The (B)old and the Beautiful: Investigating the Preference of Senior Consumers Concerning (the Age of) Models Used in Advertising

Katarina Panic, Ghent University, Belgium
Verolien Cauberghe, Ghent University, Belgium
Delphine Verhoye, Ghent University, Belgium

1 Introduction

Today, it is estimated that 7.6 per cent of the world population is aged over 65 (CIA, 2009), making it the fastest-growing age segment in the world. Considering that older citizens do not only grow in number, but also in life expectancy and economic power, one would expect the elderly to receive a great amount of attention from advertisers. But even though marketing executives are aware of the importance of senior consumers, older models are rarely used in mainstream advertising. When they appear in advertisements, elderly are primarily depicted in a negative, stereotypical way (Gunter, 1998; Sikkel, 2004). Older models are mainly found in ads for ‘senior products’ like health products, often suggesting some form of physical impairment. However, these cliché images are far from the current reality. Today’s seniors are socially active, living an active and dynamic life. They are also a powerful consumer group with the means and the willingness to try out new things (Hanson, 1998). Nevertheless, almost no models older than 50 can be found in advertisements for general, age-universal products. This underrepresentation and stereotyping evokes feelings of dissatisfaction, frustration and even insult (Dutta-Bergman, 2006). Many older consumers become alienated from and disinterested in advertisements because they do not identify with the models used in advertisements. These emotions can negatively influence seniors’ attitudes towards advertising (and brands) and affect their purchase intention. While a series of studies revealed that older consumers would like to see more models of their own age in ads (e.g. Long, 1998), other research suggests that seniors do not wish to be confronted more models of their age group in advertisements (Greco, 1989; Carrigan and Szmigin, 1999). Therefore, the main question addressed in this study is: do senior consumers prefer seeing models of their own age, models who match their subjective age, or even younger models in advertising?
Past research has found that the age of the model used in advertisements also has an influence on the models' credibility (Gunter, 1998). In this study, the relationship between the age of the models used in advertising and the perceived credibility is investigated for older consumers. In addition, the moderating influence of gender is studied to determine whether preferences regarding model likeability and credibility differ for male and female seniors. To conclude, the impact of model likeability and credibility on the advertising effectiveness (measured through attitude towards the ad, attitude towards the brand and purchase intentions) is explored.

2 Conceptual Framework and Hypothesis Development

2.1 Understanding the Older Consumer

After recognizing the potential of the growing group of senior consumers, the next step is to develop advertising campaigns that actually appeal to the elderly. This appears to be more complex than many marketers expect. Older consumers have different motivations and needs than the younger, mainstream audience that marketers are used to target. As consumers grow older, their preferences, taste and priorities change. Therefore, communication needs to be adjusted accordingly. Some authors (e.g., Chingching, 2008) state that it is best to use older models when targeting the more mature market. Others advise the use of models who are ten to fifteen years younger than the target audience (Loro, 1989; Sikkel, 2004), or argue that one should portray the target audience in the same way as they see themselves (e.g., Tréguer, 1998). So the question arises: how ‘old’ do older people see themselves? Who do they identify themselves with? In order to answer these questions, we investigate the role of models used in advertisements since they set an image of the product user and his or her lifestyle. After seeing a certain product being advertised by a certain model, consumers will categorize it as ‘something for me’ or ‘not something for me’. This way, the age of the model has an important influence on the consumers’ interest in the product and eventually on the purchase decision (Chingching, 2008).

2.2 The Role of Subjective Age

To disentangle the impact of the model’s age on advertising effectiveness, it is necessary to look at the concept subjective age or “the age one perceives one’s self to be” (Stephens, 1991, p.37). Subjective age considers how old people feel and how they perceive themselves, as opposed to how old they actually are (the