

GRANDPARENTHOOD AND COGNITIVE AGE:

KEY VARIABLES FOR TARGETING THE OVER-50 MARKET.

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Abstract

The growing importance of older consumers (aged 50 and above) is evident to marketers in Europe, North America and parts of south east Asia and Australasia. Increasingly, many companies that provide goods and services for children are targeting grandparents in the older consumer market to purchase these goods and services for their grandchildren. Recent marketing literature on the grandparent-grandchild relationship tends to focus solely on the grandchild, and little is known about the impact the relationship has on the grandparent. This paper presents findings from the first empirical study (n=650) undertaken in the United Kingdom that examines the relationship from the grandparent's perspective, and specifically what effects it has on the grandparent's cognitive age. The results are discussed and recommendations are made for marketing strategy.

Key Words

Older (50+) consumers; grandparenthood; self-perceived age; marketing.

Introduction

According to the United Nations, the ageing of the world's population is unprecedented in human history, is a global phenomenon, and is enduring, insofar as it is unlikely ever to be reversed. Moreover, in the developed economies of Western Europe, North America, Japan and parts of Australasia, the emergence of a 'new old', predicted by Neugarten as long ago as 1974, has come to pass. This demographic, product of the baby boom of 1945 to 1964, defies the stereotypes of poverty, infirmity and social isolation previously held about older people. In the United Kingdom, for example, there are just under 20 million people aged 50 and over, constituting almost one-third of the population. Although there are pockets of very real deprivation in this segment (Roberts 2005, Gray, Misson and Hayes 2005), there is also a large degree of relative affluence and willingness to spend, especially when compared with those younger consumers on whom marketers have traditionally focussed. For example, 50 to 64 year olds in the UK are the biggest spenders per capita on recreation and culture, including cinema and theatre admissions, holidays abroad and new cars than any other group (ONS, 2002, 2004a,b).

However, despite the size, affluence and willingness to spend that characterizes the over 50 market, outside of a few industries (most notably leisure and tourism), they remain strangely neglected by mainstream marketers. Evidence suggests that they are routinely excluded from many market research samples (Flatters, 1994), advertising campaigns (Simcock and Sudbury, 2006), and product design (Peters, 1994; Higham, 1999). Various authors have suggested a number of reasons why this might be the case, ranging from specific segment characteristics (for example, Hauser and Scarisbrick-Hauser, 1995; Philp, Haynes and Helms, 1992; Schewe and Meredith, 1994), or that practitioners in marketing in general - and advertising in particular - young themselves and obsessed with youth, are unable to empathise with older consumers (Blackett, 2002; Treguer, 2002).

A third possible reason, relatively unexplored, why some companies have historically been reluctant to target older consumers is that there is a lack of valid and reliable research available to help formulate and guide marketing strategies. Indeed, although there is a growing corpus of literature on older consumers in general in the UK, much of it lacks empirical evidence, and the body of available knowledge still lags far behind what is known about older Americans. One such area is that of self-perceived age amongst older consumers, its antecedents, and the effect it has on their consumer behaviour.

Self-perceived Age

In marketing, chronological age is the most frequently used of all demographic variables to describe consumer behaviour research and segment consumer markets (Barak and Schiffman 1981). Despite this, the limitations of chronological age have long been acknowledged (Adams 1971; Heron and Chown 1967). Although chronological age may be a useful clue to performance during early life (Jarvik 1975), ageing *per se* does not perfectly coincide with chronological age (Bell 1972), and so homogeneity in individual lifestyles and conditions among age groups cannot be assumed. Indeed, the number of years lived is a poor indicator of a person's values, attitudes, and consumer behaviour (Chua, Cote and Leong 1990; Van Auken, Barry and Anderson 1993). Such observations have led to predictions – thus far unfulfilled - that chronological age will progressively have less and less utility as a research variable (Maddox and Campbell 1985).

Given the limitations of chronological age, the cliché that a person is as young or as old as they feel might be more useful in understanding the behaviour of older people. Research shows that the age a person perceives themselves to be, or identifies with, constrains them to recognise changes in themselves and to perceive that attitudes toward them have changed (Peters 1971). Thus, the age a person identifies with gives an insight into the behaviours that the individual thinks society expects from them (Guptill 1969). Likewise, an individual's self-perceived age gives a better insight into their likely consumer behaviour than does chronological age alone (Barak and Schiffman 1981; Cleaver and Muller 2002; Schiffman and Sherman 1991; Stephens 1991). Thus, self-perceived age has been of interest to American gerontologists for over half a century (Cavan et al. 1949; Havinghurst and Albrecht 1953) and American marketing researchers for a quarter of a century (Barak and Schiffman 1981).

Despite a relatively large body of American knowledge, and a much smaller body of British knowledge regarding self-perceived age, hardly anything is known about the potential effects of some basic socio-demographic variables on this phenomenon. One such socio-demographic variable is grandparenthood, which, as the following discussion shows, is an important role for older people in society.

Grandparenthood, Society and Marketing

There is a relatively large corpus of literature from the wider social sciences pertaining to grandparenthood, with the role having attracted the attention of, *inter alia*, gerontologists, sociologists, anthropologists and even theologians (Rosenman and Conroy, 1985). Thus, grandparenthood, described by Bengtson (1985, p.11) as ‘certainly one of the oldest social roles in human experience’ has been analysed from a large number of perspectives, for example the symbolism of grandparenting (Hagestad, 1985); ethnic and religious differences in the role (McReady 1985, Burton and Bengtson 1985, Wechsler 1985, Conroy and Fahey 1985); styles of grandparenting (Cherlin and Furstenburg, 1985); and grandparenting options in divorcing families (Drew, Richard and Smith 1998, Johnson, 1985).

These and other authors have explored the diversity of grandparenthood, and destroyed many of the myths and stereotypes traditionally associated with the role, and there is now a broad consensus about the multi-dimensional role that grandparents play. This is summarised by Wilcoxon (1987, p. 289) after a comprehensive review of the literature: the historian, providing a link with both the cultural and familial past; the role model of mature adulthood; the mentor, an experienced adult with acquired wisdom of lifestage transitions; the wizard, an accomplished story-teller who fosters imagination and creativity; and the nurturer-great parent, the last bastion in familial crises and transitions. Additionally, it is important to note how pertinent for the grandparent-grandchild relationship Englund’s (1983) distinction between parentage and parenting is. Parentage is more of a social role within the family system, whereas parenting is much more of an authoritarian role, associated with responsibilities such as boundary setting, laying down rules and generally enforcing discipline. Wilcoxon (1987, p. 290) concludes that for the contemporary grandparent it is grandparentage rather than grandparenting, experiencing ‘pleasure without responsibilities’, that is important.

Compared with the rich insights into grandparenthood coming from these disciplines, recent marketing literature – both in the trade and academic press – is curiously one-dimensional. Although some earlier studies explored potentially interesting areas of intergenerational influence such as brand lineage (for example, Miller 1975, Olsen 1993), much recent writing by marketers relating to grandparents has tended to view them as little more than doting cash cows for their grandchildren, with scant attention paid to the impact the role has on the grandparent *qua* the wider consumer. This is exemplified by Hanks (2001) who notes that the

'businesses most interested in grandparents as consumers are those that sell products and services that target seniors and children...grandparents are portrayed as having resources and wanting to use them to spend time with grandchildren...' (p. 660).

Hanks' conclusion is borne out by much of the recent marketing literature available on grandparenthood. Thus we find that Chinese children are indulged by their grandparents with special payments of money on birthdays, at Chinese New Year and other special occasions (McNeal and Chyon-Hwa, 1997) even as they become less important as sources of information on new products as these children become older (McNeal and Ji, 1999). In the United States we learn that grandparents are, at 16% of the market, the second single largest purchasers of toys after parents (Playthings, 2004); 19% of teenagers get money from their grandmothers, and 14% from their grandfathers (Dolliver, 2005); and that American museums and other cultural institutions should actively exploit the highly lucrative grandparent-grandchild relationship (Khalife, 2002). Finally, Fisher (1996) informs us that although grandparents can sometimes be elusive in terms of accessing them through formal marketing communication channels, several organisations have managed to do this, with Fisher Price, the American multi-national toy manufacturer, presciently pioneering this as early as 1987.

What all of these studies lack, however, with this one-dimensional perspective, are any insights into the effect that grandparenthood has on grandparents as individuals, and specifically the impact that it might have on the self-perceived age of the grandparent.

Self-perceived Age and Grandparenthood

Although sociologists and gerontologists have long been interested in the influence of the family on the ageing experience, few self-perceived age researchers have been concerned with family relationships. Those few researchers who have examined this potentially important area have found that ageing awareness is partly caused by the growth of children or by the demands they make (Brooks 1981; Hori 1994), and that grandparenthood is a potentially important consideration in the study of self-perceived age. However, the relationship is not a simple one, and the specific impact it has (feeling older or younger) is dependent on a number of factors.

Kaufman and Elder (2003) explored the importance of at what age becoming a grandparent has on an individual's age identity. Age identity is the oldest and most popular technique for

measuring self-perceived age amongst gerontologists, and requires people to state the age category (young, middle-aged, old) with which they most identify. This study suggested that becoming a grandparent 'on-time' (i.e. between the ages of 50 and 65, when one might reasonably expect to take on the role) leads to enjoyment of the role, a younger age identity, and a desire to live longer than those individuals who become grandparents 'off-time' (i.e. below the age of 50), whose transition to the role leads to an older age identity. This may be because, as Jerome (1993) suggests, some people may find it difficult to reconcile being a grandparent with their youthful self-image. In contrast, although there is variability in the role, research suggests that grandparenthood can constitute a source of renewal and renewed purpose (Knipscheer 1988; Neugarten and Weinstein 1968; Thompson, Itzin and Abendstern 1991) with many grandparents taking pleasure from the role (Bengtsen, Rosenthal and Burton 1990).

Grandparenthood has also been considered in two other self-perceived age studies (Barak and Gould 1985; Barak 1987), both of which used cognitive age as the measure. This asks respondents to identify with age decades along the dimensions of feel (psychological/emotional), look (biological/physical), act (social), and think (cognitive/intellectual interests) ages. Overall cognitive age is computed by averaging the midpoint values for the four age dimensions. Both studies found the age of the oldest grandchild to have the strongest relationship to self-perceived age.

Overall, therefore, whilst it is clear that self-perceived age is important, and that grandparenthood is important, only three studies, all American, have focused on bringing these variables together. Moreover, only two (Barak and Gould 1985; Barak 1987), have considered these from a marketing perspective. Thus, this study is the first outside the US to consider grandparenthood and self-perceived age from a marketing perspective.

Method

A self-administered questionnaire was used in the study. The lower age parameter of 50 was chosen on the basis that this is the starting point for many United Kingdom age related services (for example SAGA, Age Concern) offered to older consumers. In order to attain a sample that mirrored the older UK population in terms of 5-year age groups, and because no practical sampling frame that details all people over 50 in the UK is readily available, quota sampling was employed, a technique that is quite acceptable and widely used in the UK and

most of Europe (Taylor, Harris and Associates 1995). The procedure resulted in a usable sample size of 650, whose ages ranged from 50 to 79 years (mean age 62.4, s.d. 8.4), the distribution of which mirrors UK population in terms of 5-year age bands, as shown in table 1.

Table 1: Sample Ages Compared to Census

Age	Sample		UK Census	
	n	Percent	n (000s)	Percent
50-54	144	22.2	3847.2	22.2
55-59	137	21.1	3653.7	21.1
60-64	109	16.8	2888.5	16.7
65-69	99	15.2	2621.4	15.2
70-74	88	13.5	2343.1	13.5
75-79	73	11.2	1941.3	11.2
Total	650	100.0	17295.2	99.9

Measures

Although a variety of techniques to measure self-perceived age have evolved over the years it is the cognitive age scale (Barak 1979; Barak and Schiffman 1981) that has had the greatest impact for marketing research, and was therefore the method chosen here. Moreover, the cognitive age scale is superior to other available instruments on the basis that it is easy to administer, easy to understand by respondents (Stephens 1991), is multidimensional, and has been shown to be a valid instrument (Van Auken, Barry and Anderson 1993; Van Auken and Barry 1995). The reliability of the Cognitive Age scale was found to be acceptable (Cronbach's alpha .89).

In addition to cognitive age, respondents were asked a battery of socio-demographic questions, including chronological age, gender, marital status (married, single, divorced/separated or widowed), work status (working, housewife, retired) which also comprised a number of questions on length and nature of retirement, socio-economic status (income and socio-economic groupings), and a range of progeny variables, including number and ages of children and grandchildren. Two open-ended questions also invited respondents to state those things that made them feel young and those things that made them feel older.

Results

As the figures in Table 2 clearly show, grandparenthood does not equate to individuals feeling cognitively older than their counterparts who have not yet entered the role. Indeed, despite those grandparents in the survey being on average 8 years older than those respondents who were not grandparents, their cognitive age was over 10 years younger, which emerged as significantly different ($t = 2.017$, $df = 481.7$, $p < 0.05$) to only 9 years for those who have no grandchildren. That grandparenthood does not necessarily add years to one's cognitive age was confirmed with a partial correlation analysis, where the highly significant positive association with grandparenthood found at the zero order level disappeared once chronological age was held constant.

Table 2: Mean Ages By Grandparent Status

Grandparent Status	n	Chronological Age	Cognitive Age	Youth Bias
No grandchildren	190	57.9	48.6	9.3
Grandparent	350	65.8	55.5	10.3

Weak but significant positive correlations were also found at the zero order level with youth bias and number of grandchildren ($r = .087$, $n = 545$, $p < 0.05$), and age of oldest grandchild ($r = .179$, $n = 353$, $p = 0.001$) although it did not correlate with the age of youngest grandchild. Individual hierarchical regression analyses later confirmed most of the progeny variables to be non-significant predictors of cognitive age, with the exceptions of parenthood ($\beta = -.061$, $p < 0.05$) and age of oldest grandchild ($\beta = -.171$, $p < 0.001$).

All the socio-economic variables that were found to be potentially important in the individual analyses were then considered in relation to each other. Based on the advice of Brace, Kemp and Snelgar (2003) a regression model was built using the simultaneous method because, other than the importance of chronological age, there was no theoretical reason for any variable to be more important than any of the other variables that have been found to relate to cognitive age. The variables under consideration were chronological age, marital status, widowed, parenthood, and age of oldest grandchild. A highly significant model emerged (F6,

340 = 90.237, $p < 0.001$) which accounted for 61.4% of the variance ($R^2 = .614$). No marital status variable was a significant predictor in the model. Those variables that did emerge as significant predictors are shown in table 3, which also details the unstandardized and standardized beta coefficients and significance levels.

Table 3 Significant Socio-Demographic Predictors of Cognitive Age

Variable	β	Standardized β	p
Chronological Age	.972	.858	$p < 0.001$
Age of Oldest Grandchild	-.149	-.131	$p < 0.01$
Parenthood	-4.215	-.112	$p < 0.05$

As can be seen from table 3, chronological age accounts for the greatest amount of the variance, and the remaining predictor variables are small by comparison. Nevertheless, the age of the oldest grandchild is the next most important predictor variable after chronological age. This is noteworthy, given that the variables under consideration included such measures as retirement and widowhood, which have received far greater attention in previous self-perceived age research than have grandparenthood variables. Indeed, the finding that the age of the oldest grandchild is a more important predictor of cognitive age than gender, retirement, and even income and social class is clearly an important one.

The importance of grandchildren in relation to ageing was also apparent from the qualitative data attained in response to the questions “What, if anything, reminds you that you are getting older?” and “What, if anything, do you do to ‘stay young’?” Reminders of ageing included the growing of grandchildren, especially life events such as a grandchild starting school. Paradoxically, however, almost as many respondents mentioned mixing with their grandchildren as something that keeps them young.

Discussion and Conclusions

This research has clearly shown that after chronological age, becoming or being a grandparent for the first time, and the growth of that first grandchild, is the single most important predictor of an individual’s cognitive age. The question now is what are the possible implications of this for the wider consumer behaviour of grandparents and marketing activity directed at

them? Firstly, it further reinforces the widely held consensus that grandparents represent an important market segment for products and services that help reinforce and actualise the relationship they have with their grandchildren. This is well understood in the USA, where marketers have long understood that grandparents buy expensive toys and other products for their grandchildren, 'grandma' and 'grandpa' dolls can be purchased, and educational trips and vacations are available for grandparents and their grandchildren (Schewe and Balazs 1992). To date, British marketers have shown nothing like this level of understanding and sophistication, and consequently the segment remains relatively under-developed in the UK.

More importantly, however, and more originally, the research presented here shows that marketers need to consider the importance of cognitive rather than chronological age as a factor in the grandparent's decision making process for both high and low involvement products and services for their grandchildren. Accordingly, the youthful cognitive age of many grandparents should inform the creative strategies of advertisements aimed at them. Models employed in such advertisements should appear to be close to the target markets' chronological age (look age is invariably closest to actual age amongst older consumers), but they should be portrayed as active, sociable, having a youthful outlook, and interacting with their grandchildren. Such a relatively youthful portrayal is likely to be well received by the target market.

The final conclusion that can be made, of course, is that far more empirical work needs to be undertaken, especially in the UK and Europe, into the grandparent-grandchild relationship, and this needs to embrace the impact it has on both parties. A tentative research agenda might include grandparenting styles - the formal, the fun seeker, the surrogate parent, the reservoir of wisdom, the distant figure (Neugarten and Weinstein, 1968; Thompson *et. al.* 1990) – how that role changes over time, and the impact this has on cognitive age and consumer behaviour. Only then can we gain the insights and understanding marketers need to target and service an increasingly important market segment.

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