Consumer Response to the Portrayal of Older People in TV Advertising: Empirical Evidence From Japan

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Despite the growing importance of the 50+ age group in the population, older consumers are still under-researched and often not included in a range of marketing and advertising practices. This empirical study is the first one to analyze the response of Japanese consumers to the portrayal of older people in TV advertising. We find that respondents perceive the portrayal of older people in TV advertisements as stereotypical/inaccurate and partly negative, albeit not necessarily as insulting, and that they are willing to boycott products and/or companies portraying older people negatively in advertising.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

CONCEPTUALIZATION
This paper aims to contribute to the state-of-the-field of research on older consumers and advertising in general and the Japanese older consumer in particular. It focuses on consumer response to the portrayal of older people in advertising (TV commercials), based on a large sample survey conducted in Japan.

Television is an important agent of socialization research shows that advertising teaches people about social roles and values. Empirical evidence indicates that aging and exposure to mass media advertising may affect several aspects of the consumer behavior of older people including the rejection of negative or non-desirable portrayal of older people in advertising. Besides, despite the fact that older consumers mostly reject the notion that they are influenced by television advertising, other evidence suggests that advertising in the media, and television especially, can play a part in shaping older consumers’ product preferences. Against this backdrop, it is obvious that studying the portrayal of older people in advertising as well as the consumer response to this portrayal are of utter importance to marketing researchers and practitioners alike.

METHOD
We contracted a Japanese professional marketing research company experienced in academic research to carry out an online survey using the company’s regular consumer panel. Members of the panel were quota sampled based on age and gender in accordance with their actual distribution in the Japanese population through a two-stage sampling process. Respondents came from all 47 prefectures across Japan and were aged between 20 and 79.

As this paper deals with the response of older consumers to their portrayal in TV commercials, we only included data from respondents aged 50 and older (N=911) and then split them among two age groups: 50-64 (N=567) and 65plus (N=344).

The attitudes of the respondents toward the portrayal of older people in TV commercials were measured using a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). A total of 15 statements dealing with the portrayal of older people in advertising were adapted from previous research and based on a principal component analysis summarized scales were created for each component consisting of the individual items. 1) Perceived negative portrayal scale with 6 items, the perceived stereotypical/inaccurate portrayal scale with 5 items and 3), and the purchase intention scale.

MAJOR FINDINGS
Our results indicate that our respondents perceived the portrayal of older people in TV commercials as stereotypical/inaccurate, but not necessarily as negative. The strength of this perception was positively correlated with age, as was hypothesized. It is obvious that older consumers in Japan are critical of the portrayal of older people in TV commercials, perceiving it to be at least stereotypical and inaccurate. While the perception of the portrayal is not necessarily negative, it is not positive either. However, overall, our findings seem to be in line with previous research.

Our results further show that older consumers generally have the intention not to purchase a product if the portrayal of older people in the advertisement for this product is perceived as negative, a finding that confirms results from previous research. However, our hypothesis of a correlation between the age of the older consumers and the intention not to purchase was not supported by the data, lending support to the assumption that this issue is of equal importance to the 50-64-year-olds and their older counterparts. This seemed to be the case regardless of gender, but educational level apparently influenced only the older 65plus cohort in their intentions to boycott products whose advertisements portray older people negatively.

Finally, we found a positive correlation between a negative attitude toward the portrayal of older people in advertisements and the intention not to purchase a product if the portrayal of older people in the advertisement for this product is perceived as negative. This correlation did not show any significant differences when analyzed separately for the 50-64 years age group and the 65plus age group. This probably means that regardless of the older age cohort people belong to, they are more likely to boycott a product because its advertisements stereotypes older people or even portrays them negatively, if their attitude toward the portrayal of older people in advertising is already negative. This phenomenon seems to hold also true across differences in gender and educational levels.

The results from a regression analysis found only the perceived stereotypical/inaccurate portrayal, but not the perceived negative portrayal to significantly predict the intention not to purchase. One explanation for this might be the high number of respondents who did not clearly voice their opinion on the perceived negative portrayal by opting for the (neutral) midpoint. However, the need for further research to understand the differences and/or the relationship between perceived stereotypical/inaccurate portrayal and perceived negative portrayal is warranted. The finding that once more, educational level only played a significant role for the 65plus age group could be a mixture of the fact that more educated people might be more critical against advertising in general as well as the fact that the 65+ age group identifies with the represented images and so feels closer to it than the 50-64 age group.

We found age effects when running the regression on the full sample including people younger than age 50. Finally, in line with consumer socialization and cultivation theory, we had also checked with TV consumption had an impact on the intent not to purchase, but in the regression analysis this turned out to be not significant. Further research along these lines is warranted.

There are two main conclusions from our research: 1) Older consumers perceive the portrayal of older people in

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Japanese TV advertisements as stereotypical/inaccurate and partly negative even though not necessarily as insulting. 2) Older Japanese consumers have the intention not to purchase a product if its advertising is perceived as portraying older people negatively, i.e. they are willing to boycott these products and/or even the company (and its other products). Both of these observations can be seen as outcomes of a consumer socialization process through watching TV and the advertisements therein.