The old and the beautiful: senior female exposure to models in advertisements and consequences on their identity

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Abstract

This research questions the impact of feminine models of different ages in advertisements on senior women. Using social comparison theory, it focuses on identity tensions created by advertising and subsequent comparisons strategies to deal with these tensions. It relies on a qualitative approach involving 27 in-depth interviews with French females aged 60 to 79. Photo-elicitation was used to capture comparison strategies to models. Results show that identity tensions due to appearance emerge when senior women are confronted to advertising models. They manage the comparison with female representations differently, some women devaluating their self while others engage in more positive identity reactions.

Keywords   Advertising, appearance, identity, older consumer, social comparison.

INTRODUCTION

Many advertising images show young women whose physical appearance tends towards perfection. If many researches have highlighted the harmful effects of these images on young women (Richins, 2011), few have looked at the effects on another population not targeted by these ads but nevertheless just as exposed to such images: senior women.
In our youthful society, aging is not easy. Senior women are confronted with identity tensions between the age written on their identity card (chronological age) and the age they feel they have (subjective age (Guiot, 2001).

Other more recent work has shown that the perception of age identity is not set and that seniors readjust all the time depending on the situation (Barnhart and Peñaloza, 2013). These readjustments or identity negotiations (Welté, 2019) give rise to strategies of rejection or, on the contrary, acceptance of age (Tepper, 1994).

The issue of appearance is a particularly sensitive component of aging identity. Advertising images are precisely likely to provoke identity reactions involving appearance.
Using social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), our research tries to better understand mechanisms at work when senior women are exposed to female advertising models and the way in which senior women take over advertising representations: Do they compare themselves to models and according to what mechanisms? How do they appropriate images of senior women in a context where old age is not valued?
The objective of our research is to fill this gap by studying the effect of exposure of senior women to female models from an identity perspective.

BACKGROUND

Identity tensions due to ageing appearance
In Western societies, ageing is not valued. Elderly people being stigmatized attain a "diminished" social status (Goffman, 1963). This is particularly true for elderly women because of appearance changes. As they age, they move away from the norms of feminine beauty since youth is a constituent ingredient of beauty (Borau and Bonnefon, 2017), deviating thus from the beauty standards. Moreover, the social injunction to look young puts additional pressure on older women and increases identity tensions (Galland, 2006).
In the face of these identity tensions, different strategies are implemented by senior women. While, some senior women can go as far as concealing the effects of aging on their body, others try to value the body differently as one ages and change the norm to define an individual no longer according to appearance but according to interiority (Dumas et al., 2005).
Research conducted more broadly on age (Weijters and Geuens, 2006) emphasize on the influence of attitude towards age on the identity strategy adopted. Negative attitudes vary from denial, to reject, concealing or irrelevancy of age. Positive attitudes include age reconciliation and age pride. These different reactions depend on the individual's perception of self and in particular whether or not they categorize themselves as elderly.

Advertising models' exposure and Social Comparison Theory (SCT)
Exposure to advertising appears to be a revealing context of identity tensions. Numerous studies mobilizing the theory of social comparison (SCT) from Festinger (1954) highlight the identity threat posed by exposure to mannequins. SCT concludes in an increase of social anxiety and negative emotions towards oneself (Antioco et al., 2012) as well as jealousy (Richins, 2011).

This is explained by the fact that an individual confronted to a mannequin in an advertising will compare to him/her on the criteria of physical appearance which is of major salience in this context. Comparing process can refer to the self, people trying to identify to the mannequin (Kelman, 1961). Then an upward comparison is ruled, enhancing identification with the mannequin with negative consequences because the mannequin provides an unattainable model (Borau and Nepomuceno, 2016). Comparison is then unfavorable to people exposed to advertising (Borgès, 2011).

According to SCT's framework, when they are not in a compelled situation such as provided by advertising, individuals will choose the comparison approach which will be the most beneficial for their self-image. They could choose a comparison to an individual who performs less well than he/she does or try to change the criterion on which to compare.

Most studies using SCT have dealt with the reactions of young female viewers to visuals featuring young female models. Little is known about comparison strategies applied by senior women (Alaphilippe, 2008). The context of aging is favourable to further investigation. Seniors are heavily exposed to advertising (Gerbner et al., 2002). Additionally, it is proved that the representation of older adults in advertisements impacts perceptions they have of their own ageing (Kleinspehn-Ammerlahn et al., 2008).

Ultimately, this research shows that advertising context should generate identity reactions as appearance is a sensitive subject among older women.

METHOD

To capture how senior women deal with images of models of different ages, we used a qualitative approach based on semi-structured interviews and narrative analysis. Photo-elicitation was used to facilitate and enrich each discussion (El Jurdi and Smith, 2017).

27 women aged between 60 and 79, were interviewed. Informants were recruited to include varying age, varying social profiles and differing prior professional backgrounds for retirees and current professions for professionally active respondents (appendix 1).

Interviews were conducted over a period of 4 months. The subject matter is sensitive. There is therefore a risk of obtaining only consensual and surface responses. To get around this difficulty, several precautions were taken:
- a broad investigation of appearance was conducted and overly direct questions that lead respondents not to answer honestly were avoided;
- a method consisting of collecting general speeches on the one hand and confronting respondents with plates of images of women on the other hand (plate 1: women of all ages; plate 2: advertising representations of women of all ages; plate 3a&b: senior women; plate 4a&b: advertising representations of senior women). The plates were composed of models' faces, facial beauty being directly related to an individual's overall physical beauty (Hume and Montgomerie, 2001). Seeking to understand what the identity dynamics of senior women in relation to female images are, we let women choose the female images that seem most beautiful to them, comment on them and bring them closer to their own appearance.

All interviews were transcribed mentioning the respondents' reactions to the questions. First, the authors analysed half of the interviews separately and thematically in order to minimize the risk of subjectivity. They then compared their results and discussed interviews and themes. The

final coding sheet revealed significant homogeneity and resulted in the identification of a certain number of themes:
- aging identity: age salience, perception of aging and self-perception;
- dynamics at work when confronted with feminine images. For each respondent and each image, the following elements were noted: (non)comparison, comparison criteria used and impact on identity (identification, positive/negative effects).

FINDINGS

A fragile ageing identity

The problematic appearance of senior women
Respondents develop a negative view of old age which is largely nourished by the question of the appearance of senior women. Aging of the body is seen negatively, through wrinkles, bulges or white hair. Old age is seen as a degradation ("We have passed the stage of this beautiful youth. And we're gradually deteriorating" (Virginie, age 64)).
While respondents frequently referred to the idea that one can "be beautiful at any age", this positive discourse needs to be nuanced. An analysis of what our respondents consider to be a beautiful senior woman reveals that the physical appearance of senior women is evaluated according to the criteria applied to young women: skin firmness and absence of wrinkles, slim and sporty silhouette, etc.

A fragile self
The context of appearance and advertising featuring women of all ages accentuates the identity tension created by the age of the respondents. Our respondents reveal a weakened identity. Most of them express a negative content to varying degrees. Confronting oneself becomes difficult for older women ("I don't like to be looked at, I don't like to look at myself" (Yvette, age 79)). Age draws the boundaries of older women's identity ("When I was young, I was much more beautiful. At my age, I have become aware of that" (Myriam, age 68)). Other respondents have a valued view of themselves that is not based on physical appearance but is holistic in nature ("I'm happy with myself" (Michèle, age 73)).

Identity tensions
The advertising context in which questions of appearance are made salient accentuates the identity tension created by the age of the respondents. The desire for youth is strongly expressed, even if it is inaccessible ("I would like to go back in time, to be young like her" (Virginia, age 64)).
This desire for youth can be transformed into a desire to age well and direct some women towards the implementation of actions to preserve their appearance "as eating less, moving more, not drinking too much alcohol, not smoking (Marianne, age 74).
Some respondents stressed the need to give up this desire to appear young ("Taking on your age means not wanting to be younger than you are" (Martine, age 62)). The desire for youth is then transferred to other facets of identity. "Staying young" consists in maintaining a status, activities or psychological traits that are related to youth.

Comparison strategies of senior women

Non-comparison and false comparisons

Some feminine images do not give rise to comparisons. They are commented on, without reference to oneself. In other cases, a comparison is made: the image is related to oneself. However, sometimes the image chosen is so far away from the respondent (for example, with different physical characteristics or a different culture) that it does not allow her to identify herself ("I find this woman very beautiful... My physique is very different from hers" (Nina, age 60)).

Lack of comparison or comparison with images of women that are unrealistic or very different from the respondent (cultural background, different physical style or age) ensures that the identity of the respondent is not put into question. These are strategies for avoiding comparison.

Comparisons and effects on identity

Many images of models give rise to more accurate comparisons. The comparisons are based on different points involving appearance (hair, skin or eye color) but also psychological traits (simplicity, kindness, and psychological balance). These psychological traits allow the respondent to identify with the model presented ("I identify with her by her smile and her naturalness" (Claire, age 61)).

Confrontation with images of models can make it more difficult for senior women to accept their appearance. It can also lead to a devaluation of the self that goes beyond the question of appearance alone, affects psychological qualities or is of a more general nature ("I wish I could have worn an expression so full of joy and life" (Anne, age 64)). Conversely, images of models can be used by respondents to enhance their self-esteem. This can happen in two ways. The first is to make a favorable comparison on psychological traits ("She's less nice than me!" (Yvette, age 75)). The second is to compare to models that respondents consider older than they are. Comparison to an older model has the consequence of relativizing the age of the respondent who feels less old and projects a possible representation of herself into the future ("I will identify with her when I'm 70!" (Nadège, age 60)).

Ultimately, the images of the female models chosen by the respondents can lead to comparisons that involve their identity. Some respondents are subjected to the images offered to them and they come out of the comparison devalued. Others, on the other hand, seem to appropriate them in order to enhance their self-esteem.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our results highlight the fragility of senior women's identity when confronted with advertising images. They show that respondents very rarely manage to put appearance aside and redefine themselves according to their inner self, be it their personality, their psychological traits or their spirituality. The method consisting in confronting women to feminine images could have made appearance issues more salient than in current life. This fragility raises the question of the role that public authorities and brands can play in limiting these effects. For example, in France, institutions (CSA) have recently taken up the issue of women and age. For the first time, they have quantified the extremely high under-representation of women over 65 in the media. As far as brands are concerned, the example of Damart, a French clothing brand is full of interest. In 2017, Damart staged for the first time a seductive mature female model in unretouched photos that were reported as such, anticipating the "Photoshop" decree[1]. Its slogans emphasize the fidelity of the representation to reality: "Photo not retouched", "Personality not retouched" or "Emotion not retouched". Additionally, there is a growing awareness of the role of brands and

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[1] Decree No. 2017-738 of 4 May 2017: this decree of 4 May 2017 on the use of commercial photographs of models whose body appearance has been altered makes it mandatory to indicate any photographic processing carried out on the body of the models shown.

marketers in creating standards in the representation of consumer targets (Pounders, 2018). Moreover, brands want to be more inclusive, this making their image more attractive for consumers (see Dove for instance). Researchers can actively participate through their work in this movement.

Our results allow us to deepen the mechanisms of social comparison occurring when one is exposed to advertising images. We obtain several original results. First, it is difficult for respondents to escape comparison. Even when they declare that they do not compare themselves, they do so automatically when confronted with images. Second, while comparison strategies theoretically allow individuals to preserve their self-esteem, we have several cases in which women devalue themselves by comparing themselves to the chosen advertising images. In fact, they do not always choose the images that are most advantageous to them. This observation underscores the fact that senior female respondents are particularly powerless in the face of advertising images and find it difficult to implement winning strategies to overcome the issue of appearance. To deepen this result, it would be interesting to carry out a quantitative research to generalize to larger populations including personal factors of variations such es self-esteem level, subjective age or sociodemographic factors (family status, education, incomes level).

In addition to the comparison based on age, which is very significant, the respondents use original modalities based not on the whole physique but on one of the physical characteristics. They thus make a selective comparison. This enables them to limit the deleterious effects of the comparison on their self-esteem. To enhance their self-esteem, in some cases, they will also compare themselves on psychological rather than physical characteristics. This shows that the very modalities of the comparison are complex. However, these modalities are little studied.

Such future research should address the testing of these modalities: when can women switch from physical comparison traits to psychological ones?

These insights into senior women's comparative mechanisms can assist advertisers in developing portrayals of senior women. Showing very old models is a way for some older women not only to enhance their self-esteem, but also to provide them with models of aging. One way to do this would be to show more of the interiority of the women portrayed.

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Appendix 1. Qualitative survey respondents' profiles

	Age	Status	Professional situation
Nadège	60	Divorced	Professionally active
Nina	60	Divorced	Professionally active
Pascale	60	Married	Retired
Cécile	60	Divorced	Retired
Diane	60	Married	Professionally active
Clémence	60	Married	Retired
Claire	61	Married	Professionally active
Agathe	61	Married	Retired
Martine	62	Married	Professionally active
Monique	63	Married	Retired
Florence	64	Married	Retired
Virginie	64	Married	Retired
Anne	64	Widowed	Retired
Fleur	65	Widowed	Retired
Agnès	65	Married	Retired
Léa	66	Divorced	Professionally active
Blandine	66	Divorced	Professionally active
Alice	67	Married	Retired
Myriam	68	Widowed	Retired
Colette	72	Widowed	Retired
Paule	72	Divorced	Retired
Louise	72	Married	Retired
Michèle	73	Married	Professionally active
Marianne	74	Married	Retired
Camille	75	Widowed	Retired
Andréa	77	Widowed	Retired
Yvette	79	Widowed	Retired