Rewriting the myth of invisibility: The presentation of older adults in Australian advertising

Keywords: image of ageing; equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI); promotional culture; advertising research; Australia

Abstract
Old age diversity and inclusion in branded communication has become an increasingly important topic in Australia. This chapter establishes why brands should care about old age equity, inclusion and diversity, followed by an investigation into the current presentation of older adults in Australian advertising. Adopting a promotional culture stance, this empirical study examines the social standing of older Australians, those aged 50 years and over, as reflected by advertising, and investigates the previous claims of scant attention, marginalisation and dismissal of this social group. A media content analysis of 1,050 print advertisements shows that while older adults as a whole are frequently presented, there are still intersectional aspects of old age that are neglected in contemporary Australian advertising, such as gender, ethnic and age diversity. Although brands are increasingly offering representations of older adults, this has yet to embrace a more authentic appearance of different experiences and backgrounds commensurate with Australian society. It is recommended that brands and advertising professionals in Australia take inspiration from other countries to accelerate their efforts for equity, diversity and inclusion in branded communication.

1 Background and research objectives
In the early months of 2020, a commercial on Australian free-to-air TV promoting an automotive rental business featured a scene in which older adults found themselves being herded towards a rental bus by a young cowboy on horseback, equipped with a whip. This advertisement further fuelled an on-going debate around the perception and treatment of older people within Australian society. Complaints from the public concerning the specific commercial focused on the dehumanising metaphor as part of the promotional narrative: *"Treating the elderly like cattle. Denegrating [sic], humiliating, disrespectful and targeted discrimination based on age."* While the advertiser's defence honed in on the commercial's humorous nature, Ad Standards, Australia's advertising standards authority, upheld the complaint on the grounds of age discrimination (case no. 0019/20). This is just one of serval cases over the past decade that saw brands having to pull their advertising due to ageist undertones; or, in this case, overtones. Australia's advertising industry keeps finding itself accused of lacking a skilful hand for age diversity and inclusion, with Ad Standards registering dozens of complaints each year for branded communication that is perceived as vilifying or discriminating against older adults. Long considered home to "the young and adventurous" (Fiske/Hodge/Turner 1987: 71), Australia seemingly struggles with coming to terms with the realities of its ageing population profile.

Although research into the presentation of older adults in Australian advertising has been sparse—only four studies examining the country's advertising were identified during a systematic literature review (Olsen 2020)—the existing literature draws a rather bleak picture. Branded communication in Australia is marked by scant attention and dismissal when it comes to old age (Higgs/Milner 2006; Szmigin/Rutherfold 2009; AHRC 2013), with one study going as far as concluding that "older people are marginal and irrelevant social members" (Hall 2005: 143) in the eyes of brands and advertising professionals. Over the last decade, no one has revisited the topic to examine whether any progress has been made regarding old age equity, diversity and inclusion. However, a recent nationwide survey of adults aged 18 years and over, by the Australian Human Rights Commission (2021), concludes that older adults still perceive advertising largely to ignore them. But does this perception and the claims of

marginalisation and dismissal from over a decade ago truly reflect contemporary advertising in Australia? This chapter attempts to provide an answer to this question.

Building on the body of existing research, this study adopts a promotional culture stance, considering advertising as a "distorting mirror" (Olsen 2022: 52) that indicates and influences the social standing of older people within Australia. It is framed by *vitality theory* (King Smith/Ehala/Giles 2017), according to which the standing of any social group within a society is reflected by the media and, thus, can be determined through the examination of, for example, advertising. Vitality theory is based on the grouping of individuals via socio-demographic variables, such as their proportion within a population, geographical distribution, political awareness and social status. Behind this lies the assumption that groups of greater number and social importance are considered to have greater 'vitality', and thus continue their survival as groups, and the specific group features are propagated. A group that possesses more vitality will receive much greater support and representation in society as a whole, including in the media (McConnell 1991; Harwood/Roy 2005). Therefore, by looking at how groups are portrayed within media content, one can gain insight into the social standing and the perception of these people within a society (Kessler/Schwender/Bowen 2010). Combined with *cultivation theory* (Gerbner et al. 2002), and a structurationist understanding of advertising (Cluley 2017), this study assumes that portrayals that are picked up and disseminated by advertising influence audiences—and the wider society—by becoming part of a person's socialisation.

Based on this, the research objectives are twofold:
(i)   to examine the current social standing of older Australians as reflected by advertising; and
(ii)   to investigate whether the previous claims of scant attention, marginalisation and dismissal of older adults within society, as reflected by advertising, still hold true.

This study is thus interested in how diverse and inclusive in terms of old age and older adults Australian advertising currently is. For the purpose of this investigation, a person is considered an 'older adult' once they have reached the age of 50 years. Although an arbitrary delimitation, this age is commonly used in market research and the broader advertising industry in Australia (e.g., WPP AUNZ 2019).

Before moving on to the empirical investigation, a closer look is taken at why brands and advertising professionals in Australia should care about old-age-specific equity, diversity and inclusion.

2 Why brands should care about age equity, diversity and inclusion in advertising
Although not yet experiencing the same severe demographic shift that other high-income countries have been undergoing in recent decades, Australia's population undeniably is also ageing. While the country's share of 18- to 49-year-olds has declined by 4.6% since 1991, the share of people aged 50 years and over has increased by 11.0%, amounting to over a third (35.6%) of Australia's total population in 2021 (ABS 2021). The shift towards an ageing population becomes even more apparent when looking at the ratio of the oldest members of Australian society: accordingly, the group aged 75 years and over almost doubled over the last three decades to 7.6%; and with .05% of the total population, the share of centenarians (100 years and over) is amongst the highest in the world (*ibid*.; University of Sydney 2021). The demographic shift in Australia, although not as far progressed as in, for example, Germany or Japan (Prieler/Kohlbacher 2016; Otrebski 2016), showcases a tendency that is representative for high-income countries around the globe; in the coming decades most of these societies will boast an increasing number of older citizens—both in relative and absolute terms. Ahead of us lies a future of 'greying societies', due to longevity on the one hand, and declining birth rates on

the other. In consequence, older adults are already, and will increasingly, become relevant in terms of their social and economic impact.

A greying market embracing consumerism

The sheer growing number of older adults is just one facet of why older populations are increasingly significant. Another one is their financial resources. The average household wealth of older Australians currently stands at more than 1.5 times that of younger age group households (AIHW 2021). Compared to younger generations, older Australians have experienced an accelerated increase in their wealth over the past two decades (Wiltshire/Wood 2017). Compulsory superannuation combined with robust economic conditions have resulted in older Australians leveraging a relatively high disposable income and making them the wealthiest generation the country has ever seen (Compton/Lewin/Howe 2011; The Australian 2023).

Older adults also increasingly have good health and are generally satisfied with their position in life. Studies show that old age is far from a depressing time for most people; rather, for many, their 50s and 60s are the most satisfying period of their lives (Baird/Lucas/Donnellan 2010; Graham/Ruiz Pozuelo 2017; Bartram 2021). Today, older adults are more active and lead healthier and more mobile lives for longer than they did even just a few decades ago. They follow trends, fashions and lifestyles previously reserved for younger people, are self-confident, diverse, critical, and at the same time adventurous and prepared to spend more for a corresponding benefit (Age of Majority 2018; WPP AUNZ 2019; Taylor 2021). A general attitude towards spending and enjoying their own wealth differentiates today's older generation from those that have come before (Higgs/Milner 2006; Cokis/McLoughlin 2020). It therefore comes as little surprise that older Australians are spending the highest proportion out of any age group on services and goods dedicated to recreation, including cars, travel and alcohol (ABS 2017; WARC 2019). Advertising must adequately adapt to and reflect older adults' changing wishes and needs. The 2022 Global Marketing Trends report pointedly states that it is "imperative for brands to authentically reflect a range of backgrounds and experiences within their messaging if they expect to effectively connect with future customers" (Deloitte 2021: 12); this includes age diversity to connect to an increasingly greying Australian market.

Additionally, despite recurring claims that brand loyalty must start at a young age—and thus providing an excuse for advertising professionals to ignore older adults—research indicates that consumer experience, not age, dictates brand choice (Chura 2002; Lambert-Pandraud/Laurent 2010). According to WPP AUNZ (2019), the vast majority of adults over 50 years in Australia are open to switching brands and trying new things. It makes older adults an attractive consumer group, and thus highly relevant for brands and their communication efforts. Creating an image of old age that resonates well with this target audience is therefore all the more important.

Changing expectations: brands as facilitators of societal change

But it is not just the financial resources of older adults themselves that should drive brands and advertising professionals to care. There is more at stake, including a societal dimension that ought to be considered.

Consumers increasingly ascribe a central role to businesses in transforming societies and pursuing social causes. Purchase decisions, and decisions to stay loyal to a brand, are increasingly influenced by what brands stand for, favouring those that put people before profits. Almost two-thirds of today's consumers expect brands to focus on values that address societal 'we' issues (Edelman Trust 2021; Kantar 2022a). This is particularly true amongst Generation Z consumers, loosely those born between 1995 and 2010. This age group differs in several respects from preceding generations, with a distinct

hunger for social causes relating to equity, diversity and inclusion. No previous generation has "championed diversity and inclusion quite like Gen Z" (Germano 2020). In a recent international survey, over two-thirds of consumers voiced that brands are expected to solve both personal and societal problems (Edelman Trust 2020). For Generation Z, this number is as high as nine in ten (McKinsey & Company, 2019). Creating a more equitable, diverse and inclusive society has become a key social concern and consumers are increasingly turning their attention to brands' external communication to judge how much they are facilitating positive change.

Brands ought to be aware of the power they wield in terms of setting trends and influencing the social agenda with their messaging. Nowadays, secondary experiences are mainly conveyed by the media, including advertising. On every occasion in which people are unable to experience something first hand—due to distance, time, effort, a pandemic, etc.—the media fill the gap. Luhmann (2000) even claims that all we know about society and the world we live in, we know through the media. Media portrayals are in general, but even more so within advertising, often guided by stereotypes (Olsen 2022). Advertising simply does not have the luxury of time, nor does it attract the level of attention, for detailed and multi-faceted representations of situations and characters that develop over time, as is possible in film or literature. People's memories are guided by stereotypes (Welzer 2002), which makes their use even more precious for advertisers, who are eager to achieve the highest recall results possible. Additionally, research into the effect of stereotypes on societies has shown that stereotypes have the power to shape people's perception of others—in the long as well as the short term. They influence in many ways how people perceive and evaluate members of out-groups. But stereotypes can do more than simply shape perceptions. They can assign a specific place within society to the stereotyped individuals and, moreover, actually create conditions that lead to their own confirmation. Furthermore, they can cause members of stereotyped groups to demonstrate stereotype-compliant behaviour, by the mere fact that the group members concerned are aware of the existing stereotype (Thiele/Atteneder/Gruber 2013; Russow/Koll-Stobbe 2015). A recent report by the Centre for Ageing Better (2023) stresses the real-world impact of age-related stereotypes, including those disseminated by the media, on the day-to-day lives of those exposed to them. By way of example, a study from the late 1990s shows that a negative self-image and perceived negative old age stereotypes are amongst the biggest barriers in the way of older adult's participation in further education. Conversely, positive acknowledgement from the environment, including the media, proves beneficial to participation in education programmes (Röhr-Sendlmeier/Käser 1999).

In modern industrialised societies, where advertising is omnipresent, a high contact rate between individuals and promotional media content is almost inevitable. Due to the frequent and cumulative occurrence of exposure, the opportunities to influence audiences are great. Advertising is particularly crucial, because it mediates between collective and individual experience by offering typical interpretations of supposedly typical problems. What Hall and colleagues (2013) state for mass media applies also more generally to advertising: they have a defining power and the resources to make their version of the world and events generally available to the public and to "offer powerful interpretations of how to understand these events and the people or groups involved in them" (Hall et al. 2013: 60). To meet public expectation regarding their role within society, brands must fully embrace their (corporate) social responsibilities and should use branded communication not only for sales but also to facilitate positive societal change. In terms of equity, diversity and inclusion, this means, for example, advertising that authentically reflects a range of backgrounds and experiences, going beyond tokenistic gestures.

3 Study design

For the empirical study, magazine advertisements featuring adult characters (≥ 18 years), with a particular focus on those aged 50 years and over, were examined using media content analysis (Macnamara 2005). Variables for the quantitative analysis included the character's age, gender, ethnicity and role prominence as part of the promotional narrative. In addition to analysing frequencies, tests for association were conducted (X^2, φ_c).

The composition of the sample was determined by the University of Technology Sydney, Australia, as part of their *New Advertising and Cultural Strategies* research cluster. Access for the present study was granted through a personal contact within the Australia-based research team. The sample comprised four Australian magazines with high national circulation, including two women's lifestyle magazines, *New Idea* and *Woman's Day*, the TV guide *TV Week*, and the business and finance magazine *Money Magazine*; all of which were published as national editions and were amongst the most circulated print media in Australia within their respective genre at the time of data collection (Roy Morgan 2022). All issues published between 1 July and 30 September 2021 were included, resulting in a total of 42 magazines. Each magazine was subsequently scanned for advertising content, excluding advertorials and sponsored content, thus, focusing on traditional print advertisements only.

During the investigation period, a total of 1,050 advertisements were placed in the selected magazines, featuring 506 adult characters (≥ 18 years). Characters were identified by employing an adapted version of Hastenteufel's (1980) selection approach. Accordingly, a character had to (i) be depicted more substantively than just by a small body part, such as a hand or a leg (exception: close-up shots of a person's face); and (ii) undoubtedly contribute meaning to the primary narrative of the advertising—that is, being assigned at least the role of a minor character within the advertisement, and thus excluding almost all 'picture-in-picture' elements, where, for example, a person appeared on a cover of a magazine lying in the background on the coffee table, in an otherwise unrelated promotion.

The coding of variables was conducted by four individuals, including two male coders aged 28 years and 79 years, and two female coders aged 37 years and 54 years. All coders were based in Australia. The choice of coders was in accordance with difficulties raised and recommendations expressed by other researchers within advertising research, and intended to counteract potential cultural, sex and/or age biases during the coding process. Using coders rooted within the sample's origin society follows the idea that active participants within a society can more easily identify culture-specific content within the communication and assign it to pre-defined variables. Due to their exposure to day-to-day life within the country, the coders are confronted with, inter alia, relevant events, as well as parts of the advertising campaigns beyond the printed editions that might be picked up or referenced by the data set. The inclusion of a diverse age group of coders is intended to minimise distortion that might result from looking at the representation of a certain age group, such as old age, through the looking glass of a younger/older person. Lastly, the choice of both female and male coders is intended to counterbalance potential sex biases.

All coders were trained remotely via video conferencing software Zoom prior to the coding process. The training took between 45 and 60 minutes each. After the training, coding took place independently and without consultation or guidance (Lomard/Snyder-Duch/Bracken 2002). IBM SPSS Statistics Version 28 was used for quantitative data analysis. The reliability coefficient for inter-coder reliability was determined via percent agreement. All coded variables achieved satisfactory results of between .92 and 1.0.

4 Findings and discussion

The myth of invisibility in old age
Looking at contemporary print advertisements in Australia, it appears that older adults are established characters in the stories told by advertisers. There is an undeniable notion of vitality of this social group—in the sense of *visibility*—with every third advertisement involving an adult character (≥ 18 years) also featuring at least one character aged 50 years and over (table 1).

Table 1: Comparison of advertising characters with adult population in Australia (in %)

age (years)	advertising	population
18 – 34	42.1	27.0
35 – 49	24.3	26.5
50 – 74	31.0	36.6
75 and over	2.6	9.9
total	100.0	100.0

Although the trend towards greater visibility of older adults in advertising is difficult to trace with great precision for Australia, due to the lack of dedicated research on this topic, it seems fair to say that, overall, there has been an increase over the past two decades; from between 2.8% and 13.7% of characters featured in Australian advertising in the early 2000s (Hall 2005; Higgs/Milner 2006), to 33.6% in 2021. This social group seems therefore increasingly acknowledged by brands and in today's perception of Australian society.

This rise in visibility, however, does not automatically go hand-in-hand with a proportionate representation of this social group, where 46.5% of the population are currently aged 50 years and over. In this regard, Australia's older generation seems still to fall somewhat short of an 'authentic' reflection in contemporary advertising in purely numerical terms. Although this does not contradict the finding above that older adults have visibility within Australian society per se, it could indicate a negative bias against this age group. An under-representation of older characters does not come as a surprise, as this has been pointed out before by other researchers and is often interpreted as a negative public attitude towards old age (e.g., Hall 2005; AHRC 2013). Yet, Higgs and Milner (2006) highlight in their study that, in addition to older characters, middle-aged adults, those between the ages of 35 and 49 years, were also under-represented in Australian television commercials; something that appears to still hold true for contemporary Australian print advertisements. In fact, in 2021, the under-representation of middle-aged and older adults stands at a comparable level, indicating that age-related biases might equally exist for both middle-aged and older adults in Australia, resulting in a favouritism towards younger adults.

A case of favouritism
An explanation for this favouritism towards younger adults is easy to find—being, or at least appearing to be, young, active, spontaneous and self-determined is a central element that most advertisers work with, in order to arouse desire in the audience for a brand, product or service. Kochhan (1999) summarises these kinds of characteristics under the term *youthfulness* and puts them on the same level of importance in terms of successful advertising, as the actual presentation of the products or services promoted within an advertising campaign (see also Basbug's 2013 elaboration on the *myth of youth culture and youthfulness* in advertising). It is easier, of course, to create youthful characters and situations believably and convincingly by utilising age groups that embody these desired characteristics; and in the minds of advertising professionals today, so it seems, remains the idea that narratives including older characters might struggle to convey the appearance to be young

and active enough. The older a person is, so the common (mis)conception, the more this person is set in their ways, often shying away from spontaneity in life—thus potentially being a less attractive choice for advertisers compared to a younger adult. This preconception, however, does not necessarily match reality, with market research indicating that more than half of older adults in high-income countries nowadays are 'Active Agers' (Age of Majority 2018; Taylor 2021); a group characterised as mentally, physically, socially and digitally active, regularly embracing new things and adventures in life.

But there is more to the apparent favouritism towards younger adults in advertising than just the embodiment of youthfulness. The chronological age of the target audience also plays a role in the casting of characters in advertising campaigns, as the choice of character is also influenced by the target audience's *desired age*; this means, for teenagers, appearing to be slightly older; and for middle-aged and older adults, to be slightly younger—in both cases, depicting a desired age works in favour of younger adults (Szmigin/Rutherford 2009; Otrebski 2016). Not featuring older adults in advertising might therefore not be inherently down to a negative old-age-bias. Young adults have become something of a safe pair of hands for advertising professionals that do not require much thought or convincing of the client commissioning the campaign. It should be noted, however, that recent market research is signalling a potential shift concerning this preference, at least for older adults, with Active Agers relating increasingly better to people that look more like them rather than younger models (Taylor 2021).

Table 2: Role prominence of advertising characters according to age group (in %)

role prominence	18 – 49 years	50 years and over
major	47.3	45.3
minor	12.5	6.5
equal	40.2	48.2
total	100.0	100.0

$X^2(2) = 5.73$, $p < .001$; $\varphi_c = .233$

That the under-representation of older adults in contemporary Australian advertisements is more likely to be rooted in the peculiarities of branded communication rather than reflecting a negative old-age-bias against this social group is also supported by insights into the observed characters' role prominence (table 2). Older characters are frequently shown in major roles within the stories told by advertisers, thus regularly demonstrating their relevance in a variety of reflections of social situations; such as being socially and/or physically active—alone or with friends and loved ones—or providing advice on financial matters. In fact, characters aged 50 years and over are only half as often seen in minor roles in contemporary Australian advertising, and are almost equally often assigned major roles compared to younger adults, weighing palpably against the idea that a negative bias against old age exists.

Fig. 1 Examples of older adults' role prominence in advertising

In Australian advertising, older adults are primarily featured as either major characters or they share equal role prominence with other characters; only very occasionally are older adults assigned minor roles. (Left) In the advertisement for financial services provider *HESTA*, an older woman confidently, and visibly content, takes centre stage, as the copy promotes the benefits of a sustainable pension product. (Middle) The advertisement for care provider *KinCare* depicts a jolly older man in the company of a middle-aged female carer. While the man does not appear to be in immediate need of assistance, the copy informs the reader about the benefits of in-home care. Both characters are featured equally prominent as part of the promotional narrative. (Right) In the advertisement for financial service provider *Generation Life*, an older woman is sitting at a table outside with her family. She is partially cut off from the picture and appears to be primarily a visual rhetorical device, only accentuating the generational aspect of the brand and pension service promoted.

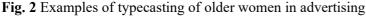### *A gendered, whitewashed 'young-olds' representation*

Whilst older adults in general might therefore not be invisible, there are intersectional aspects of this social group where invisibility appears to be very much the case in contemporary Australian advertising; namely, gender, ethnic and age diversity amongst older characters.

Considering the gender of older characters, there is a noticeable difference in terms of frequencies and connotation. At 80.6%, older women feature almost four times more often in advertising than older men (19.4%). This is in stark contrast to previous findings for Australia, with Hall (2005: 129) labelling older women at the time "virtually invisible" (also Higgs/Milner 2006). In 2021, it could be argued that older Australian men are experiencing the scant attention previously reserved for older women. While a surplus of older female characters reflects the realities of Australia's population (ABS 2021), the ratio observed in contemporary print advertising is disproportional. This might be an attempt by brands and advertisers to (over)compensate for previous shortcomings; however, a probable explanation for this is also rooted in the sample composition of this study, which features magazines with a distinct female skew in terms of its readership (Roy Morgan 2022).

It should also be noted that such an extreme focus on older female characters might not be a positive development per se, due to possible gendered ageism. Accordingly, older women are experiencing ageism more often and more severely in Australia (McGann et al. 2016), which includes negative and limiting stereotyping. In fact, a considerable number of Australian advertisements in 2021 typecast older female characters. By way of example, advertising for psychic readings and fortune telling, which accounted for a fair number of advertisements featuring older adults in women's magazines, resort to the narrative of the old mysterious woman that, through her life experience or other form of spiritual conduct, seemingly gained the ability to perform supernatural tasks. This stereotype is not new, but shows at its core parallels to archetypes known from fairytales and other forms of literature, where the evil, the weird, or the 'other' is primarily represented by women and, more specifically, by

the 'hag' (Niederfranke 1999; Backes/Clemens 2013). Parallels to contemporary promotional narratives can be drawn, where mostly older women seem to possess these special powers and their appearance is sometimes out of the ordinary. Although 'helping others' is the main narrative focus of these advertisements, this gender- and age-specific portrayal undeniably contains unfavorable undertones that might reflect and/or negatively influence the perception of older women in Australian society.

Fig. 2 Examples of typecasting of older women in advertising

'Talking to people that care' at international clairvoyant *Joan Lesley*, or speaking to 'the most popular psychic and tarot line in Australia' at *Grace's Psychics*—older women as supernatural beings is a recurring promotional narrative in Australian print advertising. The business card sized adverts are staples in women's magazines and their arrangement as mosaic usually stretches from 1/2 horizontal or vertical to a full page per issue.

As a country that has had a long tradition of migration, Australia's culture is a conglomeration of international influences. By 2021, approximately 7 million residents in Australia were born overseas; just over one in four of the country's overall population (ABS 2021). Most of them were born in England; followed by India, China, New Zealand and the Philippines; and just over one in ten are aged 50 years and over, which does not even include people from a migrant background who were born in, and are legally considered, Australians. In addition, around .5% of the country's overall population are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 50 years and over (AIHW 2021). Despite the fact that Australia's society is multi-ethnic, older characters in advertising do not demonstrate a level of ethnic diversity remotely commensurate with the ethnic composition of this age demographic. In contemporary advertising, only 4.7% of older characters presented are from an ethnic minority background (predominantly from South Asia), making ethnic diversity starkly under-represented and signalling that scant attention is given to the specificities of old age within Australia. However, the lack of 'authentic' representation—or, in this case, adequate multi-ethnic reflection—appears not to be limited to older adults. Looking beyond the age group of 50 years and over, the lack of ethnic diversity in advertisements appears to be a phenomenon that exists irrespective of age—and is even more pronounced in younger characters in Australian advertising, with only .9% of characters aged between 18 and 49 years having an ethnic minority background ($X^2(2) = 8.53$, p < .05; $\varphi_c = .130$).

This potentially points at a bigger issue concerning the perception and standing of ethnic minorities within Australian society. Hall's (2005: 133) claim regarding the 'elusive' intersection of ethnicity and old age in Australia therefore still rings true in 2021. Although ethnic diversity in other media formats,

such as fictive television productions, has increased over the past decades—from 2% in the early-1990s to around 20% in the late 2010s (Klocker 2014; Screen Australia 2016; Turner 2020)—the level of diversity seems to have remained the same, or even declined in Australia's branded communication. It appears that advertising still "lags well behind drama in its preparedness to portray [ethnic diversity]" (Higgs/Milner 2005: 64), echoing the ethno-gerontological hypothesis of *double jeopardy*, according to which older minority ethnic groups are at a double disadvantage, firstly due to their age and secondly due to their ethnicity (Torres 2015).

In addition to the elusiveness of ethnic diversity, old age diversity appears to be also critical in relation to the current presentation of older adults, with characters beyond the age of 75 years being almost invisible in contemporary Australian advertising. Prima facie, it might seem surprising that this age group should be more severely under-represented than their younger counterparts as, after all, the oldest members of society are the fastest growing age demographic in almost all high-income countries, including Australia (ABS 2021). A more thorough look at this particular age group, however, reveals a number of possible reasons for their under-representation that need to be considered. For one, it may relate to the wealth, spending power and attitude to spending of this social group; or it may be due to the fact that the depiction of very old characters might be limited in its appeal, even to this age group itself.

Over the past decade, several market reports and surveys from governmental bodies have established the increasing discretionary income of the target audience '50plus' relative to other age demographics in Australia (e.g., WPP AUNZ 2019; AIHW 2021). Compared to previous older generations, the attitude to spending of this market segment has changed—they wish to treat themselves and enjoy their own wealth. The target group '50plus', however, is not a homogenous group. With an average life expectancy in Australia nowadays of 83.0 years (AIHW 2022), this group subsumes people from well over three decades. The increase in wealth and discretionary income is largely documented for the younger end of this market segment. Similarly, the change in attitude towards more spending appears to be only registered in those younger than 75 years of age (Compton/Lewin/Howe 2011; ABS 2017; WPP AUNZ 2019). It therefore seems unsurprising that the oldest members of society do not attract the same attention from advertisers as younger old adults, and thus that they are under-represented within advertising, where the ultimate goal is to sell.

In addition, there might be an extra layer of difficulty in portraying the upper end of the age scale in a way that is both positive and authentic. Advertising professionals may struggle to portray those aged in their 80s or 90s without showing decline as a result of ageing that is unappealing, and a visual image of old age deficits may risk a negative connotation to the product through mere proximity or being presented within the same context (Kroeber-Riel 1993; Cook 2001). Hence, 75plus-year-olds may be seen as somewhat risky characters and a challenge that advertisers are not prepared to take on. There may not even be any reward for taking it on, as, unlike younger 'Active Agers', the oldest members of society may still prefer to see 'young-olds' in advertising (Szmigin/Rutherford 2009; Age of Majority 2020).

Finally, advertisers may struggle with the roles that people in their 80s and 90s are able to play believably within advertising. Typical strategies such as desirability through beauty, or status through a prominent position in society, might be more challenging to adopt with very old characters. Trying, for example, to convey expertise or authority in order to attach cachet to a product—a common strategy when employing older models—might be difficult, as people aged 75 years and over are likely to have been outside of the job market for a significant period of time. With the average age of retirement currently at 55.4 years in Australia (AIHW 2021), their knowledge may be seen as outdated

and unconvincing. Using beauty and sexual appeal to sell products, another common strategy, with very old characters might also confound advertisers.

Overall, the under-representation of adults aged 75 years and over might therefore not necessarily be a reflection of marginalisation within society, but is likely to be due to a mix of reasons. It appears that brands and advertising professionals are not targeting the upper end of the age scale as potential customers because of their assumed lack of financial resources and/or their unwillingness to indulge in consumerism. Furthermore, this age group is not conventionally understood to have visual appeal (including to the oldest members of society themselves), and the difficulty in creating *authentic* and at the same time *appealing* 'old-old' characters would require advertisers to come up with new, or at least different advertising strategies.

5 Concluding remarks and recommendations

Accusations of age discrimination have been simmering for decades with regard to Australia's advertising industry. Yet despite old age diversity and inclusion in branded communication being increasingly important across the globe, it is still mostly neglected in research concerning Australia. The present study is the first in over a decade, and only the fifth study overall, to contribute much needed new insight to the on-going debate on the presentation and perception of old age in Australian advertising. This study is also a first in adopting a promotional culture perspective for Australia, thus opening up possible trajectories for future investigations.

Based on the current findings, it appears that Australia has made some progress in terms of embracing its ageing population. With the social group of older adults as a whole being frequently presented in contemporary advertising, their overall occurrence is a far cry from the previously proclaimed scant attention, marginalisation and dismissal. From a promotional culture point of view, Hall's (2005: 143) claim that older adults are "irrelevant social members" in the eyes of brands and advertising professionals can therefore firmly be rejected for 2021. Based on the ideas from vitality theory, the social group's regular occurrence does not only indicate visibility, but, in combination with the pronounced role prominence of older characters, speaks for a solid standing within Australian society, notwithstanding the continuous under-representation concerning their share within the population demographics. However, the findings also show that despite the apparent visibility and vitality of older adults as a social group as a whole, there are still prevailing aspects of old age that are clearly neglected in advertising, and possibly within the perception of wider society; thus still feeding into a prevalence of old age discrimination, mainly by omission. Unlike in previous decades, however, this seems to be a less wide sweeping but more nuanced and targeted form of age discrimination. Whilst brands are increasingly offering representation of older adults, this has yet to embrace a more authentic appearance of different experiences and backgrounds in Australian society.

Creating an authentic and positive presentation should be in the interest of brands—both economically and in terms of their corporate social responsibility. This does not necessarily mean a hyper-realistic copy of every aspect of society; rather, a more intersectional and less typecast approach to age in branded communication will be needed to eventually achieve true equity, diversity and inclusion regarding this social group. At a minimum this should include the intersections of age with gender and ethnicity, as well as the full range of ages—including those 75 years and above. Ideally, however, this goes much further, also embracing sexuality, religion, (dis)ability and more. Skilfully incorporated in branded communication, these might create a win-win situation; positively impacting society whilst also future-proofing a brand's appeal to various audiences. By way of example, the intersection of age and ethnicity could widen the social perception of the manifold manifestations of ageing and, at the same time, may lead to improved penetration of existing markets. More realistic multi-ethnic

reflections within advertising campaigns can be beneficial in creating a broader appeal for brands, thus increasing demand in consumer groups within existing markets (De Mooji 2021; Kantar 2022b). This seems particularly relevant in times where most markets are saturated and target audiences with increasing purchasing power are demanding brands take on social responsibilities to collectively build a better, more inclusive society.

The relatively slower shift in age composition of Australia's population compared to other high-income countries puts Australia in a favourable position. Brands and advertising professionals should seize the opportunity and learn from countries that have already undergone the changes that Australia has yet to face. Natural choices to look into are those countries that have been steadily feeding Australia's growing population and culture through migration. Amongst these are countries with considerably greyer markets, such as Italy, Germany and the United Kingdom. Looking at good and bad practice as to how brands in these markets have tackled demographic challenges in advertising and beyond could be a game changer in terms of accelerating the debate around equity, diversity and inclusion in Australia. Co-creation with older adults, such as the projects facilitated by research group *sentha* at Universität der Künste Berlin, Germany (archived at http://www.universal-design-fuer-alle.de/engl/index.htm), could inspire future approaches to developing new and different strategies for empowering and engaging branded communication. A key quality of any inclusive approach to advertising must comprise ways to overcome the prevailing preconception of creating desirability through youthfulness and provide brands and advertising professionals with clear guidance how to do so. In line with the action points suggested by WPP AUNZ (2019), brands need to ensure they understand the current consumer behaviour, purchasing habits and intentions of older target audiences, and reflect the diversity, optimism and vibrancy of this social group in branded communications in order to connect to them authentically.

Now seems the ideal time for brands and the advertising industry in Australia to make a move. A positive development is the recent creation of the Advertising Ageist Action Group (AAAG) in October 2022. Its founder, and former marketing director of WPP AUNZ, Greg Graham, has vowed to "get ageism in the diversity conversation", setting the aim to "drive positive changes in the next 12 months" (The Drum 2022). Although this fighting spirit is encouraging, the real-world impact on Australia's advertising landscape will need to be seen. This means, however, that the next study examining the presentation of older adults in Australian advertising should probably not wait for another decade. Only through regular monitoring and academic rigour can changes be reliably traced and strategies for brands and the advertising industry be based on.

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