

The 50 and Older Characters in the Advertisements of *Modern Maturity*: Growing Older, Getting Better?

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Advertisements in Modern Maturity for more than 30 years (1959-1991) were analyzed for how they depicted the 50 and older characters. The characters were portrayed as capable, important, healthy, and socially active. Over time, both gender ratios and age group (50 to 64 vs. 65 and older) ratios became close to even. On the negative side, there were few non-White characters. This points to an unrealistic reflection of the racial composition of the American population. If Modern Maturity wishes to continue to be the most influential advocacy magazine for older Americans, it must make an effort to attract advertisements that use older, non-White characters.

The older segment of the American population is expanding both in numbers and purchasing power. One fourth of Americans were age 50 and older in 1990. This segment is projected to increase to more than one third of the population by the year 2020 (Exter, 1990). Nearly 34 million Americans (or 13% of the population) were age 65 and older in 1995. The number will double by the year 2030 as the last of the baby-boom generation passes age 65 (Treas, 1995). This is producing what the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) has termed a "demographic revolution" (AARP, 1988, p. 1).

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The 50 and older segment of the population already has as much as half of the country's discretionary income and 77% of its assets (Assael, 1993). Although many elders have incomes that are lower than average, elders as a whole are doing well financially (Treas, 1995). The "woopies," or well-off, older people have created a vast market for businesses and are "the most powerful buying group in the U.S. economy" (Assael, 1992, p. 265; Longino, 1994). Even companies that sold primarily to the youth market in the past have noticed the trend and are beginning to target more of their advertising toward older consumers (Schlossberg, 1993; Watkins, 1994).

Background

The portrayal of 50 and older people in general audience advertising has traditionally not been positive (Goldman, 1993; Thomas & Wolfe, 1995). For example, although older characters were not missing from advertisements, they were underrepresented in comparison with their proportion in the population and their portrayal was often unfavorable—especially the portrayal of older women (e.g., Bramlett-Solomon & Wilson, 1989; Lexchin, 1990; Swayne & Greco, 1987; Ursic, Ursic, & Ursic, 1986; Wolfe, 1990; Zhou & Chen, 1992). When compared with younger characters, older characters were more likely to be cast in lower status occupations such as being blue collar workers and were in less important roles. They were also portrayed as having suffered a decline in physical activity level, needing health aids, and placed in scenes at home or in nonworking settings with little social interaction. Therefore, social critics and ethics researchers have long charged that general audience advertising emphasizes youth and devalues older individuals (e.g., Francher, 1973; Gantz, Gartenberg, & Rainbow, 1980; Peterson, 1992). Langmeyer's (1993, p. 88) recent research suggests that not much has changed on this front over the last decade or so—older characters as a whole continue to be "portrayed somewhat sparingly and in rather stereotypical and circumscribed characterization."

Advertising is a means of social communication (Belk & Pollay, 1985; Leiss, Kline, & Jhally, 1990) acting as a relatively unchecked tool of consumer socialization (O'Guinn, Lee, & Faber, 1986). Unfavorable images of older characters in advertising could affect the elderly's self-esteem and societal attitudes toward them (Swayne & Greco, 1987). They could also provide negative cues for the behavior of elders. Festervand and Lumpkin (1984) have found that elders have negative feelings about their unfavorable image in advertising and that some of them might boycott the advertiser's products as a result. Theories of successful aging suggest that communication

is at the core of any successful attempt to adapt to biological aging (Nussbaum, Thompson, & Robinson, 1989). Continuity theory posits that one's ability to adapt to aging successfully is dependent on their ability to maintain behaviors that have served them well before. Similarly, activity theory holds that to age successfully one must maintain "the activity patterns and values typical of middle age" (Atchley, 1980, p. 239). The social communication and advertising implications of these theories are that in order to create and maintain a positive role for elders to adapt successfully to later life, advertisers must avoid promoting unfavorable images of elders in advertising and must ensure that older characters are seen as intellectually capable, physically healthy, and socially active.

The Study

This article presents the results of a content analysis of the portrayal of characters 50 and older in advertisements in *Modern Maturity*, the flagship magazine of the AARP and the largest private organization in the United States.

AARP was founded in 1958 and currently has more than 32 million members age 50 and older. *Modern Maturity* is sent to all of its members. One of its major goals is "to improve the image of aging" (AARP, 1990). The magazine began publication in November 1958 and has been published six times a year since then. The size of its circulation alone makes it the number one publication in the 50 and older magazine market and it is, in fact, the largest paid-circulation magazine in the United States (Goldman, 1993; Teinowitz, 1991).

AARP claims that *Modern Maturity* has the "toughest advertising standards of any publication" and that this has caused it to "reject many ads that are offered [for publication]" because they contain "a negative statement of aging" (AARP, 1988, p. 1). In terms of the advertising message, according to AARPs advertising guidelines, "the analgesic ads we publish are those that suggest, 'Feel great with X.' We decline those that say, 'I feel terrible—give me an X' " (AARP, 1988, p. 1). In terms of products, *Modern Maturity's* policy is to exclude advertisements for many products of a medical or therapeutic nature and at a minimum highly constrains these presentations. "If we carried all the health-related remedies we could attract, our publications would come across as a depressing—and highly deceptive—statement about what being over 50 is like" (AARP, 1988, p. 3).

More recently, *Modern Maturity's* advertising standards director has stated that approximately 30% of submitted advertisements were rejected

because of their negative portrayal of people age 50 and older (Goldman, 1993). Outright exclusions include advertisements for tobacco products, prescription drugs, religious organizations, and self-defense weapons (AARP, 1991).

Initially, *Modern Maturity* had a policy of not accepting any outside advertising. However, by the late 1970s the demand by advertisers for access to the growing older segment of the population—and not incidentally to their higher per capita disposable income than that of the population in general—had grown so great that AARP changed this policy in 1979 and outside advertising began in 1980. An *Advertising Guidelines and Acceptance Policies* manual was first published in 1984. The manual has been revised regularly on an annual basis, and its 1991 edition has more than 80 pages covering areas from general policies on ageist advertising to message content (AARP, 1991). This has led to our interest in finding out whether *Modern Maturity*, as the most influential advocacy magazine for people age 50 and older in the United States, has carried out its claimed advertising policies of promoting a positive image of older people. Such policies could, at times, be unenforced for various reasons. For example, Ferguson, Kreshel, and Tinkham (1990) suggest that *Ms.* magazine's self appointment as the leading voice in the feminist movement seemed less than credible in the face of the advertisements it carried that frequently ran counter to stated policies. To examine the extent to which *Modern Maturity* has carried out its policy, two research questions were asked in the present study: (a) How were 50 and older characters portrayed? and (b) Has this portrayal changed over the years? If the portrayal of 50 and older characters in *Modern Maturity*'s advertising is in harmony with the spirit and letter of its advertising guidelines (according to the perspective of activity theory and continuity theory of successful aging discussed previously), we should find characters in the advertisements of *Modern Maturity* to be capable, healthy, and socially and physically active.

Methodology

Sample

Two issues of *Modern Maturity* were randomly selected for each year from 1959 (the first full year of publication) through 1991 from the AARP's National Gerontology Resource Center in Washington D.C. No regional editions were identified. From these issues, all half-page size or larger advertisements that contained human characters were retained. In these advertisements, 602 characters were judged to be analyzable because their

Table 1. Coding Categories

<i>Category</i>	<i>Main Descriptors</i>
Demographics	
Age group	50-64 years old versus 65 and older: direct mention; no mention but known; "look" age—face, hair, wrinkles; posture.
Gender	Male/female.
Race	White/non-White (Aboriginal, African American, Asian): direct mention; facial features; color of skin.
Images	
Occupation (nondomestic)	Higher status (top level manager, professional, famous entertainer, etc.) versus lower status (middle level white-collar occupation, clerical, construction worker, etc.): direct mention; task performed; tool used; and so on.
Role importance	Important versus unimportant: direct mention, strategic physical position in illustration (e.g., front vs. back, center vs. side); shot size relative to others; focal point of attention or not; product expert versus nonexpert; giving advice/help versus receiving advice/help.
Setting (place)	Business versus home: surrounding; background.
Physical activity level	Nonsedentary and "high" physical activity (stand, sports participants, etc.) versus sedentary (sit, read, watch TV, knit, etc.).
Social relationship	In group versus alone.
Health	Healthy versus unhealthy: appearance; receiving assistance; wearing hospital clothing.

image was clear. Four hundred and seven (67.6%) of the characters were judged as belonging to the 50 and older age group and were included in the resultant sample.

Coding

Nine coding categories were developed with reference to Zhou and Chen's (1992) study. They were refined and finalized after a pilot study. "Basic demographics" include age group, gender, and race. "Images" include occupation, role importance, setting or place, physical activity level, social relationship, and health. For every image theme, each character was categorized based on a basic "positive-negative" dichotomy. Table 1 lists the coding categories and their operational definitions. For each category, if a character was unable to be classified, the character was coded as "indeterminate" or

Table 2. Number of Product Appearances by Time Period

<i>Product Category</i>	<i>Period</i>				<i>Total (%)</i>
	<i>Internal Advertising Only</i> 1959-1979	<i>Preadvertising Guidelines</i> 1980-1983	<i>Early Advertising Guidelines</i> 1984-1987	<i>Recent Advertising Guidelines</i> 1988-1991	
Pain relievers and OTC medicines	—	7	7	2	16 (3.9)
Stereotypical old age/infirmary products ^a	—	13	8	8	29 (7.1)
Avoid aging products ^b	—	6	2	1	9 (2.2)
Age-related services ^c	52	42	95	57	246 (60.4)
Food	—	10	19	8	37 (9.1)
Clothing/fashion	—	7	15	6	28 (6.9)
Other	—	9	17	16	42 (10.3)
Total	52	94	163	98	407 (100)

a. This category includes three-wheeled scooters, laxatives, denture products, and page magnifiers.

b. This category includes products for the purposes of avoiding, disguising, slowing, or ameliorating the aging process (e.g., skin creams, makeup, hair coloring).

c. This category includes services such as life insurance or retirement financial planning, and travel services designed for older consumers.

“not applicable.” Two trained coders coded all the advertisements independently. Intercode agreements varied between 85% and 100% for different categories. Disagreements were resolved through discussion with the authors. The coding method was consistent with the method suggested in the literature (Kassarjian, 1977; Zhou & Chen, 1992).

Analysis

The data were divided into four time periods that include the (a) internal advertising only period (1959-1979), when only a very limited number of advertisements for AARP-offered services such as travel or membership recruitment were used in the magazine; (b) preadvertising guidelines period (1980-1983) (During this 4-year time period, external advertisements were accepted but the aforementioned comprehensive advertising guidelines and acceptance policies had not yet been published.); (c) early advertising guidelines period (1984-1987); and (d) recent advertising guidelines period (1988-1991). The last two periods (c and d) covered a 4-year time period. Frequencies of the product categories used in the advertisements by time period are listed in Table 2.

Table 3. Number (percentage) of Advertising Characters by Year, Age Group, Gender, and Race

Year	1959-1979	1980-1983	1984-1987	1988-1991	Total Number	(%)
Total number	52	94	163	98	407	(100.0)
Age group***						
50-64	15	60	76	42	193	(47.4)
65 and older	37	34	87	56	214	(52.6)
Gender						
50-64 age group*						
Male	3	29	27	25	84	(43.5)
Female	12	31	49	17	109	(56.5)
65 and older age group**						
Male	10	20	49	31	110	(51.4)
Female	27	14	38	25	104	(48.6)
Race						
50-64 age group						
White	15	60	72	39	186	(96.4)
Non-White	0	0	4	3	7	(3.6)
65 and older age group						
White	36	34	86	54	210	(98.1)
Non-White	1	0	1	2	4	(1.9)

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Results

Basic Demographics of the Characters

Age group. As shown in Table 3, 193 (47.4%) of the 407 characters were identified as belonging to the 50 through 64 age group and 214 (52.6%) as belonging to the 65 and older age group. With the exception of the preadvertising guidelines period (1980-1983), in every period there were more 65 and older age group characters than 50 through 64 age group characters ($\chi^2 = 18.2, p < .001$).

Gender. There were 194 (47.7%) male characters and 213 (52.3%) female characters. Females dominated the internal advertising only period (1959-1979) in both age groups, but over time the gender ratios became more even.

Race. Most of the characters were White. Whites accounted for 97.3% (396 out of 407) whereas non-Whites accounted for only 2.7% (11).

Images of the Characters

Occupation. Of the 70 characters whose occupation could be determined, for the 50 through 64 age group, the proportion of the characters portrayed as holding lower status occupations tended to decrease over the periods (see Table 4). Although there were no characters depicted as holding higher status occupations in the internal advertising only period (1959-1979), the proportion of the characters portrayed as holding higher status occupations tended to increase over the later periods ($\chi^2 = 20.3$, $p < 0.001$). The pattern was not found in the 65 and older age group.

Role importance. Throughout all periods, nearly all characters in both age groups were cast in important roles relative to the advertisement's theme. In a very small number of cases—about 4%—the characters were cast in unimportant roles.

Setting. During the internal advertising only period (1959-1979), whereas no setting for the characters in the 50 through 64 age group was ascertained, all the identified settings for the characters in the 65 and older age group were business settings. Starting in the preadvertising guidelines period (1980-1983), both groups were shown more often in a home setting than in a business setting and the frequency of the home environment for both groups tended to increase whereas the business setting decreased toward the last period studied—the recent advertising guidelines period (1988-1991).

Physical activity level. Beginning with the preadvertising guidelines period (1980-1983), approximately two thirds of the characters in the 50 through 64 age group were depicted in nonsedentary activities ($\chi^2 = 9.6$, $p < .05$). In contrast, in the 65 and older age group, the frequency of portrayal in nonsedentary activities decreased from 71.4% to 40.0% in the recent advertising guidelines period (1988-1991), whereas portrayal in sedentary activities increased from 28.6% to 60.0% ($\chi^2 = 9.2$, $p < .05$).

Table 4. Images of Advertising Characters

<i>Years</i>	<i>1959-1979</i>	<i>1980-1983</i>	<i>1984-1987</i>	<i>1988-1991</i>	<i>Total %</i>	<i>n</i>
Occupation						
50-64 age group**						
Higher status	0	54.5	33.3	91.7	46.5	20
Lower status	100.0	45.5	66.7	8.3	53.5	23
<i>n</i>	11	11	9	12	100.0	43
65 and older age group						
Higher status	16.7	100.0	66.7	60.0	48.1	13
Lower status	83.3	0	33.3	40.0	51.9	14
<i>n</i>	12	4	6	5	100.0	27
Role importance						
50-64 age group						
Important	100.0	90.0	97.3	97.6	95.3	183
Unimportant	0	10.0	2.7	2.4	4.7	9
<i>n</i>	15	60	75	42	100.0	192
65 and older age group						
Important	97.3	97.1	93.1	98.2	95.8	205
Unimportant	2.7	2.9	6.9	1.8	4.2	9
<i>n</i>	37	34	87	56	100.0	214
Setting						
50-64 age group						
Business	0	44.4	30.0	40.0	37.5	18
Home	0	55.6	70.0	60.0	62.5	30
<i>n</i>	0	18	20	10	100.0	48
65 and older age group**						
Business	100.0	36.4	52.1	23.8	48.3	43
Home	0	63.6	47.9	76.2	51.7	46
<i>n</i>	9	11	48	21	100.0	89
Activity						
50-64 age group*						
Nonsedentary	16.7	66.0	76.9	61.8	66.9	93
Sedentary	83.3	34.0	23.1	38.2	33.1	46
<i>n</i>	6	47	52	34	100.0	139
65 and older age group*						
Nonsedentary	43.3	71.4	58.2	40.0	52.9	99
Sedentary	56.7	28.6	41.8	60.0	47.1	88
<i>n</i>	30	28	79	50	100.0	187
Social relationship						
50-64 age group						
Group	26.7	51.7	60.0	45.2	51.6	99
Alone	73.3	48.3	40.0	54.8	48.4	93
<i>n</i>	15	60	75	42	100.0	192
65 and older age group						
Group	59.5	55.9	71.3	73.2	67.3	144
Alone	40.5	44.1	28.7	26.8	32.7	70
<i>n</i>	37	34	87	56	100.0	214

Table 4. (Continued)

Health						
50-64 age group						
Healthy	0	100.0	100.0	92.3	98.2	110
Unhealthy	0	0	0	7.7	1.8	2
<i>n</i>	0	36	50	26	100.0	112
65 and older age group						
Healthy	100.0	80.0	100.0	97.4	96.7	199
Unhealthy	0	20.0	0	2.6	3.3	4
<i>n</i>	1	15	68	39	100.0	123

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .001$.

Social relationship. For the characters in the 50 through 64 age group, starting in the preadvertising guidelines period (1980-1983), they were almost equally likely to be depicted alone as with others. However, the 65 and older age group characters were consistently shown more often in social or group settings than in single person settings in every period studied.

Health. Overwhelmingly, in 98.2% of the cases for the 50 through 64 age group and in 96.7% of the cases for the 65 and older age group, the characters were presented as healthy.

Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the results of this content analysis, the majority of characters in the advertisements of *Modern Maturity* were portrayed as capable, important, healthy, and physically and socially active. Over time, both gender and age group ratios became almost even with the proportion in the female and older age groups being slightly larger.

We found that the proportion of the characters in the 50 through 64 age group portrayed as holding higher status occupations tended to increase over time. We hypothesize that this may reflect the reality that there is an increasing opportunity for some elders due to a societal trend toward economic restructuring and the progressively higher proportion of white-collar jobs that accompanies this trend.

At the same time, we found that elders were seen increasingly at home rather than in business settings and that, over time, the 65 and older age group were increasingly depicted in sedentary activities. These findings do not support the activity and continuity theories which suggest that for successful

aging, communication to elders should continue to portray them in activities and behavioral patterns that have prevailed throughout their lives. We reason that, to a certain extent, these portrayals may reflect a shift of the American way of life in recent years. Many people in the 50 and older age group have opted for a "cocooning" life by turning their home into a nest "as the outside gets too tough and scary" (Popcorn, 1992). A closer look at the data reveals that the increasing depiction of the 65 and older age group in sedentary activities was partly due to the increasing appearance of travel services advertisements designed for elders which include sedentary scenes. Elders as a whole are financially well-off, as pointed out previously. They are thus increasingly a target in advertising promoting leisure-oriented activities.

On the negative side, we found that most characters in *Modern Maturity* advertisements were White. This pattern was, to a certain extent, tied to the audience the magazine attracted. In 1986 (the first year the information on *Modern Maturity's* readership was available from its advertising department), 95.7% of the readers were identified as "White," whereas at the end of this study, 94.0% of the readers were identified as "White." A basic advertising theory is that effective advertising aims its message at a well-defined market segment (Belch and Belch, 1995). This may provide some context for the extremely White depiction of the characters here, which mirrored *Modern Maturity's* readership. However, we believe that the lack of non-White characters points to an unrealistic reflection of the racial composition of the older American population, especially when we ponder the matter from the social communication perspective. Because most Americans are proud of their multicultural and multiracial society, this finding is ironic. If a goal of *Modern Maturity* is indeed "to improve the image of aging", and if this publication wishes to continue to be the most influential advocacy magazine for *all* older Americans, it must make a conscious effort to attract non-White readers as well as advertisements that use non-White characters. Appropriate guidelines and policies should be formulated for inclusion in the advertising guidelines manual of *Modern Maturity* and implemented.

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