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GREYING SOCIETIES

The value of looking at the growing elderly population through the looking glass of media studies

In light of rapidly ageing Western societies, I have studied the image of old age and the elderly, in the media and in advertising, for a variety of academic projects over the past decade. When asked about my research, I regularly encounter split reactions. On the one hand, the audience's approval of the research topic as a highly relevant and contemporary issue. On the other hand, incredulity and scepticism concerning my choice of pursuing this topic through analysis of media, and some dismay about the possibility of producing significant or even relevant results.

In this paper, I will address the sceptics and make a case for the utility of looking at this socially relevant topic from a media studies point of view. Moreover, I will argue for the appropriateness of the media, and more specifically of advertising, to carry out research on the image and standing of social groups, such as the elderly, within a society.

Socio-demographic changes

The demographic transition currently underway in the industrialised world, characterised by low birth rates, longer life spans and an increasing proportion of older people, has stimulated an interest in ageing and the effects of an older society in areas such as politics, health care, sociology, consumer behaviour and more. Within the past few decades, the population pyramid in most Western countries has seen clear changes in age structure. The demographics are shifting in favour of the elderly citizens; this group is growing fastest, whilst the number of younger people is noticeably decreasing. Looking, for example, at Germany, a nation that is rapidly ageing, the median age has risen from 37.2 years in 1992 to 45.0 years in 2012. During the same period, the population aged 14 years and under declined from 16.3% to 13.2% and is predicted to slump to a mere 7% by 2060; in contrast, the group of people aged 65 years and over has increased in the past two decades from 15.0% to 20.6% and is predicted to exceed one third of Germany's population within the next 40 years (Eurostat, 2015). This development is, admittedly, one of the more severe cases in Europe and the world; nonetheless, it showcases a tendency that is representative for Western countries, which means that in the coming decades most societies will boast an increasing number of elderly 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, society's elderly are already and will increasingly become relevant – both socially and economically.

The social relevance manifests itself *inter alia* in the so-called 'grey voting bloc', comprising elderly citizens, who are oftentimes politically the most active group in society, and thus are a desirable target audience for politicians, as they might hold the balance of power in future elections. Guaranteed state pensions for the not-too-distant future, no extra monetary burdens and targeted social spending are often used as campaign promises tailored to this precious group of active voters. Consequently, the needs of the elderly as a social group are already well-addressed and this tendency will only amplify with their increasing number.

With regard to economic relevance, the elderly are already one of the wealthiest target groups in Western societies, with extensive purchasing power. Turning to Germany once more as an example, statistics indicate that citizens aged 65 years and over currently comprise the wealthiest group of all time. They are among the highest earners, despite retirement, due to a substantial and still secure state pension, and have a higher than average disposable income compared to any other age group. By the beginning of the new millennium, the elderly held almost half of the total purchasing power of all adults in Germany; and this tendency has since been on the rise (GfK, 2012). Their monetary resources are no longer hidden under their mattresses or deposited with a bank for the next generation to inherit, as was commonly the case in the past; instead, the elderly have adopted lifestyles previously reserved for younger people: they follow trends and fashions, are self-confident, diverse, critical, and at the same time adventurous and prepared to spend extra for a corresponding benefit. A general attitude towards spending and enjoying their own wealth thus differentiates them from previous older generations. This makes the elderly one of the most attractive consumer groups and highly relevant for a country's economy.

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So why should society concern itself with also looking at the elderly through the prism of media studies and investigate their image and standing in the media, and specifically in advertising?

Stereotypes conveyed by the media affect society

The portrayal of the elderly in media affects society by having a lasting effect on the image, self-perception and attitude of the elderly themselves and other social groups. Nowadays, secondary experiences are mainly conveyed by the media. On every occasion in which people are unable to experience something first hand – due to distance, time, effort, etc. – the media fill the gap. Prominent German sociologist Niklas Luhmann (2000) even claims that all we know about society and the world we live in, we know through the media. Modern means of communication can make the strange seem vivid and concrete, thereby reducing the mental distance. But just like our system of sensory impressions, the media do not provide a faithful copy of the world, but construct a version of reality. Accordingly, technological progress has not been able to alleviate the problem of stereotypes, which are a social shorthand and functional means for simplifying complex environments. On the contrary, it has received a new dimension in which mass media play an important role.

The media are largely responsible for imparting knowledge and ideas of the unknown, thereby critically helping to shape and distribute stereotypes. *Cultivation theory* addresses this concept, and posits that the more time individuals spend consuming media, the closer their views align to the 'reality' created by the media. In other words, a frequent and high exposure to media content impacts the viewer's perception of social reality in the direction of the reality constructed by the media (Gerbner *et al*., 2002). This effect is enhanced when the images portrayed align with the real world. Therefore, individuals learn about the world in terms of gender roles, age stereotypes and cultural paradigms derived from the media; a phenomenon that is particularly pronounced in children but can be seen throughout a person's lifetime. In modern industrialised societies, where the media are omnipresent, a high contact rate between individuals and media outlets is almost inevitable. Due to the frequent and cumulative occurrence of media exposure, the opportunities to influence the creation of stereotypes are great. Mass media are particularly critical because they mediate between collective and individual experience by offering typical interpretations for supposedly typical problems. Their special position lies in the fact that 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).

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 in the short run. 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 – like a self-fulfilling prophecy. 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; this is termed stereotype threat. A study from the late 1990s, for example, shows that a negative self-image and perceived negative age stereotypes are amongst the most important barriers in the way of elderly people's participation in further education. Conversely, positive acknowledgement from the environment proves beneficial to participation in education programmes (Röhr-Sendlmeier and Käser, 1999). Another investigation points out that those elderly who have lost their jobs but wish to work are often 'limited by their own identification with the stereotype of age (i.e. as being useless, sick or too old for certain things)' (Shafer *et al*.,1993: 35). In societies in which the elderly group grows fastest, maintaining an open mind regarding their social contribution, however, is crucial in order to remain competitive. But not only are the self-images of the seniors affected; younger people's stereotypes of the elderly are also aligned with their media representation, often resulting in a fear of growing old and conflict over resources within societies.

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The media indicate the vitality of a group

An additional affirmation of the media's usefulness regarding the investigation of social groups can be found within ethnolinguistics' *vitality theory*. The theory is based on the grouping of individuals via socio-demographic variables, such as the proportion within a population, geographical distribution, political awareness and social status (Ehala, 2010). Behind this lies the assumption that groups of greater number and social status are considered to have greater 'vitality', and thus continue their survival as groups and their groups' specific features. A group that possesses more vitality will receive much greater support and representation in society as a whole, including in the media. If those groups that possess greater vitality are better represented in the media, by looking at how groups are portrayed, one can glean an insight into the social standing and the position of these people within a society.

This theory stands somewhat in contrast to cultivation theory: rather than analysing media content for the effect it has on a society, it looks at media as a reflection of society and a tool for understanding the social standing of groups within it. Both theories combined, however, emphasise how productive media investigations can be. They also point out the dynamic nature of the media, which limits findings inter alia to a specific point of time.

Why use advertising to study the elderly?

It has been argued that the media in general are an appropriate perspective from which to look at social groups, such as the elderly, within a society. Although advertising might not be the first format that comes to mind when making the case for a media studies stance, the advantages of using this particular form of media cannot be dismissed. The above applies just as much to the different vehicles of advertising, as they apply to, for example, film, television, books or the press. Advertising is generally communicated via mass media and therefore can be investigated from this point of view. As well as functioning as a taste-forming medium with respect to the products promoted, it has the effect of forming opinion.

Advertising uses stereotypes

Advertising is known for its frequent use of stereotypes. This particular form of media 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. The average viewing time of print advertising is between 1.4 and 5 seconds and an average television commercial is between 20 and 40 seconds; so every relevant aspect that advertisers want to communicate must be done in a very efficient way. Nevertheless, every advertisement – or at least every advertising campaign – possesses a self-contained story; a narrative that almost always develops via a storyboard or animatics – a film version of the storyboard that sometimes already includes drafts of dialogue and sounds or music – and, analogous to film, features a specific plot, characters, settings, etc. A similar analogy can be stated for the casting and presentation of advertising protagonists. Models are chosen according to their narrative function. Casting and allocation of roles in advertising, just as for other fictive media forms, are no coincidence, but are fully considered. However, due to the restrictive nature of an advertisement, the actual description of situations and characters must remain compressed, so that the audience focuses all their mental capacities on the relevant message.

Research into memory and cognition has also shown that memories are guided by stereotypes (Welzer, 2002), which makes them even more precious for advertisers, who are eager to achieve the highest recall results possible. Hence, advertising has some distinct advantages when investigating social groups. Firstly, advertisements are short in time as well as physical scope, and thus must limit themselves to a few aesthetic constructs. The use of stereotypes in this specific medium is one that appears to fit reality, and because it appears to fit reality, advertising, and with it the message, gains the confidence of the viewer in that regard. Moreover, advertising does not have the time to build complex lines of argument and thus uses social shorthand, such as stock characters and templates, to build on the viewers' expectations with regard to the storyline.

Advertising is part of a society's culture

Every aspect of our lives nowadays is permeated by the presence of material goods. The discourse on and through products – and therefore advertising – and the debate surrounding advertising itself, occupy important places in our lives.

Beyond pure economic efficiency, advertising has socially relevant side-effects. Due to its omnipresence in the media, advertising has turned into a mass cultural phenomenon, communicating cultural and social developments widely, and thus becoming itself an integral part of modern day culture. Traditional opinion leaders, such as church and family elders, have largely lost their influence in industrialised societies, whereas the influence and impact of material goods has risen. It is increasingly artefacts that determine the relationship between members of society, and they have taken over the role and means of interpersonal communication. Messages about one's own attitude and identity are transmitted to others by consumer goods, their use and consumption. Regarded individually and superficially, advertisements only promote goods and services, but '[l]ooked at in depth and as a whole, the ways in which messages are presented in advertising reach deeply into our most serious concerns' (Leiss *et al*., 2005: 14).

One of the roles of advertising in modern societies is therefore to formulate and reflect the possible meaning of things, and facilitate the exchange of meaning in social communication. This is achieved *inter alia* by drawing on cultural techniques already established. The reading of images, and to some extent also their appreciation, is dependent on learned knowledge. Since images and the deciphering and understanding of images are part of a transnational cultural heritage, one can assume that advertising does function, but does not always have to (e.g. in the case of radio), as communication through and with pictures. On the basis of this anthropological perspective on the purposes of goods and advertising in human cultures, advertising should be understood as a major cultural institution (Leiss *et al*., 2005).

This cultural foothold is also due to an undeniable, ever-advancing integration of art and commerce into production, distribution and reception. The lines between art and commerce have increasingly blurred, with veterans from both disciplines introducing and interweaving their origin-specific aesthetics and points of view in other forms of media. A well-known example is the Italian filmmaker Federico Fellini, who decided during the final decade of his life to also pursue advertising – for example, in 1984 the commercials *Alta Societa* for Barilla, and *Oh, che bel paesaggio!* for Campari; in 1991 *Che Brutte Notti* for the Bank of Rome – and who has thereafter repeatedly been praised for his ability to fit the telling of big stories and to capture the atmosphere of cinema in the restricted format of advertising. Further examples include successful advertising photographers and directors Ridley Scott and David Fincher, who have switched between the big screen and advertising for decades now, becoming sought-after directors for both forms of media and bringing their 'advert-esque' style of over-designed aesthetic and concise storytelling to the silver screen. Due to the high quality of presentation and the budgets spent, advertising itself is now considered by creatives, as well as by scholars such as Michele Bogart and Werner Faulstich, as a legitimate form of art, blurring the distinction between economy and culture. Advertising can therefore be understood as an important cultural institution, since the world of goods and its corresponding marketing comprises a principal channel of social communication. Accordingly, the market is a cultural system, in which people enter into a discourse with one another. Therefore, it seems legitimate to regard advertising as a creation of a society's culture, and thus as a means to investigate culture-specific ideas of, for example, the elderly.

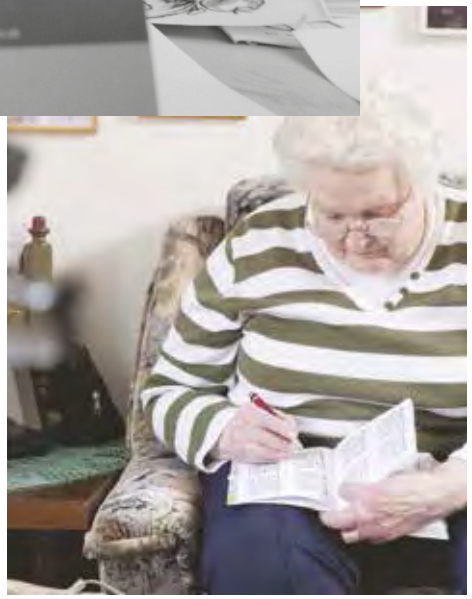
Advertising, to some extent, mirrors society

Researchers in the field of advertising are often confronted with the following questions about the relationship between the medium and society: Does advertising accurately depict ideas and cultural aspects from society, or does it impose certain ideas on society? And if the latter, which ideologies are these ideas based on?

Looking at the circumstances in which advertising acts, the relationship probably includes aspects of both. Advertising, just like other forms of mass media, reflects selected ideas and characteristics of society. It includes a variety of aspects of everyday life, but also purposely omits others. It makes use of images that come from the image storage in our minds – the desires, stereotypes, or clichés that we have already internalised – and by choosing only some things and by reintegrating them into the meaning system of the advertisement, it acts back on the recipient and thus creates new meanings; hence, becoming a part of our ideas, or modifying existing ideas:

> When confronted with the task to anchor something in the mental world of potential recipients, one should assume that those thoughts have already been occupied, and that it makes the most sense to utilise certain, already existing thoughts and ideas. In this sense, advertising can provide information about ideas of certain social groups at certain times.
> (Ingenkamp,1996: 152; original quotation in German)

Traditional opinion leaders, such as church and family elders, have largely lost their influence in industrialised societies, whereas the influence and impact of material goods has risen



Assuming that advertising taps into such an existing mental world, for example, by utilising defined target groups and their respective codes, conclusions from widespread examples could indicate tendencies within a society.

Ingenkamp (1996) and others, however, argue that it would not be reasonable to consider advertising as a general societal or cultural indicator, for example, as evidence of the transformation of a society's structures or changes of values in society. According to this view, images communicated by advertising have little reference to reality, but refer instead, above all, to the imagination of its recipients. Consumers face worlds of ideas, desires and fears in advertising messages, which largely correspond to their own, as the arguments and values in adverts are, in most cases, developed in accordance with findings from opinion research and demographic analysis.

Whilst it seems unlikely that advertising acts as an accurate mirror of a society and its culture, due to its obligation to persuade and sell, it can still be regarded as a moderately reliable indicator for social and cultural trends and developments and current ideas prevailing within a society. Advertising captures the *Zeitgeist*, hence allowing inferences on collective ideals, social perceptions and cultural patterns. Although, just like mass media, advertising does not provide a faithful copy of the world, but constructs reality with the help of selected truths, it does not create new topics or trends, but simply picks them up and follows them – ideally in an early stage – thus making them known to a wide audience. The ideas, desires and even fears advertising undoubtedly plays upon are a major part of a society's culture; or at least of the sub-culture formed by the target audience. The contents of adverts are an expression of what advertisers have found in search of the addressee. Advertising is a continuum, comprising evaluations in terms of what is currently perceived as, for example, important, desirable or undesirable by members of society. It amplifies and affirms contemporary patterns of behaviour and shows cultural standards (Goffman 1979).

Considering the effort and money put towards exploring potential consumers, it seems very likely that advertising reflects the dominant values, norms, role expectations, prejudices, fears, dreams and needs of their target group with considerable accuracy. Therefore, whilst advertising might not fully mirror all aspects of a society, it can be assumed that it largely picks up on and conveys contemporary ideas and developments; at least those relevant for the group(s) it aims for. It therefore provides insights to the mental image and expectations regarding old age and the elderly of the respective target audience. Consequently, investigations into advertising work like a puzzle, where research into a variety of advertising for complementary target groups provides a growing number of puzzle pieces, slowly forming insights into society as a whole.

Conclusion

In this brief defence of a media studies stance for assessing the standing and perception of social groups, such as the elderly, in society, I have hopefully demonstrated, for those who are more sceptical of the approach, that advertising can be an appropriate choice to carry out research on the topic. The importance of a media studies perspective has already been recognised by some countries. For example, the B*erichte zur Lage der älteren Generation in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, a document comprising several hundred pages, commissioned regularly by Germany's Federal Government and dealing with the situation of the elderly in Germany, has more recently dedicated a whole chapter to the current image of the elderly in the media, including a section on advertising. Media outlets offer indeed a rich source of information regarding a society's conception of an issue or theme such as the elderly given the following:

- the frequent use of stereotypes in advertising, which reflect the attitudes and perceptions of the society that holds them;
- advertising being part of a society's culture and its role as a principal channel of communication, providing us with a view of how groups, such as the elderly, are portrayed in a society's cultural output; and
- advertising providing a legitimate, if only partial, mirror of society and a vision of the standing of social groups within a society.

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