The Portrayal of Older People’s Social Participation on German Prime-Time TV Advertisements

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Objectives. We investigated the portrayal of older people’s social participation on TV advertisements according to a set of theoretically meaningful indicators from communication science and gerontology.

Methods. We examined a representative sample of 656 prime-time advertisements broadcast for a period of 2 weeks in 2005 in Germany. Five percent of the advertisements featured at least one older character. Each of the characters in the subsample was rated according to role prominence, viewer–character distance, employment status, openness to experience, social interactions, and loneliness. This portrayal was compared with the portrayal of younger characters appearing in the same commercials and with the portrayal of younger characters in commercials without an older character according to the same indicators.

Results. 4.5% of the characters were rated 60 years or older. Older characters were disproportionately featured in major roles, depicted as employed and open to new experience. Furthermore, older characters were most often depicted within intergenerational and nonfamily contexts. Older characters were kept at a greater camera distance than younger characters in “young commercials.”

Discussion. Although rare, when older characters did appear, they were depicted as socially engaged. We compare this portrayal with real-world gerontological evidence and age stereotypes and discuss how the portrayal might affect viewers.

Key Words: Advertising—Images of aging—Intergenerational interaction—Old age stereotypes—Social participation.

Social participation has traditionally been a central topic in aging research, including, for example, studies on older people’s engagement in social activities (e.g., Bukov, Maas, & Lampert, 2002), their integration into the job market (e.g., Blossfeld, Buchholz, & Hofäcker, 2006), and intergenerational transfer (e.g., Kohli, 1999). In the present paper, we complement this “real-life” research by using a set of theoretically meaningful indicators to investigate the portrayal of older people’s social participation in an almost inescapable part of people’s media experiences: TV advertisements. By social participation, we refer to a person’s active engagement both in microsocial (e.g., interaction with family and friends) and macrosocial contexts (e.g., employment; cf. Mangen & Peterson, 1982). Throughout our investigation, we consider the reality of aging as represented by gerontological evidence, age stereotypes, and the interests of the advertisement industry to maximize profits.

Previous research has investigated the portrayal of older people in advertisements primarily in terms of personality traits, cognitive abilities, and physical functioning (e.g., T. Robinson, 1998; Roy & Harwood, 1997). In our study, we enrich and extend previous research to more fully explore how advertisements portray older adults’ social participation. We also compare the portrayal of older adults with that of younger adults to determine the distinctiveness of their portrayal. This important issue has been neglected by extant research, which has considered only older characters as the unit of analysis (cf. Harwood, 2007). Specifically, we compare older characters with their younger counterparts (appearing in the same commercials) as well as with younger characters in “young” commercials (i.e., commercials without any older characters).

Indicators of Social Participation: Communication Science

In communication science, the presence of a social group in mass media has been discussed as a quantitative indicator of that group’s level of objective social participation in society (Harwood & Roy, 2005). Accordingly, the frequency with which older people appear in TV advertisements is suggestive of the age group’s “vitality” and the extent to which society respects older people. Several studies have shown that, similar to other media genres, advertisements underrepresent older people relative to demographic figures across different cultures (J. D. Robinson, Skill, & Turner, 2004; Zhang, Harwood, Williams, Ylänne-McEwen, Wadleigh, et al., 2006). According to these studies, older adults constitute between 1% and 7% of advertisement characters. In comparison, people aged 60 years and older constitute circa
25% of the German population. Furthermore, on TV, “young–old” people and men outnumber the “old–old” and women (e.g., Kessler & Staudinger, 2006; T. Robinson & Anderson, 2006).

Of course, beyond frequency of appearance (i.e., a quantitative indicator of social participation), qualitative indicators more thoroughly describe portrayals of social participation. Role prominence in media depictions—whether the characters play major or rather minor roles—has been discussed in communication science as communicating the character’s position in society (Zhang, Harwood, Williams, Yläne-McEwen, & Thimm, 2006). In two U.S. studies, 32% and 38% of older characters played major roles (Roy & Harwood, 1997; Swayne & Greco, 1987).

Shot analysis can be used to describe how the camera frames the characters. From the viewer’s perspective, views of the character that simulate short distances between the viewer and the character (i.e., close shots) likewise simulate close relations and high levels of social engagement (Schwender, 2006). No studies to date have analyzed viewer–character distance specifically for older characters. TV has been discussed as avoiding physical markers of aging (e.g., Bosch, 1990), which are particularly salient in characters’ faces. This may contribute to an overrepresentation of older characters in more distanced shots, relative to younger characters.

Indicators of Social Participation: Gerontology

Several gerontological indicators of older people’s social participation can be applied to media portrayals. First, employment status represents a central indicator of older adults’ social participation. In Germany, the employment rate in 2007 was 3.5% for those aged more than 65 years (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2008). Previous research suggests that media exaggerates the proportion of older adults in professional roles. We recently found that 70% of older “continuous” characters in German prime-time TV series were portrayed as employed—a considerable exaggeration of real-world employment rates (Kessler, Rakoczy, & Staudinger, 2004). A study of U.S. prime-time commercials revealed that approximately 40% of male but less than 3% of female characters aged more than 65 years were depicted as employed (Stern & Mastro, 2004).

Many gerontological studies have also examined older adults’ social interactions. In reality, family members and age peers constitute the most important and frequent interaction partners for older adults (Frederickson & Carstensen, 1990; Lang & Fingerman, 2004; Riley, Foner, & Riley, 1999). Despite the common stereotype of the generative old person who cares and provides for members of the younger generation (e.g., “the perfect grandparent” stereotype; Hummert, 1990), intergenerational interactions, especially outside of the family and between nonadjacent generations, are rare (Kessler & Staudinger, 2006). Although the majority of people maintain satisfactory social ties throughout their lives, one third of older adults in Germany reported suffering from loneliness compared with one fifth of younger adults (Bundesamt, 1997). Previous research has indicated that TV advertisements mostly feature older characters interacting with other people rather than alone and most often alongside multiple age groups than with peers (Roy & Harwood, 1997; Swayne & Greco, 1987), suggesting that advertisements tend to downplay negative old age associations such as loneliness and exaggerate intergenerational bonds. Advertisers might elicit the “grandparent” stereotype to connect older viewers’ generative strivings with purchasing a product or service.

Finally, gerontopsychological studies have investigated openness to experience, a personality-related indicator of social participation reflecting an individual’s active pursuit of novel information about the world. In reality, openness to experience has been shown to decline after the age of 60 years (McCrae et al., 1999; Roberts, Walton, & Viechtbauer, 2006). Widely held stereotypes attribute openness to experience to younger age groups, whereas the antithesis, rigidity, is stereotypically attributed to older people (Heckhausen, Dixon, & Baltes, 1989; Levy, 1996). No studies have investigated how advertisements portray older people’s openness to experience, though it would seem a good marketing strategy for advertisers to foil the stereotype of a rigid older person with an open, curious, older person as a “role model” for older consumers or to connect a sense of “youthfulness” in old age with the consumption of a product or service.

Current Investigation

We integrated the indicators from both communication science and gerontology to generate a thorough description of older characters’ social participation. Specifically, we investigated older characters’ frequency of appearance, viewer–character distance, role prominence, employment status, social interactions, loneliness, and openness to experience. With regard to social interaction patterns, we extended previous research by more specifically investigating with whom older characters interacted in terms of the age (intergenerational or peer) and relation (family, nonfamily) of the interaction partner as well as the nature of the exchange (supportive, stressful, or neutral). Going beyond extant research, we compared the portrayal of older characters with the portrayal of their younger counterparts appearing in the same commercials. As younger characters in “old commercials” might be depicted differently from younger characters in “young commercials”, we also compared the portrayal of older characters with that of younger characters in advertisements without any older characters.

Considering that negative stereotypes of old age prevail in Western industrialized societies (Nelson, 2002), images of old age and aging may be considered depressing rather than entertaining by advertisers. We therefore expected to
replicate earlier findings that older characters are portrayed as a minority in terms of the frequency with which they appeared. In addition, we expected to replicate patterns uncovered for depictions of older peoples’ personality traits, cognitive abilities, and physical functioning (cf. Zhang, Harwood, Williams, Yläne-McEwen, Wadleigh, et al., 2006) such that depictions of older adults’ social participation would similarly contrast negative old age stereotypes (see also Roy & Harwood, 1997). In order to connect a positive feeling with a product or a service, we assumed that advertisers would present open, integrated, productive older characters whose social participation is even more positive than that of younger characters appearing in both old and young commercials. We tentatively expected that this would translate into exaggerations of older characters’ employment rates and openness to experience relative to real-world evidence and younger characters.

Moreover, we expected that older characters would play as many major roles and be as actively engaged in social networks as often as younger characters. We expected that advertisers would generally, though not exclusively, draw on positive associations of aging, such as the generative, supportive relationships between older adults and the youngest generation, and likewise generally avoid negative associations of aging, like loneliness. Despite our expectations for a positive engaged portrayal, we speculated that older characters would be more often portrayed in long shots than younger characters based on TV’s avoidance of physical markers of aging (e.g., Bosch, 1990), minimized by more distant shots.

METHODS

Sample Construction

The eight German networks with the largest market shares were chosen as the target channels, including two public networks (ARD and ZDF) and six private networks (RTL, SAT1, Pro7, RTL2, VOX, and Kabel 1). These networks reach 75% of all TV viewers. All prime-time (6 p.m.–11 p.m.) advertisements broadcast from August 29 through September 11, 2005, were videotaped. The recording included 6,633 clips, corresponding to 15.7% of the airtime. After excluding commercials broadcast multiple times as well as election and “social awareness” spots, 656 commercials promoting products and services remained. One of the authors then identified all individually identifiable characters in these 656 clips. Characters appearing in a crowd or otherwise not individually identifiable were excluded from analysis. Next, two female raters were instructed to evaluate the age group of the characters on the basis of their physical appearance. As a rater’s age may influence the estimation of another person’s age, we decided to employ same-aged raters (23 and 26 years old). The raters then judged whether each character was either younger than 60 years or 60 years or older (α = .89). This classification resulted in two groups of advertisements, one with older characters (old commercials) and one without (young commercials). All old commercials were included in the present study. From the much larger group of young commercials, 33 commercials were randomly selected to create an equivalently sized comparison subsample (young commercials comparison subsample).

Next, a digitized portrait of each character from the old commercials and the young commercials subsample was produced from the videotape. Based on the portraits, two independent female raters (24 and 27 years old) evaluated the gender and age group of the character. We based the age judgments on the portraits, rather than the filmed material, to avoid contextual confounds that may have led to younger or older age estimations. Specifically, the raters evaluated whether the character was young (0–35 years), middle-aged (36–59 years), young-old (60–75 years), or old-old (76+ years). As the main focus of our investigation was on the portrayal of older characters relative to younger characters, we collapsed the two younger age categories to form one group of younger characters (0–59 years) and the two older age categories to form a separate group of older characters (≥60 years). We refer to these collapsed groups as G_younger and G_old, respectively.

Measurement of Character-Level Variables

Three pairs of independent judges (N = 6, all female, age range 24–32 years) were trained to assess the characters for role prominence (Pair 1), employment status and loneliness (Pair 2), and viewer–character distance and openness to experience (Pair 3). Training was based on a manual and lasted approximately 3 hours per dimension. The judges practiced rating characters from advertisements not used in the study, compared their codings, and resolved discrepancies until interrater consistency was established.

Role prominence.—Two judges rated the role prominence of each character. To be coded as a major character, an actor had to be the most prominent individual in the advertisement as demonstrated by a speaking part, extended appearance, and/or a vital role in communicating the plot or scene. Characters not meeting these criteria were coded as “minor” if their appearance was limited and nonessential to the story and “equal role” if all characters contributed equally to the story.

Shot analysis.—Two judges decided whether the closest shot of the character was a close-up, showing face and shoulders; a medium shot, showing face to waist; or a long shot, showing face to feet.

Employment status.—Two judges evaluated the employment status of each character. A character was coded as
employed if he or she was shown in professional clothing or in vocational settings or if the job was explicitly mentioned. In addition, the judges assessed whether the job comprised high, moderate, or low levels of vocational expertise.

**Loneliness.**—Two judges coded the character lonely if the character was portrayed as suffering from the absence of social contacts and/or emotional closeness, regardless of whether the character was shown with or without other people. Because only one character was depicted as lonely, we did not compute a reliability score.

**Openness to experience.**—Judges coded each character according to high level of openness to experience, closed to new experience (rigid), or neither open nor rigid. Openness to experience was defined as the degree of preference for novelty and variety, intellectual curiosity, active imagination, aesthetic sensitivity, and attentiveness to inner feelings (McCrae & Costa, 1980). Expressions of openness were considered relative to age norms under current historical conditions. For example, when an older character was depicted using an MP3 player, he or she was rated as highly open to experience, whereas a young character in this case was coded as neither open nor rigid.

**Measurement of Social Interaction Variables**
A fourth pair of trained independent judges (both female, aged 27 and 32 years) assessed the social interaction variables. Because of data dependency, older characters’ interaction behavior could not be compared with that of their younger counterparts appearing in the same commercials.

To illustrate, when Person A and Person B interact, the behavior of Person A depends on the behavior of Person B. Consequently, we compared older characters’ social interactions with a random selection of younger characters from the young commercials subsample. We refer to this sample as the “young commercials social interaction subsample.”

In the first step, the two judges assessed whether each character appeared alone or in the context of a social interaction. An interaction was defined as a verbal and/or nonverbal exchange between two characters. All interaction behavior between two characters in an advertisement was coded as one interaction. (A pilot study revealed that about 90% of the advertisements depicted only one type of interaction between two characters. In the rare case that there were more complex interactions, the judges were instructed to code the interaction according to the most prominent type of interaction.) Each interaction was then coded according to whether the interaction included a family member or a nonfamily member and whether it was characterized by social support (received, given, reciprocal) or social stress (received, given, reciprocal) or was neutral (characterized by neither support nor stress). Definitions of social stress and social support were taken from Kessler and colleagues (2004). Based on the age ratings of the characters, the interactions were further classified as being either nonadjacent intergenerational, adjacent intergenerational, or between peers (e.g., $G_{\text{old}}$ and $G_{\text{ad}}$).

Table 1 displays the reliabilities for all measures.

**RESULTS**
Throughout the analysis, we compared the portrayal of the older characters ($G_{\text{old}}$) with two comparison groups. The first comparison group comprised the younger and middle-aged characters also appearing in the old commercials, referred to as $G_{\text{youngadj}}$(OC). The second comparison group consisted of the characters appearing in the young commercials subsample, which we refer to as $G_{\text{young}}$(YC). Importantly, the number of characters in the two comparison groups is nearly the same, justifying comparisons between these two groups of younger characters. Unless otherwise specified, an alpha level of .05 (two-sided) was used for all statistical tests.

**Frequency of Appearance**
Raters judged 49 of the 1,099 characters (4.5%) as aged 60 years or older. The 49 characters appeared in 33 of the 656 clips (5.0%). A total of 156 characters appeared in the 33 old commercials. Thus, approximately one third (31.4%) of the characters depicted in the old commercials were $G_{\text{old}}$. Significantly more $G_{\text{old}}$ were classified as young–old (83.7%) than as old–old (16.3%), $\chi^2(1, N = 49) = 22.2, p \leq 0.01$. Of the remaining characters in the old commercials, 76 (48.7%) were classified as belonging to the young age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Reliabilities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Character ratings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old commercials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>($N = 49$) characters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young commercials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>subsample ($N = 107$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;60 or ≥60 years</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
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<td>Age group</td>
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<td>Role prominence</td>
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<td>Shot analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Employment status</td>
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<td>Expertise of job</td>
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<td>Openness to experience</td>
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| Interaction ratings    |
| Old commercials        |
| ($N = 59$) interactions |
| Young commercials      |
| social interaction     |
| subsample ($N = 46$)   |
| Interactions           | $\alpha = 0.90$ |
| Family member          | $\kappa = 1.00$ |
| Interaction valence and direction |
| direction             | $\alpha = 0.81$ |

*Note:* Interactions were coded as stressful, supportive, or neutral (valence) and whether the stress and/or support was received, given, or reciprocal (direction).
category (0–35 years) and 31 (19.9%) were classified as belonging to the middle-aged category (36–59 years). This difference was significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 107) = 18.9, p \leq .001$. Overall, male characters (61.5%) appeared significantly more often than female characters (38.5%), $\chi^2(1, N = 156) = 8.3, p \leq .01$. Similarly, older male characters (61.2%) outnumbered older female characters (38.8%).

There were significantly fewer characters in the young commercials subsample than in the old commercials, $\chi^2(1, N = 261) = 10.0, p \leq .01$. As in the old commercials, the characters from the youngest age group appeared more often than middle-aged characters, $\chi^2(1, N = 156) = 59.4, p \leq .001$. In contrast to the old commercials, there was no significant difference between the number of female and male characters in the young commercials subsample, $\chi^2(1, N = 105) = 1.6, ns$.

Table 2 compares the age group and gender distribution of the characters in the old commercials and the young commercials subsample.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Young</td>
<td>27.6% (43)</td>
<td>21.2% (33)</td>
<td>44.8% (47)</td>
<td>42.9% (45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle-aged</td>
<td>15.4% (24)</td>
<td>4.5% (7)</td>
<td>11.4% (12)</td>
<td>1% (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young-old</td>
<td>15.4% (24)</td>
<td>10.9% (17)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old-old</td>
<td>3.2% (5)</td>
<td>1.9% (3)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>61.5% (96)</td>
<td>38.5% (60)</td>
<td>56.2% (59)</td>
<td>43.8% (46)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Absolute frequencies are presented in parentheses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Old commercials</td>
<td>100% (156)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young commercials subsample</td>
<td>100% (105)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Qualitative Portrayal of Social Participation

Role prominence.—There were no significant differences in terms of how often $G_{old}$ appeared in major, minor, and equal roles, $\chi^2(2, N = 49) = 1.14, ns$. However, the role prominence distributions of $G_{old}$ and $G_{younger}(OC)$ were significantly different, $\chi^2(2, N = 156) = 13.9, p \leq .001$. Specifically, relative to $G_{younger}(OC)$, $G_{old}$ played proportionately more major roles, $\chi^2(2, N = 156) = 12.1, p \leq .001$. Despite representing only one third (31.4%) of the characters, $G_{old}$ filled more than half (55.9%) of the major roles.

The relative frequencies with which $G_{old}$ and $G_{younger}(YC)$ played major, equal, or minor roles also significantly differed, $\chi^2(2, N = 154) = 8.3, p \leq .05$. Specifically, relative to $G_{younger}(YC)$, $G_{old}$ were disproportionately featured in major roles, $\chi^2(2, N = 154) = 6.9, p \leq .001$. Among $G_{old}$, 38.8% played major roles compared with 19% of $G_{younger}(YC)$.

Shot analysis.—Older characters’ closest shot was not equally distributed across the three categories of viewer–character distance, $\chi^2(2, N = 49) = 16.7, p \leq .001$. Specifically, in their closest shot, $G_{old}$ appeared most often in medium shots (57.1%), followed by close-ups (34.7%) and long shots (8.2%). This distribution did not significantly differ from that of $G_{younger}(OC)$, $\chi^2(1, N = 156) = 0.01, ns$. In other words, older characters did not significantly differ from their younger counterparts in terms of viewer–character distance.

However, the distance with which $G_{old}$ were shown differed significantly from that of $G_{younger}(YC)$, $\chi^2(2, N = 154) = 19.7, p \leq .001$. Specifically, the closest shots of $G_{younger}(YC)$ were mostly close-ups (68.6%), followed by medium shots (22.9%) and long shots (8.6%). Whereas the closest shot of $G_{old}$ was most often from medium distance, the closest shot of $G_{younger}(YC)$ was most often a close-up.

Employment status.—Twenty-four of the 156 characters (15.8%) in the old commercials were depicted as employed. There were no significant differences between how often characters in old commercials and characters in the young commercials subsample were depicted as employed, $\chi^2(1, N = 261) = 1.9, ns$. $G_{old}$ did not significantly differ from $G_{younger}(OC)$ or from $G_{younger}(YC)$ in the frequency with which they were portrayed as employed, $\chi^2(1, N = 156) = .66, ns$ and $\chi^2(1, N = 154) = .77, ns$, respectively. Six of the seven employed older characters were male. $G_{old}$ jobs were rated as requiring between moderate and high levels of expertise, $M = 2.6$. In comparison, $G_{younger}(OC)$ and $G_{younger}(YC)$ jobs were rated as requiring between low and moderate expertise, $M = 1.6$ and $M = 1.5$, respectively.

Openness to experience.—$G_{old}$ were depicted as highly open to experience (as opposed to neutral or rigid) significantly more often than either $G_{younger}(OC)$ or $G_{younger}(YC)$, $\chi^2(1, N = 156) = 15.7, p \leq .001$, and $\chi^2(1, N = 154) = 5.4, p \leq .05$, respectively. Specifically, 13 of the 59 (26.5%) $G_{old}$ were depicted as highly open to experience and only 2 (4.1%) were depicted as rigid and inflexible. In comparison, of the 107 $G_{younger}(OC)$, 4 were depicted as highly open to experience, and 1 as rigid. Eleven of the 105 $G_{younger}(YC)$ were highly open to experience and none of them was rigid and inflexible.

Loneliness.—Only one $G_{old}$ was depicted as lonely. Similarly, none of the $G_{younger}(YC)$ and $G_{younger}(OC)$ was depicted as lonely.

Table 3 compares the qualitative portrayal of older characters, younger characters in the old commercials, and younger characters in the young commercials subsample according to the selected indicators.

Social Interactions

Frequency.—Each of the old commercials included at least one social interaction. $G_{old}$ participated in 59 separate interactions. This did not significantly differ from the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Loneliness</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Old</td>
<td>59% (34)</td>
<td>46% (34)</td>
<td>1% (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young</td>
<td>42% (34)</td>
<td>32% (34)</td>
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Table 2. Age and Gender Distribution of Characters in Prime-Time Commercials

Table 3. Qualitative Portrayal of Social Participation

<table>
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number of interactions of characters in the young commercials social interaction subsample, which included 46 interactions, $\chi^2(1, N = 105) = 4.6$, ns. Only the minority of $G_{\text{old}}$ (26.5%) was shown without social interactions, $\chi^2(1, N = 49) = 10.8$, $p \leq .01$. This did not significantly differ from $G_{\text{younger (OC)}}$, $\chi^2(1, N = 156) = 0.2$, ns, or from $G_{\text{younger (YC)}}$, $\chi^2(1, N = 154) = 0.4$, ns.

**Interaction valence.**—$G_{\text{old}}$ participated significantly more often in supportive interactions than in stressful or neutral interactions, $\chi^2(2, N = 59) = 28.6$, $p \leq .001$. Specifically, 39 of the 59 interactions were supportive (66.1%), whereas 11 (18.6%) were neutral and 9 (15.3%) were stressful. This pattern was also true for the younger characters, who also participated significantly more often in supportive interactions than in stressful or neutral interactions, $\chi^2(2, N = 46) = 59.5$, $p \leq .0001$. Still, the distribution for $G_{\text{old}}$ differed from that of the younger characters, $\chi^2(2, N = 105) = 6.1$, $p \leq .05$. Specifically, the young commercials social interaction subsample depicted proportionally more supportive interactions than the old commercials, $\chi^2(1, N = 105) = 6.0$, $p \leq .02$.

Of the older characters’ supportive interactions, about the same number were reciprocally supportive ($N = 21$) as unidirectionally supportive ($N = 18$). Of the younger characters’ 40 supportive interactions, the large majority were reciprocally supportive ($N = 36$) and 4 were unidirectionally supportive. The distributions were significantly different, $\chi^2(1, N = 79) = 11.1$, $p \leq .001$. That is, relative to younger characters, $G_{\text{old}}$ were more frequently involved in unidirectionally supportive interactions.

**Relation to interaction partner.**—$G_{\text{old}}$ interacted significantly more often with nonfamily members than with family members, $\chi^2(1, N = 59) = 4.9$, $p \leq .05$. Only 21 out of the 59 interactions (35.6%) were with family members. In comparison, 26 of the 46 interactions (56.5%) in the young commercials social interaction subsample were with family members. This difference was significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 105) = 3.8$, $p \leq .05$. That is, relative to younger characters, older characters were depicted more frequently with nonfamily members.

**Age of partner.**—$G_{\text{old}}$ were involved in more intergenerational (79.7%) than peer (20.3%) interactions. This pattern was reversed for younger characters, who appeared in more peer (91.3%) than intergenerational (4%) interactions. There were significant differences between the frequencies with which $G_{\text{old}}$ interacted with young, middle-aged, or same-aged characters, $\chi^2(2, N = 59) = 20.6$, $p \leq .001$. Namely, most $G_{\text{old}}$ interactions were with young characters (83%). The remaining interactions were approximately equally shared with middle-aged interaction partners (22%) and peers (16.9%).

**Intergenerational interactions in the old commercials.**—Overall, the old commercials most frequently depicted nonadjacent intergenerational interactions between young characters and old characters (36 out of 59 interactions; 61%) as opposed to adjacent intergenerational or peer interactions. In comparison, the commercials in the young commercials social interactions subsample most frequently depicted peer interactions between young characters (39 out of 46; 84.8%).

In the intergenerational interactions in the old commercials (i.e., interactions between $G_{\text{old}}$ and young or middle-aged characters), there was a trend that $G_{\text{old}}$ provided support more often than their younger interaction partners ($G_{\text{younger (OC)}}$), $\chi^2(1, N = 18) = 1.9$, one-tailed $p = .09$. Furthermore, stress came from the $G_{\text{younger (OC)}}$ in seven of the nine stressful interactions. Two interactions were reciprocally stressful.

Table 4 compares the frequencies, valence, and partner characteristics of older and younger characters’ social interactions. Table 5 summarizes the valence of the social interactions in the old commercials by interaction partner.

**DISCUSSION**

We integrated social participation indicators from both communication science and gerontological research to investigate how German TV advertisements portray older adults’ social participation. Our approach allowed us to reveal how older characters are distinctively portrayed relative to younger characters, an important issue neglected by previous research, which considered only older characters (cf. Harwood, 2007).
The Portrayal of Older People’s Social Participation: An Ambivalent Picture

Overall, increasing recognition of the buying power of the gray market and the growing media publicity of the “graying society” in informative genres were not reflected in our sample of TV advertisements. Rather, we replicated the finding that older people are heavily underrepresented (Stern & Mastro, 2004; Zhang, Harwood, Williams, Ylänen-McEwen, Wadleigh, et al., 2006). As shown in earlier studies, the oldest–old were even more strongly underrepresented, possibly reflecting a double standard of aging such that attitudes toward the oldest–old are more negative than attitudes toward the young–old (e.g., Bell, 1970). Given that people of all ages continue to hold predominantly negative attitudes toward old age (Hummer, Garstka, Shaner, & Strahm, 1994; Levy, 2003), advertisers may avoid using characters (e.g., older people in general and especially the oldest–old) based on the assumption that older characters will be perceived as depressing rather than entertaining. Indeed, depictions of older people, particularly the oldest–old, may even remind viewers of their own aging, frailty, and death (cf. terror management theory; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991)—a negative affective experience that advertisers would not want connected with their product. Interestingly, the number of younger characters in the old commercials and in the young commercials subsample was nearly identical. In fact, older characters represented just one third of all of the characters in the old commercials. Older characters seem to be an “add-on” to the standard commercial character pool, rather than a substitute.

The underrepresentation of older adults might be a consequence of disproportionate marketing toward the “key demographics” of young and middle-aged adults (Harwood, 2007). Younger adults are assumed to have more disposable income and to make more first-time consumer decisions, many of which remain stable for years to come (cf. Harwood). Advertisers may assume that older adults are less easily attracted to a new product or service because of their assumed greater skepticism about new things in general and their decreased willingness to switch to a new product (Harwood). Thus, our results might reflect an overrepresentation of middle-aged and young adults rather than an underrepresentation of older adults per se.

Whereas the quantitative representation of older characters in TV advertisements might suggest that older adults constitute an invisible segment of the population, this picture changes when considering their role prominence. In contrast to earlier research (Roy & Harwood, 1997; Swayne & Greco, 1987), we found that older characters were disproportionately featured in major roles relative to younger characters. However, the shot analysis partially confirmed our expectation that older characters would be kept at a greater viewer–character distance than younger characters. Whereas older characters did not differ from their younger counterparts in terms of viewer–character distance, older characters were indeed kept at a greater distance than younger characters in young commercials. This analysis suggests that prime-time advertisements do indeed avoid depicting physical markers of aging (e.g., wrinkles).

Analysis of the gerontological indicators of social participation revealed a positive, socially engaged portrayal of older characters. Overall, characters of all ages were rarely depicted as employed. However, older characters were shown as employed as often as younger characters in both old and young commercials. We replicated earlier findings that media exaggerates the employment rates of older characters, particularly older men (e.g., Stern & Mastro, 2004). The finding that the employed older characters were almost exclusively male replicates previous findings and may be reflective of a double standard of aging for men and women in terms of competence (e.g., Canneto, Kaminski, & Felicio, 1995). Closer analysis of older characters’ jobs suggested that their jobs required higher levels of expertise than the jobs of younger characters in old commercials and younger characters in the subsample of young commercials. This
portrayal signals that the older characters possess vocational and life experience and are trustworthy sources of advice. Hence, commercials featuring older characters seem to make use of the stereotype of the wise and reliable old person (Heckhausen et al., 1989; Levy, 1996).

Rigidity and conservatism are central parts of people’s negative old age stereotypes (Heckhausen et al., 1989; Levy, 1996). In contrast to these stereotypes, older characters were disproportionately depicted as open to experience relative to younger characters. Advertisers seem to feature highly open older characters as a foil to negative stereotypes to catch viewers’ attention or, alternatively, to convince viewers that they can disassociate themselves from a negative trait (e.g., rigidity) by purchasing a certain product or service. Indeed, openness to experience was shown to be a particularly salient dimension for older characters, though we caution that younger characters faced a higher “threshold” to be judged as open under the current rating scheme because openness is considered more “normal” for this age group under current historical conditions.

Our analyses also demonstrated that older people were portrayed as socially integrated. Only about 25% of the older characters were shown without interaction partners, similar to younger characters in both old and young commercials. Only one older character was shown as lonely, in contrast to recent findings that around one third of older adults suffer from loneliness (Bundesamt, 1997). Interestingly, in terms of network composition, older characters were most often depicted interacting with nonfamily members, proportionately more so than younger characters interacted with nonfamily members. This too contrasts with reality, as family members constitute the most important and frequent interaction partners for older adults (Lang & Fingerman, 2004). Furthermore, older characters interacted most often with members of the youngest generation. This sharply contrasts with gerontological evidence: Real-life intergenerational relations, particularly between nonadjacent generations and particularly outside of the family, are rare (Hans-Seidel-Stiftung, 2002; Riley et al., 1999).

Older characters’ interactions were characterized predominantly by social support, in line with “real-world” research showing that older people generally report having effective, supportive relations (Lang & Fingerman, 2004; Wagner, Schütze, & Lang, 1996). The predominance of supportive interactions was not exclusively limited to the portrayal of older characters. However, the analysis revealed that relative to younger characters’ supportive interactions, older characters’ supportive interactions were uniquely characterized by unidirectional support and the tendency in intergenerational interactions for older characters to provide more support than they received. This suggests that advertisers seem to make use of the positive stereotype of the generative and caring old person. Albeit to a much smaller extent, advertisers also seem to sketch the opposite powerless image of the elderly: In the relatively rare stressful interactions, older adults were lopsidedly burdened with stress by their younger interaction partners.

In sum, the findings suggest an ambivalent portrayal of older people’s social participation. On the one hand, the underrepresentation communicates the idea that older people are an unimportant minority group that does not contribute much to society. On the other hand, when older characters did appear, their portrayal was generally that of a vital, productive, and well-integrated social group. Even so, advertisers seem to avoid making age too salient by diffusing older characters with a larger pool of mostly younger characters and by maintaining a greater camera distance relative to younger characters in young commercials. In contrast to reality, older characters were most often depicted within intergenerational and nonfamily contexts.

How Might These Depictions Affect Viewers?

Neither societal structures nor individuals are well prepared to deal with the increased longevity and the changed age structure of the population (Riley et al., 1999). Individuals are looking for role models to help them to plan for and structure their extended lives. For better or worse, media characters may serve this function. Older viewers may identify with the portrayal of older advertisement characters as productive, curious, and involved in intergenerational interactions, as these characteristics tap into older people’s desire for contributing to the society and their strong generative strivings (Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1986; Midlarsky & Kahana, 1994). Thus, the positive portrayal of older characters may raise older people’s awareness of their opportunities and activate their potentials. Such a modeling effect hinges on whether an older viewer considers a character self-relevant and his or her traits and contexts attainable (cf. Kessler & Staudinger, 2006). If an older person considers himself or herself a member of the opposite category (i.e., a lonely, unproductive, rigid person), any potential modeling effect will be seriously compromised or will not take place at all (e.g., Schubert & Häfner, 2003).

The positive portrayal of older characters’ social participation may also contribute to younger viewers’ expectations for their own old age (see also Kessler & Staudinger, 2006). On the one hand, positive images may contribute to more positive expectations for one’s own aging, which may in turn lead to more positive outcomes (e.g., increased longevity; Levy, Slade, Kunkel, & Kasl, 2002). In contrast, the positive portrayal of older adults connected with a sales pitch might have the dangerous consequence of convincing younger viewers that buying a product will delay or even stop the aging process. Although social isolation need not be an inevitable part of aging, the overly positive portrayal of older adults’ social participation may ultimately leave people unprepared (psychologically, financially, and otherwise) to deal with the inherent losses that accompany aging. Furthermore, the exaggerated positive portrayal of older
people may lead younger people to react more negatively to real-life older people whose social participation is not as positive as the media image. In particular, younger viewers may attribute deviations from the media ideal as due to inadequacies of the older individual rather than critically consider how the real-life contexts of aging differ from the idealized world of TV advertisements.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The generalizability of our findings may be limited, as our sample of German commercials may represent particularly German traditions. Further research is needed to investigate cultural differences in the media representations of older people.

Future studies could use our paradigm to systematically compare how other forms of TV media (e.g., news, cartoons) depict older adults’ social participation. Such an analysis would be helpful given the varying target audiences and goals (e.g., entertainment, marketing) of different forms of media. In addition, how media portrayals of age potentially affect psychological and physical outcomes requires empirical testing. In addition to laboratory research, longitudinal studies are needed in order to investigate both short- and long-term effects of exposure to TV images of older people.

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