pp. 173-175). If the advertisers for these magazines want a percentage of the elderly segment to buy and read these publications, they need to change the way they speak to and about seniors.

In order to reach the old-old segment market, advertising firms can develop "multiple or at least dual-promotional mixes to reach different age segments with its
promotion though the product itself may be exactly the same” (Milliman and Effmeyer, 1989, p. 35). Through their findings, Milliman and Effmeyer (1993) concluded that the appearance of a certain age holds a great deal of importance when advertising to the elderly; “people over 65 do look favorably upon ads featuring models other than young models and that, at least in some instances, they consider middle, and older-aged models significantly more believable or credible” (p. 35). These older people can relate to models that appear close to their chronological years.

Finally, in the quest to dispel ageism, Butler (1994) indicates that, “there is a lot of gold in geriatrics”, and he goes on to say, that when older people gain control over their own lives, they will prove to the younger generation that they are not “unproductive, depressed, disengaged, inflexible, or senile” (p. 142).

Conclusion

Advertisers must reinvent themselves and constructively review their marketing techniques regarding the diverse elderly population in the twenty-first century. Although marketers have initiated minor changes and realizations concerning the elderly in advertising, more work needs to be done on completely changing the public’s attitude toward the stereotyping of the elderly. The gradual “paradigm shift” of a small percentage of advertisers in the United States toward the elderly, are instrumental in making shifts to dissipate the negative perceptions (e.g., weak, inept, crazy, and grouchy) of the aged and respect their needs. Advertising agencies like Ogilvy and Mather have changed their marketing strategies in the sense that they no longer isolate the mature adult in advertising. Contrary to other agencies, they “celebrate the relationships that people over fifty have with the rest of Americans” (Ward, 1988, p. 21).
Ogilvy and Mather doesn’t portray seniors as society’s problems, rather they advertise the value that the aged hold in this country.

Many advertising researchers anticipate that the future elderly market holds a plethora of economic wealth. Therefore, by changing the past stereotypes and underrepresentation of seniors, marketers plan to keep in touch with these people and not make them feel ignored, insulted, or isolated. However, the ethics of these advertisers are questionable. This poses the question, “what can account for this more favorable media and industry recognition of older people in the United States? Two things: numbers and markets” (Haug, 1995, p. 4). Regardless of the motives, future marketing researchers need to remedy these inaccurate mass media portrayals in our society. The preceding argument leads to the following hypotheses:

H1. Magazine ads can send inaccurate messages that affect the way younger generations view the elderly.

H2. The elderly view themselves through their cognitive age rather than their chronological years.

H3. Both the younger and older respondents will indicate that elderly minorities continue to be underrepresented in magazine ads.

H4. Magazine ads continue to reinforce elderly stereotypes.
CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

Sample

Subjects were recruited on the basis of convenience from communication classes at the University of Nevada Las Vegas, and the Nevada Chapter of Retired Teachers. Approximately, 148 questionnaires were returned to the researcher by individuals claiming to read magazines on a consistent basis.

Subjects

The respondents studied were former Clark County School District educators. These former teachers held a variety of positions within the school district, had a wide range of educational and ethnic backgrounds, and were familiar with the various levels of media, including print ads in magazines. The retired teachers who voluntarily participated in this experiment were expected to be uniform in the way that they viewed the ads that were provided to them by the researcher, because they fell within the age categories specified in the introduction to this paper. The University of Nevada, Las Vegas students who voluntarily took part in this experiment, consisted of mainly communication majors. This segment of respondents were chosen because they were an eclectic group of subjects, from different demographic and age backgrounds, and they were familiar with the various types of media. They were also educated on the various methods the media uses to get certain points across to the public. These respondents were ideal candidates to be studied as a comparison group against the retired teachers because their ages and cognitive concepts were so vastly different.
Because the study involved human subjects, approval had to be obtained from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) Office of Research Administration before any experimental sessions could begin. Formal notification of approval by the Office of Research Administration was made on June 18, 1999, by UNLV’s Director of Research Administration.

Instrument

A questionnaire was created using a perceived realism scale to determine how different subjects in various age groups react to magazine ads and their meaning of those ads. The Perceived Realism Scale used by Rubin (1981a) is reported in this volume. Respondents report their agreement with each statement using 4-point Likert responses ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (4). The researcher used a 4-point Likert scale to force respondents to make a choice that did not include a vague response. However, there were several questions that utilized 5-point Likert responses, such as “race,” and “age,” where more information was needed to complete the survey. Perceived realism scores are usually defined as the average of the item scores. The scale takes less than 1 minute to complete. The items are often mingled with other attitudinal statements (Rubin, 1981a, pp. 141-165).

Respondents analyzed ads from several popular magazines (see pp. 38-41) The first ad was taken from the November 1998 issue of Details magazine. The second ad came from the October 1998 issue of Cosmopolitan magazine. The third ad was taken from the October 1998 issue of People magazine. The fourth ad came from the November 1998 issue of Modern Maturity magazine. These magazines were chosen on the basis of their “target audience.” For example, Details magazine readers are of the younger and older market segment (30-year-olds to 70-year-olds). Cosmopolitan magazine also caters to readers of the younger audience (14-year-olds to 30-year-olds). People magazine has an eclectic group of readers (from 20-year-olds to 55-year-olds). Finally, Modern Maturity
magazine aims its marketing at an older audience (55-year-olds and above).

Volunteer respondents for the elderly were obtained from the Division For Aging Services Directory of Senior Services-Southern Nevada. The researcher chose members of the Nevada Chapter of the Retired Teachers due to their level of education and their ability to critically analyze print ads. Students enrolled in oral and interpersonal communication courses at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, were chosen on the basis of convenience, and their various ages needed for a comparison in contrast to the elderly respondents.

Before proceeding with the experiment, the researcher submitted a copy of the questionnaire to the chairman of this thesis committee, who suggested several changes to the text and the scale used to obtain the data. Once these changes were made and approved by the committee chair, the researcher submitted a copy of the questions to the president of The Nevada Chapter of Retired Teachers for approval. The president reviewed the questions to ensure that they were coherent, were not confusing and did not require any specialized knowledge. The president then approved the distribution of the questionnaire to the respondents.

This experiment was conducted at two locations on various days; one at the Classroom Buildings Complex at UNLV, and the other at the Southern Nevada Vocational Technical Community College High School, in the culinary arts dining area, located at 5710 Mountain Vista Street, in Las Vegas. Five experimental sessions were conducted on five different days. The session consisting of the 48 retired teacher volunteers participated in this experiment during their monthly meeting.

Before each session, the researcher was introduced and the purpose of the study was explained. The subjects were given a consent form at this point to acknowledge that they were willing participants in the study. (The letter of consent, and memorandum from UNLV's Office of Research Administration approving the study, along with a copy of the questionnaire are contained in Appendix 2.)
Volunteer subjects for both groups were given the questionnaires and were supplied with pens to answer the questions. Seating was random. The researcher used an overhead projector and portable screen to show the four ads which were copied onto transparencies for the entire room to view. The researcher presented each ad individually and told the subjects to indicate what their immediate reactions were to each of the ads. The respondents were allowed to view each ad for one minute, per the Likert research addressed earlier. The researcher reviewed the ads for a second time at the request of several respondents, and answered questions pertaining to the instructions on how the subjects were to answer the questions. Subjects were asked to indicate, by circling the appropriate items on the questionnaire, how they perceived the depiction of the elderly in magazines. These items will be discussed shortly. The questions included assessing the portrayals of seniors in ads, while viewing four sample ads from magazines that market diverse age groups, and whether the respondents thought the particular ads shown were positive, negative or neutral depictions of the elderly. As each participant completed the questionnaire, they returned it to the researcher. Being that this was a convenience sample, interviewing took place when the Oral and Interpersonal Communication classes met on June 25, 1999, from 8:00 a.m. until 9:30 a.m., and the week of July 2, 1999 from 10:30 a.m. until 10:45. On December 15, 1999 at 11:15 a.m., the researcher met with the Nevada Chapter of Retired Teachers until 11:35 a.m.

The Perceived Realism Scale was composed of the following items: (a) ads numbered 1 through 4 with a 3-point scale ranging from 1, being negative, 2 being neutral and 3 being positive; (b) the initial reaction to viewing each ad, which used responses ranging from, “these are true perceptions of the elderly” to “magazine ads depicting the elderly can be distasteful;” (b) “magazine ads allow us to experience how others really live,” using the Likert scale from “strongly disagree,” to “strongly agree;” (c) “I believe that younger generations view seniors and their lifestyles accurately;” (d) “I believe that seniors view themselves as being younger than their chronological years;” (e) “how often
do you remember seeing the following senior characters in magazine ads?”, these items addressing men, women, and minorities were scaled from “very often” to “never;” (f) “Indicate whether or not you believe seniors are stereotyped in magazine ads;” (g) “magazine ads do not show life as it really is;” (h) “magazine ads present things as they really are in life;” (i) “If I see something in magazine ads, I can’t be sure it really is that way.”

The next set of items on the survey concluded with three demographic items. Subjects indicated their “sex” by circling 1 = male or 2 = female. The next question addressed “race,” and subjects chose amongst the following five race classifications: (a) 1 = African-American; (b) 2 = Hispanic; (c) 3 = Asian-American; (d) 4 = Caucasian; (e) 5 = Other. Finally, age was categorized with a value assigned to one of the following five categories: (a) 1 = 18-25 years; (b) 2 = 26-36 years; (c) 3 = 37-47 years; (d) 4 = 48-58 years; (e) 5 = 59-above years.

The researcher chose these ages due to previous studies as discussed in chapter one, regarding the young-old, middle-old, and old-old age classifications. Altogether, the Perceived Realism Survey contained 13 questions: 10 perceived realism items, and three demographic items. The data collected from the 148 subjects were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) computer software program.
CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

This section summarizes the results into four areas. The first segment addressed is the demographics of the sample, then the t-test results for Hypothesis 1, 3, and 4, and finally, correlated results for Hypothesis 2.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that magazine ads can send inaccurate messages that negatively affect the way younger generations view the elderly as a whole. Hypothesis 2 foresaw that most of the elderly view themselves through their cognitive age and not by their chronological years. Hypothesis 3 predicted that the elderly, especially minorities, continue to be underrepresented in magazine ads. Hypothesis 4 stated, contrary to past advertising research, and as discussed in chapter one, magazine ads continue to stereotype the elderly and reinforce ageism.

In order for Hypothesis 1 to be supported, the result figures need to disclose that while viewing the four ads, the elderly as a whole significantly agree that magazine ads can send inaccurate messages that negatively affect the way younger generations view the senior population. In order to support Hypothesis 2, the results need to reveal that the elderly agree that they view themselves on how they inwardly feel, or by their cognitive age. In order to support Hypothesis 3, both the elderly and younger respondents must agree that the segmented elderly minority groups continue to be underrepresented in magazine ads. The information gathered for Hypothesis 4 should verify that magazine ads continue to reinforce elderly stereotyping.
Demographics

Respondents answered the following demographic questions: gender, age, and race. The sample (N = 148) of the total respondents included 99 (68.3%) females; 46 (31.7%) males. The ages of the respondents were as follows: 18-25 years (54.8%); 26-36 years (8.2%); 37-47 years (4.1%); 48-58 years (3.4%); 59-above (29.5%). Caucasians accounted for the largest portion of the sample (76.7%), followed by Hispanics (6.8%); Asian-Americans (6.2%); African-Americans (5.5%); individuals who classified themselves as “other” (4.8%).

Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1 stated, “magazine ads can send inaccurate messages that affect the way the younger generations view the elderly.” The age of the respondent was the independent grouping variable. The younger group averaged a mean score of 3.10; the older group averaged a mean score of 3.34. An independent t-test was performed to compare these means (see Table 1, p. 24). The two-tailed probability approaches significance (t = -1.829, df = 144, p > .05). This indicated that both the elderly and the younger groups reported that they believe the younger generations view the elderly lifestyles inaccurately. These results showed that there were no significant attitude differentiation between the older group and the younger group. However, these results did indicate that Hypothesis 1 was provisionally supported.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that, “elderly minorities continue to be underrepresented in magazine ads.” The younger group averaged a mean score of 3.03; the older group averaged a mean score of 2.66. The t-test for independent samples revealed (t = 2.50, df = 134, p < .05) that the young and old respondents believed elderly minorities continue to be underrepresented in magazine ads.
However, there were significant differences in that the younger group scored higher in this area. Therefore, Hypothesis 3 was provisionally supported.

Hypothesis 4 argued that, "magazine ads continue to reinforce elderly stereotypes." The younger group averaged a mean score of 3.00, and the older group averaged a mean score of 3.42. In this evaluation, using a t-test for independent samples, the results indicated a significant difference between the two groups, \( t = -3.37, df = 142, p < .001 \). Both groups significantly agreed that magazine ads stereotype seniors. However, the older group scored higher than the younger group in this area. Thus, Hypothesis 4 was supported.

Hypothesis 2 stated: "the elderly view themselves through their cognitive age rather through their chronological years." This was assessed using a Pearson Correlation. The Pearson Product Moment Correlation assessed the relationship among the independent variables (age of the subject) and dependent variable (I believe that seniors view themselves through their cognitive age rather than their chronological years). The correlation for both the young and the old age group showed a significant positive relationship between the age of the respondent and how they believe that seniors view themselves through their cognitive age \( (r = .390**, p < .000) \). A correlation analysis was also performed on how respondents reacted to the comment on the questionnaire which stated, "magazine ads do not show life as it really is." There was a significant negative relationship between the young age group and the old age group \( (r = -.329**, p = .000) \).

Overall, these results indicate that both the young and the old groups believe that we cannot look at magazine ads at face value and assume that what we are viewing is an accurate depiction of certain segment groups; namely senior citizens. Therefore, Hypothesis 4 was supported.
Table 1

T-Tests For Young And Old Attitudes Regarding Magazine Ads.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Young Group</th>
<th>Old Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magazine ads can send inaccurate messages that affect the way younger generations view the elderly.</td>
<td>3.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elderly minorities continue to be underrepresented in magazine ads.</td>
<td>3.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magazine ads continue to reinforce elderly stereotypes.</td>
<td>3.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

This study examined the relationships between the young and the old, how each group viewed an assortment of magazine ads, and assessed the depiction of the senior citizen characters in those ads. It also addressed the attitudes of the young and the old and how they believed the elderly segmented group really acted, despite the stereotypical pictures they viewed in the magazine ads. According to Lippman (1922), pictures have always been the surest way of conveying an idea, and next in order, words that call up pictures in memory. But the idea conveyed is not fully our own until we have identified ourselves with some aspect of the picture. (p. 105)

This study attempted to contrast the behavioral differences between the younger age groups and their older counterparts when addressing stereotyping through the media; specifically in print ads. Based on the literature reported, four hypotheses were created. Hypothesis 1 predicted that magazine ads send inaccurate messages that negatively affect the way younger generations view the elderly. Hypothesis 2 predicted that “the elderly view themselves through their cognitive age, rather than their chronological years.” Hypothesis 3 predicted that “elderly minorities continue to be underrepresented in magazine ads.” Finally, Hypothesis 4 predicted that “magazine ads continue to reinforce the elderly stereotype.”

The results of this study demonstrated support for all of the hypotheses. Although the hypotheses were supported, the researcher noticed through the statistical data, that
both age groups gave similar responses when answering the questionnaire. However, there were significant differences between the groups when they viewed the questionnaire ads. Most of the older respondents considered three out of the four ads to be “negative”, as opposed to the younger respondents indicating a more “neutral” reaction to the ads.

Limitations

Other research has focused on young and old attitudes concerning media portrayals of the elderly. Zhou and Chen (1992) determined that both older and younger characters were associated with a variety of products (pp. 343-354). The present study did not examine product association in comparison with certain age groups. All that can be concluded from the results of this study is that there continues to be underrepresentation and stereotyping within certain age groups. This paper also did not address activity among the elderly in magazine ads. For example, in Zhou and Chen’s (1992) study, they reported that older characters were portrayed as less physically active, and were shown in sedentary activities, compared to the younger ad characters (p. 350). The younger characters were depicted in non-sedentary and high physical activities.

Another limitation in this study indicated that the subject population used in compiling the research was limited to a small group of students and retired teachers in a single city. The main reason why the elderly subjects was limited, had to do with the unresponsive nature of the majority of groups called upon within the Directory of Senior Services in Southern Nevada. Therefore, the results of this study cannot be generalized to all of the younger and older age groups throughout the United States. Finally, a larger assortment of magazine ads could have been incorporated to expand this study, but due to the various time constraints within the groups, a smaller compilation of ads were utilized.

One of the most surprising findings in this study surfaced when a larger measure of the younger subjects, in comparison to the older subjects, indicated that they believe elderly minorities continue to be underrepresented in magazine ads. This finding can also
provide support for the prediction made by Peterson (1992) in a study concluding that "older consumers were not shown as frequently as their younger counterparts, even as compared to their composition of the total population" (p.705). These same findings were evident in Langmeyer’s (1993) study where there were no significant positive differences in the results of senior underrepresentation. She attested that, "people 60 years of age and over comprised 16.8 percent of the population in 1988. Aside from Modern Maturity, no magazine in this study contained close to that percentage of advertisements portraying mature adults" (p. 89).

Suggestions for Future Research

Although this study was completed on a smaller scale, the results could still benefit advertisers in ways that they can effectively appeal to the elderly market, which is affluent, large and on the rise. Through this research, the advise from theorists, authors, and even some advertisers pronounce that a change in advertising procedures regarding the stereotyping of elderly is imperative to this market and its needs. Although Langmeyer’s (1993) research generated a content analysis of magazine advertisements more than ten years ago, indicating that advertisers continue to take their time in bringing about changes in “social reality and underrepresent mature people in their ads,” this same behavior still exists today (p. 89).

A future study within a ten year period could focus on the baby boomers and how they would promote positive changes, if any, to dispel elderly stereotypes in advertising. However, Basting (1998) brings about a valid point when she states, that researchers need to create an “intergenerational effort” to reconstruct how people have been programmed by the media to view old age. She also believes that “we cannot rely on technology and the baby boom to provide us ways to dodge the label” (p. 2).

Presently, there are advocate groups with people from all types of backgrounds trying to change the negative images the media reinforces regarding the elderly.
The Gray Panthers is a national advocacy organization whose members include not only the elderly, but young people and middle-aged people. This organization has voiced much concern over media images of aging. They have mounted a “media watch” to record evidences of discrimination toward old people. The group has developed a list of characteristics that it considers stereotyping by the media, such as an expressionless and frail appearance, incoherent speech and stubborn and rigid personalities. This guides the group in spotting offenses in media content (Davis and Davis, 1985, pp. 55-56).

Throughout this research process, it is evident that many advertisers realize that extensive attitude changes must take place in order to correct the negative self-image effects the media portrays of mature adults to younger audiences, but few are taking part in bringing about those changes. Ironically, in the United States, there is great value placed on inanimate objects of days gone by, such as furniture, homes, and cars. However, this is not the case where the elderly are concerned. Jewell (1987) summed up this exact ideology in a body of work called, Investment of Worth. In this anthology, she states:

You value the earthen vase, each crack applauded for authenticity, a slave’s Freedom Quilt, hand-pulled stitchery a rare tale relinquished, Victorian silver hairpins with filigreed flowers delicate as unconscious. A collector of ancients quite proud of your tastes but scornful of curled brown leaves, slight grey webs, parched desert soil of a woman turned and tuned to her ripening, whose life is dear as a signed first edition, whose death as costly as a polished oak bed. (Jewel and Haldeman Martz, 1987, p. 76)

This piece of writing brings about a paradox of beliefs within this country. Many antique objects are treated with the finest care and are, in many cases, classified as invaluable. Many collectors say that these objects, even though they cannot speak, have stories to tell about where they came from through the ages. These objects are then displayed proudly in glass cases and become conversation pieces. The messages that these
values communicate to the older generation is that they are insignificant compared to a collectible antique. It is unfortunate that seniors have many interesting stories to share regarding their life experiences and usually want to talk about them, but not many younger people have the patience nor the time to listen.

Conclusion

This study examined the communicative affects magazine ads have on both the older and the younger generations. The different organizations of media create and transmit informative, entertaining, and persuasive messages to society. However, not all those messages are accurate and psychologically beneficial to senior citizens. By viewing magazine ads in the United States, the young get a distorted and unrealistic portrayal of older Americans, because the media, specifically in print advertising, unfavorably depict the elderly relative to younger persons. These messages serve to reinforce or shape the perceptions people have about this society. When a person views a non-verbal message, such as a magazine ad, he or she may rely on what they have learned through other forms of media in order to interpret what message the ad is trying to convey. Thus the information that the public receives from the media may create a bias, especially where the elderly are concerned. This bias against seniors may affect the way both younger and older people purchase, or don’t purchase, certain products, and more importantly how these people feel about themselves and others around them.

In conclusion, through my research for this project, it is evident that stereotyping the elderly has produced a societal cost of neglecting and portraying seniors unfavorably. This practice reinforces society’s ideas that older people are insignificant. More importantly, this behavior by the media may reinforce negative self images of the elderly, where they may think of themselves as being underrepresented and deprecated in advertising.
Marketers could serve the elderly in a positive way by showing senior characters in
advertising as influential members in American culture, and most importantly as human
beings who are intelligent, proficient, and motivated.
DATE: June 18, 1999

TO: Jaymes Aimetti
School of Communications
M/S 5007

FROM: Dr. William E. Schulze, Director
Office of Sponsored Programs (X1357)

RE: Status of Human Subject Protocol Entitled:
"The Depiction of Senior Citizens in Magazine
Advertisements"

OSP #381s0699-062e

The protocol for the project referenced above has been reviewed by the Office of Sponsored Programs and it has been determined that it meets the criteria for exemption from full review by the UNLV human subjects Institutional Review Board. This protocol is approved for a period of one year from the date of this notification and work on the project may proceed.

Should the use of human subjects described in this protocol continue beyond a year from the date of this notification, it will be necessary to request an extension.

If you have any questions regarding this information, please contact Marsha Green in the Office of Sponsored Programs at 895-1357.

cc: A. Ferri (CS-5007)
OSP File
October 1, 1999

Dear Participant:

My name is Jaymes Aimetti and I am a graduate student in the Greenspun School of Communication at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. First, I want to thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. I am conducting this experiment to fulfill a thesis requirement to complete UNLV’s graduate program in communication. This voluntary questionnaire asks brief questions regarding communication in print media and what your immediate reaction is to these ads. Please know that you may withdraw from participation at any time.

The questionnaire attached, and a short overhead presentation should take no longer than 10 minutes. Your answers are strictly confidential and there are no requirements which ask you to provide your name. When my statistical findings are completed, I will submit a report to my thesis chair, Larry Mullen, Ph.D., after which the questionnaires will be destroyed.

If you have any questions, please contact the UNLV Office for Sponsored Programs (FDH 304), at 895-1357, or myself at 480-3071.

Thank you again for assisting me in my research.

Sincerely,

Jaymes Aimetti
APPENDIX II
QUESTIONNAIRE

Instructions: Using the scale below, please circle the number that best describes how you feel about seniors and how they are depicted in magazine ads.

1. Do you believe that the seniors in the following ads are portrayed in a positive or negative light? (please circle one for each ad)
   - Ad#1
     - Negative: 1
     - Neutral: 2
     - Positive: 3
   - Ad#2
     - Negative: 1
     - Neutral: 2
     - Positive: 3
   - Ad#3
     - Negative: 1
     - Neutral: 2
     - Positive: 3
   - Ad#4
     - Negative: 1
     - Neutral: 2
     - Positive: 3

2. What is your first reaction when viewing these ads? (please circle one)
   - 1 2 3 4 5
     - These are true perceptions of the elderly.
     - Magazine ads depicting the elderly can be distasteful.

3. Magazine ads let me really see how other people live. (please circle one)
   - 1 2 3 4
     - Strongly Disagree
     - Strongly Agree

4. I believe that younger generations view seniors and their lifestyles accurately (please circle one)
   - 1 2 3 4
     - Strongly Agree
     - Strongly Disagree

5. I believe that seniors view themselves as being younger than their chronological years (please circle one)
   - 1 2 3 4
     - Strongly Disagree
     - Strongly Agree
6. How often do you remember seeing the following senior characters in magazine ads? (please circle one).

   Men  Very often  Never
   1    2        3        4

   Women Very often  Never
   1    2        3        4

   Minorities Very often  Never
   1    2        3        4

7. Indicate whether or not you believe seniors are stereotyped in magazine ads (please circle one)

   1 2 3 4
   Strongly Disagree  Strongly Agree

8. Magazine ads do not show life as it really is (please circle one)

   1 2 3 4
   Strongly Disagree  Strongly Agree

9. Magazine ads present things as they really are in life (please circle one)

   1 2 3 4
   Strongly Disagree  Strongly Agree

10. If I see something in magazine ads, I can’t be sure it really is that way (please circle one)

    1 2 3 4
    Strongly Disagree  Strongly Agree

11. What is your sex? (please circle one)

    1 2
    Male  Female

12. What is your race? (please circle one)

    1 2 3 4 5
    African-American  Hispanic  Asian-American  Caucasian  Other

13. How young are you? (please circle one)

    1 2 3 4 5
    18-25 years  26-36 years  37-47 years  48-58 years  59-above
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Most doctors will tell you that a key to good health is good nutrition. But even if you've taken steps to improve your diet by eating more lean meats, fruits and vegetables, you still may not be getting the balanced nutrition you need.

So how can you help guarantee that you and the ones you love get the right nutrition?

With Ensure

Ensure is more than a vitamin supplement. It's a complete, balanced nutrition drink that provides an excellent balance of protein, carbohydrates, vitamins and minerals. It's all the nutrition you need everyday to help stay healthy, be energetic and more active. Drink Ensure anytime. Enjoy it as a healthy meal by itself or as a healthy between meal snack. Ensure is even recommended #1 by doctors as a complete source of nutrition.

So make sure you and the ones you love get the right nutrition. Drink Ensure, and drink to your health!
REFERENCES


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VITA

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Thesis Examination Committee:
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Committee Member, Dr. Anthony Ferri, Ph.D.
Committee Member, Dr. Richard Jensen, Ph.D.
Graduate Faculty Representative, Dr. Andrea Fontana, Ph.D.