Impact of model gender on the perception by older viewers and the effectiveness of advertisements targeted at their age group

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Abstract

This article emphasizes the role of the advertising model's gender on several variables linked to the effectiveness of the advertising. This impact has been examined on senior consumers. A survey of 512 older viewers aged 60 to 85 reveals that model's gender influences the attitude toward the advertisement, the attitude toward the brand and the purchase intention depending on the service gender and the gender of the viewer. It also shows the importance of matching product gender and model gender in ads when targeting senior consumers. Theoretical and managerial implications are discussed, and directions for future research provided.

Key words: advertising, persuasion, gender, perception, older adult.

INTRODUCTION

The impact of advertisement on viewers is a concern for all stakeholders in the advertising industry. A positive perception on the part of customers may generate the intention to purchase the product or service advertised, while a negative perception may lead to complaints or even the rejection of the advertisement. This impact is all the more important to study among the elderly population since this is a strategic segment because of their demographic and economic potentials.

Several aspects must be approached with great care when advertising is aimed at seniors: the representation of old age and the choice of the model gender. Older consumer portrayal in ads is a topic on which the awareness of the advertising industry has been raised. Several problems have indeed been identified: the under representation of seniors in ads and their portrayal which is either idealized or caricatured (Chevalier and Moal-Ulvoas, 2018). Moreover, although the topic of gender in advertising has received previous attention, further research is needed to understand its impact on the effectiveness of ads as it has mainly been addressed with a focus on the issue of gender stereotyping (Grau and Zotos, 2016).

When working on consumer representation in advertisements, the choice of the model requires specific attention. For older consumers, senior models used in ads serve as identity references (Milliman and Erffmeyer, 1989-1990) and influence the ad's efficiency (Yazdanparast et al., 2018). The process of advertising persuasion relies partly on the viewer's identification to the model. Perceived similarity between the model's age and viewer's age is one of several characteristics which facilitates this identification process (Chevalier and Lichtlé, 2012).

It is legitimate to think that other features of the model can influence advertising effectiveness. When targeting senior consumers, the scarce research results available confirm that studying the role of the model gender on advertising efficiency is relevant for these consumers (Graham, 1994).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Gender influence in advertising

Numerous studies have examined the influence gender in advertising, including viewer gender, model gender and product/brand gender.

Previous research has demonstrated that gender is a variable which plays an important role in the way male and female consumers respond to advertising efforts (Bui, Krishen and Latour, 2012).

First, viewer's gender influences information processing and the steps of the purchasing process. Women tend to assimilate information more comprehensively (assimilating all available cues) while men tend to rely on single cues to make judgements Meyers-Levy, 1989). Moreover, women make a purchase decision while relying more on product attributes than men (Widgery and McGaugh, 1993).

Second, viewer's gender influences ad evaluation and recall. Men's attitude toward the advertisement is more favorable when the ad contains little information and women rate more favorably on those criteria when the advertisement is complex (Putrevu, 2004). Women remember more facts and detect the explicit claim of the ad more frequently than men (Edens and McCormick, 2000).

Finally, viewer's gender influences spokesperson perception. Men and women rate physical attractiveness as a function of age and the credibility of physically attractive communicators differently (Mathes et al., 1985).

Gender of the model influences product evaluation (Petroshius and Crocker, 1989) and product sex-typing and gendered perception (Kahle and Homer, 1985). The sex of the product tends to be associated with the sex of the usual product user.

Gender of the model influences purchase intention (Adigüzel and Donato, 2019). Women express higher purchase intention of a product when advertised by a male model. The perceived gender of the product should be taken into account when researching model gender influence

The concept of gender also applies to the product and the brand, which can be gendered in the mind of consumers. Products such as cars, electronics, insurance and financial products, or beer have more of a male image when products such as cosmetics, fashion or a sofa have more of a female image (An and Kim, 2007). Numerous studies suggest to match the product gender with the gender of the spokesperson used in the ad, as adequacy between these elements improves product and advertisement evaluation (Whipple and McManamon, 2002). Thus, the use of a male model is recommended for male gendered products when the use of a female model is recommended for female gendered products (Kamins and Gupta, 1994).

Product gender also impacts men and women's perception of advertisements (Bellizzi and Milner, 1991) as women tend to prefer more feminine ads for products associated with a female image, that is one that involves a softer and more emotional tone (Alreck et al., 1982).

Older adults' representation in ads

Existing research results reveal the existence of two main problems associated with the representations of seniors in advertising. First, older adults are underrepresented in ads (Chevalier and Moal-Ulvoas, 2018). Second, the portrayals of older adults in ads is not satisfactory. Older characters tend to be cast in in age-marked roles and contexts (Zurcher and Robinson, 2017).

Media images of later life serve as a resource for older adults' identity work in a context of shortage of real-life role models for ageing (Harrington, Bielby and Bardo, 2014). According to socialization theory, the presence of older adults in advertisements impacts the perception of the elderly. Older consumers seek reference models in the media. Older adults are predisposed to compare themselves to the model they see in an ad, and to judge the similarity between themselves and the featured character (Chevalier and Lichtlé, 2012).

Concepts and roles of identification and similarity

A possible explanation to the identification process lies in the similarity between the model and the target. According to Bezes (2010), similarity implies direct comparison between attributes or objects of the same nature. The consumer compares the identity he is presented with (the model in the ad for example) to the image he has or would like to give of himself (Fleck and Maille, 2010). This comparison can rely on physical characteristics (Maille and Fleck, 2011). Similarity influences the advertising persuasion process. For example, ethnic similarity between the model and the receiver strengthens the message's credibility (Freiden, 1984) and generates more favorable ratings of the ad (Morimoto and La Ferle, 2008). In the same fashion, age similarity between the model and the viewer increases advertising efficiency (Chang, 2008). This literature review highlights the need to take model's gender into account as a characteristic which can influence the efficiency of advertisements. Due to the identification process, we assume that advertising will be more efficient when the gender of the model is similar to that of the viewer. In addition to this, considering the gender associated with the product is similarly important.

From these elements, we deduce the following hypotheses:

H1: when the product advertised has a male image, a male model will generate a more favorable attitude toward the advertisement (H1a), attitude toward the brand than a female model (H1b) and purchase intention than a female model (H1c) than a female model.

H2: when the product advertised has a female image, a female model will generate a more favorable attitude toward the advertisement (H2a), attitude toward the brand (H2b) and purchase intention (H2c) than a male model.

H3: for male respondents, male models generate a more favorable attitude toward to the advertisement (H3a), attitude toward the brand (H3b) and purchase intention (H3c) than female models.

H4: for female respondents, female models generate a more favorable attitude toward to the advertisement (H4a), attitude toward the brand (H4b) and purchase intention (H4c) than male models.

METHOD

For the purpose of testing all gender aspects identified in the literature review, including product gender, two services widely used by consumers of all genders and for which older adults make an important consumer segment were chosen: travel agency services and bank services. Indeed, these two services are expected to be perceived differently by respondents when it comes to service gender. This was confirmed through the interviews of 48 seniors which revealed that: the gender of the travel agency is feminine (69%) and the gender of the bank is masculine (69%).

In order to avoid biases associated with a potential a priori toward the brand, two fictitious brands were created: Terre Prodigieuse (travel) and Banque Avenir (bank). For the same reason, the logo associated with each brand was created by us. We verified, through a pre-test, that all brands and logos were unknown to consumers.

For the choice of the models to be integrated in the ads, 15 different models were selected in a database. In order to evaluate the perceived age of the models, thirty older adults aged 60 to 85 were presented with two models each and asked to say how old they thought they were. We selected two senior models for which there was no ambiguity on their perceived age (the senior female model had a perceived age of 57.7 and the senior male model had a perceived age of 57.4).

Since we wanted to avoid any bias linked to familiarity with existing ads, we created fictitious ads. Ads for Terre Prodigieuse and Banque Avenir were made into two different versions (one with the male model, one with the female model). In order to validate both ad sets, we asked for the opinion of two ad designers, one expert in bank advertising and the other one expert in travel advertising.

512 consumers aged 60 to 85 (46% men and 54% women) were surveyed face to face. Each surveyed person was presented with two ads: one ad for Banque Avenir and one ad for Terre Prodigieuse, each involving a model of a different gender.

All measures used in this study (attitude toward the advertisement and the brand, and purchase intention) were adapted from existing scales. Exploratory factor analyses allowed us to validate our measurement scales. The factor weights (loadings) are all greater than 0.8 and can therefore be considered satisfactory (Fornell and Larker, 1981). Cronbach's Alpha then made it possible to evaluate the reliability of the measurement tools. The coefficients obtained are all greater than 0.7, in accordance with Nunnally's (1978) acceptability threshold. The results therefore show that all scales are reliable.

FINDINGS

In order to test whether gender of the model has a significant impact on the persuasion process variables, we conducted a series of variance analyses (ANOVA) while distinguishing the two services. In order to compare the variables means depending on the gender of the model, we conducted mean difference tests.

Impact of model gender on the persuasion process variables by product gender
Model gender influences persuasion variables when the product advertised in the ad has a male image (case of the bank). The male model generates a more favorable attitude toward the advertisement and toward the brand and a more favorable purchase intention than the female model. H1a, H1b and H1c are supported.
On the contrary, model gender does not impact persuasion variables when the product advertised in the ad has a female image (case of the travel agency). H2a, H2b and H2c are not supported.

Impact of model's gender on the persuasion process variables by viewer gender
For male respondents, there is no impact of the gender of the model on the attitude toward the advertisement neither for Terre Prodigieuse not for Banque Avenir. H3a is therefore not supported.
The effect of the gender of the model on the attitude toward the brand is not significant for the travel agency but is significant for the bank. The male model generates a more favorable attitude toward the brand Banque Avenir than the female model. H3b is partially supported.
The results show the effect of the gender is significant on the purchase intention for the travel agency. The female model generates a more favorable purchase intention for the travel agency than the male model. On the contrary, for bank services Banque Avenir, the effect of the gender of the model on purchase intention is not significant. H3c is not supported.

For female respondents, there is no significant impact of the gender of the model on the attitude toward the advertisement for Terre Prodigieuse. For the bank, the impact of the gender is significant on the attitude toward the advertisement. However, contrary to the formulated hypothesis, results show that the male model generates a more favorable attitude toward the advertisement than the female model. H4a is not supported. The results show that the effect of the gender of the model is not significant on the attitude toward the brand and purchase intention, neither for Terre Prodigieuse, nor for Banque Avenir. H4b and H4c are not supported.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research is the first to examine the influence of gender on persuasion variables in advertisements targeted at older consumers.
First, our study reveals that the model's gender influences the attitude toward the advertisement, the attitude toward the brand and the purchase intention of seniors. These results differ from those obtained for younger viewers as the influence revealed by the results of our study is here of varying nature: the influence depends on the gender of the product and the gender of the viewer for senior viewers. The model gender thus does not have as much influence on younger viewers as it does on senior ones (Putrevu, 2004). This result could be explained by the fact that, with advancement in age, seniors' perception of gender roles changes and gender distinction becomes less important as suggested Tornstam (2005).

Second, the study reveals that the relationship between the gender of the product and the model used in the advertisement is important for senior consumers and that it is necessary to match the two elements. For bank services Banque Avenir, which are considered masculine by our respondents, the male model generates a more favorable attitude toward the brand and toward the advertisement than the female model for male viewers. Traditionally, men are associated with bank services and more often make decisions than women for the latter. This can explain that respondents have a more favorable attitude toward the advertisement and the brand when they see a male model. For travel agency Terre Prodigieuse, the services of which are considered feminine by our respondents, we observe that the female model generates a more favorable purchase intention than the male model for male respondents. Once more, the fact that women are more often decision makers for this type of service can explain this result.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

If our results show that although seniors are less sensitive to the influence of the model's gender than younger viewers, this influence is not to be neglected. This finding also suggests that model's gender is probably not the main comparison variable and that the identification between the target and the model relies more heavily on other characteristics of the latter. As previous research suggests (Chevalier and Lichtlé, 2012), the perceived age of the model and the cognitive age of the viewer appear to be variables that facilitate comparison and identification. We therefore suggest to give greater importance to age.

Second, our study highlights the necessity to match the gender of the product and the gender of the model when targeting older consumers. It is indeed probable that seniors, in their education and life experience, have been more exposed to gender differentiation, including the association of the gender of a product with that of its most common user. As a result they are more traditional in their vision of roles and genders. This can lead them to consider it as more natural and react more favorably to the association of the two characteristics than younger viewers do. However, generational changes should be expected which might lead to another perception of model's gender in advertisements.

This research displays limits, which are associated with as many opportunities for future research avenues.

First, the respondents being all French, it would be interesting to replicate the study in other cultures. Our experimentation was based on two services. It would be interesting to reproduce it for other services and for products too. The choice of products/services which are less gendered (such as mineral water for example) would be interesting. Another research avenue lies in trying to understand where the lack of influence of the model gender on senior viewers comes from. Previous research on the influence of ageing and the spirituality of older adults through the theory of gerotranscendence (Tornstam, 2005) demonstrated that the ageing process can influence some aspects of older consumers behavior. The theory of gerotranscendence involves a decreasing need of seniors for gender differentiation, which could be tested through a quantitative research.

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