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Older People as Models in Advertisements: A Cross-Cultural Content Analysis of Two Asian Countries

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(Paper presented at the *Annual London Conference on "Money, Economy and Management"* held on 3-4 July 2008 in London, United Kingdom)

Perpustakaan Universiti Malaya



A514668685

Older People as Models in Advertisements: A Cross-cultural Content Analysis of Two Asian Countries

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The purpose of this paper is to investigate the extent to which older people are used as models in television advertisements in Korea and Malaysia, representing an aged and ageing nation, respectively. The paper examines the roles and functions played by older people in advertisements that portray these older people as models; and the social context, setting and tone of advertisements. Television advertisements from major television channels in Korea and Malaysia were recorded during prime time. These recordings were coded by two experts in each country. Data were analyzed using content analysis. The findings show that older people are underrepresented compared to their proportion in both countries. Older males are overly represented while older females are underrepresented, in both countries. Overall, older people were portrayed in a positive way even though they tended to play minor roles. However, regardless of gender, they are invariably cast as information receivers rather than senders.

Field of Research: Consumer behaviour, Advertisement portrayal, Older Adults

1. Introduction

Older consumers have grown in numbers, affluence, and influence in many countries. To some marketers they represent an attractive segment of consumers while in other countries where population ageing has yet to

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reach significant proportions, older consumers are still regarded as unworthy of attention. Considering current older consumers, especially those born in the baby boom years, there is good evidence to indicate this group will have stronger purchasing power compared to previous cohorts of older people (Carrigan & Szmigin, 1999c; Ong & Phillips, 2007). Other resources that support their ability to engage in consumption activities are health, education, and time compared to today's older population. With a segment that is increasing in size and having economic clout, it would appear logical that companies and advertisers would want to give more attention to this potentially lucrative group. Moreover, past research shows that this group depends on advertisements for information, they read or view advertisements, and respond by exhibiting more loyalty toward retailers and manufacturers that target their promotional efforts appropriately (E.g. French & Crask, 1977; Mason & Bearden, 1978; Hanson, 1987).

To date, most consumer and advertising research into older consumers has taken place in the West, with few studies carried out to investigate the Malaysian older market (Ong & Md Nor, 2007; Ong & Philip, 2007). Even in advanced countries where research abounds, research results show that older people are not only underrepresented in advertising but also tend to be stereotyped in negative ways (Hiemstra et al., 1983; Robinson, 1996; Carrigan & Szmigin, 1999a; Hooyman & Kiyak, 1999; Bradley & Longino, 2001). Past research in Korea displays similar findings (e.g. Kim, 1998; Kim & Lee, 1999; Lee et al., 2006).

This study attempts to investigate the usage and the portrayal of older models in advertising. Specifically, this study aims to examine:

- i. the frequency of older people portrayed as models in advertisements;
- ii. target audience of advertisements;
- iii. the role and function played by older people in advertisements;
- iv. the types and categories of products that use older people as models in advertisements;
- v. the social context in which older people are portrayed; and
- vi. the setting and the tone of portrayal of older people

2. Literature Review

There are several unintentional influences of modelling (E.g. Milliman & Erffmeyer, 1990). In many cases actions or beliefs can be strongly affected by exposure to the actions and outcomes of others. This would seem to be the case when older models are used in advertisements (Milliman & Erffmeyer, 1990). Older people might associate and identify

with others of similar age. Older models are a very crucial reference group and may serve as an important "external stimulus". Schreiber & Boyd's (1982) find advertisements that use senior models are often viewed by the over 65 years age segment as being "just like them", thus increasing the likelihood of role model identification.

However, for older people to be role models, it is essential to understand how older models in advertisements are being portrayed. Past research show that older people are often portrayed as negative, despondent, shrewish/curmudgeonly, mildly impaired, reclusive, vulnerable, noisy neighbours, severely impaired, vagrant etc. (Swayne & Greco, 1987; Peterson, 1995; Peterson & Ross, 1997; Hwang, 2002). Older people are also being portrayed as persons with health problems, sick/feeble, angry, unproductive, sad, needing help and lonely (Hiemstra et al., 1983; Robinson, 1996). Moreover they are portrayed as people who have declining energy, diminished intellectual ability and are less productive (Hooyman & Kiyak, 1999; Bradley & Longino 2001). The study of Carrigan & Szmigin (1999b) shows that a large number of disability related product advertisements appearing at one time may create a negative impression about older consumers on readers. Repeated exposure to mass media content can affect individuals' attitudes and beliefs could cultivate the negative stereotyping of older people (Lee et al., 2006). Gustafson and Popovich (2005) argue that negative portrayal of older people in magazine advertisements was found to be offensive by older Americans and college students.

Past studies also show that older people are underrepresented in media in relation to their proportion within a country (Tupper, 1995; Robinson, 1996; Bradely & Longino, 2001). Lee and his associates (2006) find that older people are underrepresented in television advertisements. In addition, females are more significantly underrepresented in television advertisements than males (Hiemstra et al., 1983; Tupper, 1995; Robinson, 1996; Carrigan & Szmigin, 1998).

In terms of role portrayal, older models play generally minor and background roles (Lien, 2005). When the younger market is the target, older characters are cast in minor roles and they were portrayed in a stereotypical manner (Robinson, 1996). Older men are assigned more major and information providing roles while older women are assigned more background and information receiving roles (Hiemstra et al., 1983).

However, research findings are not consistent. Smith (2000) mentioned that there is evidence that the portrayal of seniors has become more positive. For example, older people are seen as admirable and lovable persons (Featherstone & Hepworth, 2005). There are also many studies which present positive images of older people in advertisements (Hiemstra

et al., 1983; Robinson, 1996; Carrigan & Szmigin, 1998). Older adults are primarily depicted positively as happy, healthy and strong in diverse settings designed to target multiple age groups (Zimmerman, 2001).

The types of products which use older models have changed over the years. When we consider studies from the 1980s', older people were most likely to be in commercials concerning health, food, and household products and consumer services (Hiemstra et al., 1983). In the 1990s, again, the majority of products advertised towards the older market were also health-related (Robinson, 1996). The type of products advertised varied in many categories in 2000s. Older models are more frequently used in financial product/insurance, food/beverage, clothes/distribution, and computer/communication/information (Lee et al., 2006).

From marketers' point of view, advertising executives often indicate that they are not sure about the use of older models or imply that decisions to cast older adults would depend upon their client's objectives. Most executives feel that both general audiences and the over-50s audience prefer to see younger models. It may be advertisers fear that the use of older models may adversely affect product image and alienate the "more desirable" younger market (Langmeyer, 1983; Carrigan & Szmigin, 1998).

Moreover, creative copy of advertisements are developed by persons with an average age of 30 who tend to focus on the youth market and who do not, nor do they desire to know the senior market (Smith, 2000). Szmigin & Carrigan (2000)'s study of advertising executives attitudes suggest that the lack of representation of older people in advertising is less to do with their "unsuitability" and more to do with ingrained stereotypical prejudice on the part of many advertisers.

3. Methodology and Research Design

This study employs qualitative and quantitative methods to analyse the usage and portrayal of older people in advertisements. Content analysis was used as it takes into account reliability, the size of the sample frame, and generalization of the sample to the larger population (Wee, Choong & Tambyah, 1995). Based on past research, variables that are content analysed include: frequency of older people portrayed in advertisements, target audience of advertisements, types of product that use older people as models, their role, the context and the setting in which they are portrayed as well as the tone (Hiemstra et al., 1983; Tupper 1995; Robinson, 1996; Carrigan & Szmigin, 1998; Carrigan & Szmigin, 1999c; Carrigan & Szmigin, 2000; Smith, 2000; Zimmerman, 2001; Lee et al, 2006).

Television advertisements that portrayed adults judged to be age 60 years or older were sampled in this study. The eligibility criterion of 60 years old or above has been used in previous research analyses (Zimmerman, 2001; Lee et al., 2006). Advertisements were videotaped on two days during weekdays and two days on weekends of the fourth week of February, 2008 from 8:00pm until 11:00 pm in Korea. In Malaysia, tape recording was done during the second week of March, 2008 from 8:00pm until 11:00pm. These time ranges are classified as prime time television viewing by advertisers (Tupper, 1995; Zimmerman, 2001; Lee et al, 2006). Advertisements on the major networks, KBS 2, MBC, SBS were taped in Korea and RTM 1, TV3, NTV 7 were taped in Malaysia. The selection of television channels was based on previous studies that suggested the criterion of most frequently viewed television channels in a particular country (Wee et al, 1995; Firdaus, 2006; Lee et al, 2006; ABG Nielsen Media research Korea, 2008). Advertisements promoting future television events, news and movies and those with a political orientation were eliminated as suggested by Swayne & Greco (1998), Zimmerman (2001) and Lee & his associates (2006). Animated characters were not counted (Robinson, 1996).

Content analysis was based on coding conducted by two experts who were provided a coding guideline so that the same rules were used to conduct analyses for the advertisements (Zimmerman, 2001). The coder selection method was adopted from (Lee et al., 2006). The coders in Korea and Malaysia had similar academic backgrounds: one who has a Master degree in gerontology whereas the other coder has a Master degree in advertising. Briefing was given before they viewed the recorded advertisements.

Each coder coded advertisements individually on the coding form when they viewed the taped material. Coders would record each time an older person appeared in the recorded advertisements. They were allowed to view the advertisements a number of times to ensure coding accuracy. A tie-breaker would view advertisements where the two coders had different opinions on the same advertisement (Zimmerman, 2001).

4. Discussion of Findings

Korea

The coders analyzed a total of 659 recorded advertisements, with 595 that used people as models while 64 of the advertisements did not use people as models. In these 595 advertisements, a total of 3080 people appeared as models (Table 1). The final number of advertisements which used older people as models was 86 (14.5%) of the 595 advertisements. This number has high inter-coder reliability coefficient of 0.95 which is arrived based on

the total number of 626 agreements from 655 decisions (Kolbe and burnet, 1991). Kassarian (1977), Kolbe & Burnett (1991), and Carrigan & Szmigin (1998) state that inter coder reliability must be more than 0.8 for the result to be reliable. Of the total of 3080 people from 595 Korean advertisements, 265 people (8.6 %) were classified as older people by the coders. Based on census data, there were 47,041,000 adults aged 60 and above constituting 13.3% of the population of Korea (Table 2). This indicates that older Koreans were underrepresented in advertisements in comparison with the proportion of older people in the population.

Table 1: Usage of Older models Aged 60+ in Television Advertisements

	Ads Recorded	Ads with human models	Ads with older models	Human models in ads	Older models	Older male models	Older female models
	(N)	N (%)	N (%)	N	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
Korea	659	595 (90.3)	86 (14.5%)	3080	265 (8.6%)	216 (81.5%)	49 (18.5%)
Malaysia	637	494 (77.6)	47 (9.5%)	2566	61 (2.4%)	52 (85.2%)	9 (14.8%)

Table 2: Population structure of Korea and Malaysia (in thousand)

	Population	Number of people aged 60+	Number of male aged 60+	Number of female aged 60+
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
Korea (2005)	47,041 (100%)	6,254 (13.3%)	2,634 (42.1%)	3620 (57.9%)
Malaysia (2006)	26,686 (100%)	1761 (6.6%)	828 (47%)	933 (53%)

Source: Korean National Statistic Office (2005), UN World population ageing report (2002), AESAN Statistical Pocketbook (2006)

Malaysia

For Malaysia, the coders analyzed 637 recorded advertisements. Of these 494 advertisements used people as models whereas 143 advertisements did not include any human models (Table 1). The number of advertisements that used older people as models was 47 or 9.5% of the total advertisements. Originally inter-coder reliability coefficient was 0.87 based on the total number of 554 agreements from 637 decisions. To increase inter-coder reliability, the third coder was used as a tiebreaker for 25 advertisements. Of these 25 advertisements, the discrepancies were resolved and agreed that 7 advertisements used older models, 2 had only

animated models, and the remaining 16 used models of other age groups. Inter-coder reliability coefficient increased to 0.91.

From the 2566 people appearing in 494 advertisements, 61 people (2.4 %) were classified as older people. Census data of the Malaysian population shows that there are 1,761,000 adults aged 60 and above which represents 6.6% of the population. This comparison also indicates that the Malaysian older people were underrepresented in advertisements in comparison to the proportion of older people in the population.

Gender

The gender breakdown of the 265 elderly Koreans was 216 males (81.5%) and 49 females (18.5%). Based on Korean Census, the proportion of elderly male is 42% and female 58% (Korean National Statistic Office, 2005). This shows that the greater tendency to use older male models compared to female models. Similar results were obtained in Malaysia where the use of male models is far greater than female models. Results from this study indicate relative consistency over the years with the predominance of elderly males compared to elderly females in television advertisements (Hiemstra et al., 1983; Roy & Harwood, 1997; Lee's et al., 2006).

Roles and Functions of Older People in Advertisements

Overall, older models in Korea were portrayed in major roles in which about 57% of the models appeared in major roles compared to 9.8% in minor roles and 33.2% in background roles. Of the 216 older male models, 144 (66.7%) were cast in major roles compared to females in which only 14.3% were portrayed in similar role. In essence, a larger proportion of females (74%) were given a background role in Korean advertisements compared to males (24%).

Table 3: Older people according to role assignment

	Major role		Minor role		Background role	
	Korea*	Malaysia**	Korea	Malaysia	Korea	Malaysia
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
Older Men	144 (66.7)	4 (7.7)	20 (9.2)	10 (19.2)	52 (24.1)	38 (73.1)
Older Women	7 (14.3)	3 (33.3)	6 (12.2)	6 (66.7)	36 (73.5)	0 (0)
Total	151	7	26	16	88	38

*Total number of older models = 265; ** Total number of older models = 61

In Malaysia, notwithstanding the small number of older females portrayed in advertisements, the proportion of female models given a major role was higher than older male models (Table 3). A larger proportion of the Malaysian older males were given the background role while no female model was given the background role, in contrast to the roles older males played in Korea.

Content analysis also examined the function of older models in which older models were cast as information receivers rather than information senders. In Korea, 182 (69%) of the total number of older models were cast as information receivers while in Malaysia 48 (79%) were information receivers. The remaining 31% and 21% were information givers in Korea and Malaysia, respectively.

Comparing with the results of past studies, Lee et al. (2006) also reported that 86.1% of older people have a major role while 13.9% of older people act a minor role. Lee and his associates presented no older people who plays background role. According to Swayne & Greco (1987) over the past 20 years, older men (48.5%) continued to be cast in more major roles in television advertisements compared to older women (20.7%). Zimmerman (2001) found older women were cast in more minor roles (34.6%) than older men (20.6%).

Setting and Social Context

The setting of the advertisements was classified into five categories: home, outdoors, business, medical/caretaking and others. About 34% of the advertisements in Korea portrayed older people at home and in business, respectively. However, more people were featured in outdoor settings with 106 people (59 men and 47 women) than business with 44 people (43 men and 1 woman). The caretaking category was only cited 3 times as the setting that older adults were portrayed in 216 advertisements.

In Korea, the social context under which older people were portrayed was analysed. Results show that 67.4% of the advertisements which include older people also had people of all other ages. Only 23.2% of the advertisements featured older people with other older people. Older people appeared with children in 7% of the advertisements. Older person appearing alone as a spokesperson were shown in just 2.3% of the advertisements.

In Malaysia, 16 (26.2%) advertisements, with 7 males and 9 females, featured older people in home setting. More of the older people (N=42, 68.8%) were featured in outdoor setting than any of the other four

categories of settings. All the models were male. Three of the advertisements cast in business settings featured male models only. None of the advertisements used the caretaking setting.

The social context under which older people were portrayed in Malaysia was different from the situation in Korea. All older people were featured only with people of other age groups but never with older people in all the recorded advertisements. This is consistent with past research in which about three quarter of older models were reported to be featured with people of other age groups (Swayne & Greco, 1987; Roy & Harwood, 1997).

The settings that cast male and female models point to the stereotyping prevalent in Asian countries where conservatism tends to project a woman's place to be at home which explains that all the 9 females portrayed in Malaysian advertisements were shown in the home. In Korea, although almost an equal number of males and females were featured in the home setting, only one woman was cast in the business setting.

Compared with previous studies, no consistent pattern could be observed for the setting which portray older models due perhaps to the larger environment and/or product or service specific reasons. Swayne & Greco (1987) reported that 56% of their samples placed older people in the home and only 8% were set outdoors. However, Roy & Harwood (1997) reported that most of the advertisements from their sample featured older people in a "business or outdoor setting" contradicting the stereotypical view that elderly people are homebodies.

Tone

The tone of the advertisements included comical versus serious and object of ridicule versus ridiculing someone else. In Korea, most of the older people in the sample of advertisements were identified as happy (74.5 %), lucid (81.9%), emotionally strong (85.7%) and active (82.8%). In Malaysia, most of the older people in the advertisements were identified as happy (97.9 %), lucid (14.9%), emotionally strong (14.9 %), object of ridicule (17%) and active (23.4%). Overall, older people were portrayed in a positive way in advertisements in both countries and thus consistent with past research findings. For example, Swayne & Greco (1987) reported that only 6.5% of the elderly were shown as feeble and confused. Roy & Harwood (1987) reported that 93% of the older adults on their sample were happy, 100% were lucid, 100% were active and 96.9% were strong. The positive tone could be due to advertisers' intention to deliver positive messages to target audiences by showing happiness in their advertisement models.

Products Advertised

Tables 4 and 5 show products advertised in the recorded advertisements and products that utilised older people as models.

Table 4: Advertised product category and number of older models in Korean television advertisements

Product	No. of Ads (%)	Ads Featuring older people (%)
Computer/Information/Communication	138 (21)	8 (5.8)
Finance/Insurance	101 (15.3)	32 (31.7)
Automobile/Transportation	88 (13.4)	13 (14.8)
Home Appliance	77 (11.7)	10 (13)
Food & Beverage	67 (10.2)	5 (7.5)
Accommodation/Apartment	48 (7.3)	0 (0)
Health product/Medicine	37 (5.6)	12 (32.4)
Clothes/Distribution/Department	33 (5)	3 (7.1)
Cosmetic/Beauty product	25 (3.8)	0 (0)

Table 5: Advertised product category and number of older models in Malaysian television advertisements

Products	No. of Ads (%)	Number of Ads Featuring older people (%)
Personal care product	176 (27.6)	1 (1.6)
Food/Beverage	124 (19.5)	0 (0)
Computer/Information/Communication	77 (12.1)	0 (0)
Health product / Medicine	61 (9.6)	16 (26.2)
Cosmetic/Beauty	52 (8.2)	0 (0)
Financial/Insurance	41 (6.4)	41 (67.3)
Automobile/ Transportation	36 (5.7)	0 (0)
Study material	30 (4.7)	3 (4.9)
Electricity/Oil	26 (4.1)	0 (0)

Among the various categories of products advertised in Korea, the products that used older models were finance/insurance in which 32 older models were used, followed by automobile/transportation (N=13), health products (N=12), and home appliances (N=10). In Malaysia, the products that featured older models in advertisements were financial

products/insurance (N=41), health products (N=16), study materials (N=3), and personal care products (N=1). Two thirds of the older models were portrayed in advertisements for financial or insurance services products (Table 5).

5. Conclusion

The primary objective of this paper was to examine the extent to which older adults are used as models and the roles they play, as well as the context in which they appear in television advertisements in Korea and Malaysia. Overall findings show that there is under-representation of older adults in television advertisements in both countries. While older adults were given major roles in Korea, they were portrayed more in background roles in Malaysia. However, while a greater proportion of males were given major roles in Korea, the reverse is found in the case of Malaysia where more females assumed major roles than males. The majority of males in Malaysia were given background roles. Although both countries are Asian countries, the historical background and the ethnic diversity in Malaysia might explain the difference in male and female portrayal by advertisers. One positive note is the usage of older adults which were not cast in the stereotype negative perception of older people. This positive development should change perception towards older people overtime. Although the types of products that used older adults as models are still limited, the situation is likely to change when sensitization of issues related to ageing is increased and when marketers begin to realize the potential of the silver market.

Further research is needed to examine consumer perceptions toward the portrayal of older people in advertisements. In particular, research has to address the question of the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of using these models.

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