



New Media, New Commodification, New Consumption for Older People

Karine Berthelot-Guiet^(✉)

CELSA Sorbonne Université, Paris, France
karine.berthelot-guiet@sorbonne-universite.fr

Abstract. This paper intends to explore how the commodification of items linked to assisted living for older people educate the rest of the population to aging issues, especially when people are staying at home. We will work on the popularization capacity of advertising and commercial discourses in this respect. Classical ads, advertorials, common mass consumption promotional leaflets and catalogs, along with the uses of new media and online shopping enable the massification of a consuming class of elderly people. Advertising acts as information-education for the general audience, preparing younger senior to accept more easily assisted-living goods and even encouraging them to change their habits in advance. This is particularly obvious in marketing and off and online media productions that use three main communication strategy to reach baby boomers: 1/address to the main population in order to reach baby boomers senior working sometimes on taboo facts linked to aging, 2/work on offer and messages addressing a double target (young senior and their parents) or 3/changing the representations of old people in communications by promoting a new stereotypy of “longer young seniors” or “silver generation”.

Keywords: Advertising · Baby boomers · Elderly · Consumption · New media

1 Elderly, New Frontiers for New Media and Advertising

Aging as a New Consumption Eldorado

In countries with growing aging population, Elderly people have become a huge political, social and economical stake. On a demographic point of view, the whole population is ageing and the so familiar pyramid shape of population demography will evolve towards a cylinder shape around 2050. This is a major change in all fields since lesser young people will have to provide economical help for elders, and this could be a problem. At the same time, especially in European countries and USA, a great part of social, economical, political power will be on the side of senior people who appear as groups that need to be understood since they are a kind of promise [1–3]. In some of these countries, for the first time, two generations in a same family reach together the limit of senior-age, being both part of the older part of the population, the senior «kids» being 60 to 70 or plus and their senior parents being 80 to 90 and more. The younger ones being most of the time involved in taking care of the oldest. It appears that the challenge for the system of consumption, including marketing, media and advertising,

is to understand fully these new populations of consumers as being plural, with different ways regarding some new needs linked to aging, in terms of food, way of life, media consumption or home adaptation.

These different ages of life are still often categorized as one, as a whole, especially when it comes to new ways of consumption, new media and IT products consumption. It is now the time to distinguish the «Older» senior population from the younger one. Especially since the newcomers in this class of age are experienced users of classical and new media as much as IT devices and will go on like this, inventing on the go new uses and new or adapted forms of sociability, mixing traditional and online media [2, 4, 5]. Uses regarding consumption, advertising and media are very different between the different generation of senior and each of them has to deal with specific needs of consumption regarding health, care, grandparenthood, leisure and everyday life, including the question of assisted living.

In this respect, adapted and/or assisted living is a main consumption challenge that touches all generations of Elderly, the younger ones having to manage their parents into this step and they themselves, as very well trained, experienced consumers, from the baby boomers generation, start to find their own way to consume through aging, as the «best in class» in consumption they always have been. We will try to analyze these assumptions of what marketing professionals could call different senior targets in brand and media discourses through a socio-semio-communicative approach that enables to analyze how representations circulate across society through different media and commercials.

Rise of New Classes of Consumers: *Silver* more than *Older*

As it is now well known, marketing, media and advertising people work on groups of people eligible as consumers, that is to say people having the purchasing power and the will to purchase [2, 4, 6]. Until not so long ago, senior citizens, especially retired people were considered as poorly purchasing people, stuck to habits, at least suspicious towards innovation, especially IT ones, even unable to adapt to new technologies, new products and rejecting them. In this respect, as we labeled it, «once Elderly were no target at all» [4]. Till less than fifteen years ago, older people were thought as too stuck to old ways and habits and difficult to convince because of a great suspicion towards advertising. Since then, this point of view started to change in society in general and in the mind of marketing professionals [4, 7, 8]. Being more and more numerous, having a longer life expectancy, working later and having bigger pensions, Elderly started to turn into an interesting «new frontier» for products like banking products, life and health care insurances or pre-arranged funerals, then leisure products came into the scope (travel etc.) and finally everyday and IT products [5, 7, 9–12].

The context has changed during the last decade since it has become obvious that more and more people reach the age of being called *senior* and stays in this category for decades. Furthermore, the *baby boomers* have massively joined the group. This category of people is well known for their great ability in all consumption fields since their great number and their incomes have made of them the dream target for sales since they were young. In fact, the idea of teenagers as a marketing target emerged with this generation [13]. France is now the place where a new configuration is more and more numerous:

parents and children being together retired with a two-step system of consumption. French marketing people even created the expression of *silver economy* (in English) to refer to this supposed treasure [14]. The American case is partly different since senior people are working longer and staying longer in regular consumption with different needs regarding the physical problems linked to aging [3, 15].

Because nowadays senior marketing target (60–79) is constituted of people and consumers very different from the previous senior, their parents, which are still alive and constitute the Elderly marketing target (80–...). This two ages of life are, on a consuming point of view very different, they don't need the same things, they don't have the same income and the youngest one tend to take care of the oldest and have to deal with their parents who are reluctant towards assisted living expenses. Nevertheless, assisted living products and services tend to become an everyday commodity and a mass consumption issue.

The Senior and Elderly marketing target are seen as a «new frontier» because of the economical weight they represent. We intend here to question and analyze in what respect media and advertising discourses can drive the acculturation of baby boomers and elderly to the buying and use of assisted living products and services. But first of all, speaking about marketing and target requires a theoretical and methodological clarification regarding our specific point of view in research linked to communication sciences which are different from business and management sciences as well from psychology or sociology. Using the next-presented method, we will approach the following research questioning trying to have a first exploratory approach on how marketing and advertising people try to address, on an off-line, to baby boomers, taking into account their very complex situation in between generations, feeling not or not so old and dealing with their parents great age.

2 Communication Sciences: Point of View and Methods

2.1 Media and Communication Studies

The scientific point of view here will be framed by the specificity of French Information and Communication Sciences contemporary approaches [16, 17]. Especially the part of French communication sciences which are dedicated to the description and analysis of social, media and market discourses and how they circulate among different social and media spaces building their public exposure. Brand discourses are considered as social discourses assuming market mediation. We are not in a psychological or sociological point of view, we won't take in charge what people think or say and we won't be able to work on processes of choice. Our approach will concentrate on public discourses, through media or professional communications: corporate communication, advertising, journalistic discourse and, more widely media communication. These communication productions provide a specific point of observation and can give a way to reach practices.

In this frame, methodology can be considered on an epistemological point of view. This communication sciences approach takes in charge what people publicly say they do or think, especially advertising professionals and what is present in fact in media productions. This implies to work on openly commented uses in order to reach practices

and, then, it enables to go towards both uses and representations that accompany or guide them. It also gives access to creative appropriation users may develop. This perspective is not on the reception side since it is not media uses studies, but it is however on the side of the receiver. The point is to be in a socio-semiotic point of view, looking for the negotiation in interpretation and creative appropriation.

A Semiotic-Based Method: Socio-Semio-Communicational Analysis [18, 19]

Another important point is the idea of creative methodology in research. Each research needs the search and find of the proper set of qualitative methods, that is to say not based on statistics or not able to be presented with quantitative results, in order to question it, theoretically, in a proper way. Using already existing set methods is not enough, and most of the time it is necessary to conduct a theoretical analysis before choosing the proper set and architecture of mingled methods.

A last we think that *micro* scale approaches are necessary and very useful especially when one want, in the end, to reach *macro* analysis. The accumulation of small scale, very detailed, analysis on small elements, going towards, in a second step big corpuses of small elements, enables to reach precious and unexpected results which would not have been attained with a direct *macro* analysis. This methodological point of view is based on the idea that the smaller are your research objects, the bigger and wider can be the conclusions.

In view of the foregoing, our theoretical position regarding methodology is one of a socio-semio-communicational approach. Working on contemporary brand discourses and both formal and strategic transformations at work, the need for an adaptable methodology that will respect the complexity of research objects is obvious. The method needs to cope with the on going and never ending metamorphosis of brand discourses, advertising, and it has to enable the analysis of forms, given professional aims and discourses, and social discourses. Regarding brand discourses, the method starts from the point that these discourses are semiotic forms and communication *tive/apparatus* [20]. In this respect, they aim to recommend some uses.

In order to be able to fully analyze these discourses, it is necessary to provide a global and specific context understanding based on different aspects: technical and material conditions of production, socio-economic logics at work dealing with economics, sociology of organizations, variety of professional players (advertising, communications, marketing, media professionals and State regulation and consumer groups). From this, it is possible to build an analytical method that is the result of a semiotic approach of discourses, forms, formats and contents using methods or part of methods coming from discourse analysis, semiotics, economy, sociology, anthropology and regarding the organization of companies, agencies and business as well as culture in the wider sense. The method is a socio-semio-communicational point of view, looking for negotiation and interpretation of messages.

Regarding new media, new commodification and elderly people we will concentrate mainly on French media and advertising discourses. We will use content analysis mixing socio-semiotic analysis, visual semiotics, semio-linguistic analysis and discourse analysis on three kind of elements: gathered elements from French and international brands being specifically dedicated to older population, media and new media discourses

dealing with the same brands or themes in a socio-semio-communicational approach to brand discourses.

In order to analyze fully these productions, we need a both comprehensive and specific context understanding the specificities of the market of *Elderly*, globally and internationally and, more specifically, about the French market and society regarding older people. In this respect, one has to know that the French society is specific regarding retirement and pensioning, since people usually stop working between 60 and 65 years old with a universal and «pay as you go» pension system that enable them, most of the time, to have a stable situation and a good income on a monthly basis.

3 Aging Turning Commonplace Through Commodification and Its Discourses

Educating Everybody To Sell To Senior

As already seen, the baby boomers constitute the first generation that massively reaches the qualification of *senior*, being at the same time involved in grandparenthood and in caregiving for their own parents reaching advanced age with very specific health and life care needs. In this respect, baby boomers can be seen, in a marketing point of view, as a double target: they are consumers who loves traveling, leisure activities alone or with grand-kids and, at the same time, they are the one helping their parents in a new consuming path, the one of assisted living in order to stay as long as possible at home.

As a matter of fact, the older generation is entering the time of life when assisted living is involved on different scales: from staying at home with adaptations to nursing homes with or without residential care. The older ones are reluctant to change their way of life before being obliged to, mostly because of health and security issues. They prefer to stick to their usual ways because buying specific home appliances linked to assisted living is a proof of disability and one of their main argument could be condensed into «as long as I can do it... ». In this respect, even if they are, in fact, potential consumers for a full range of specific products, they are not so easy to address directly. That is why brand communications, advertising, advertorials, and so on, will mostly try to reach their children since they are the ones being able to make them buy specific products and appliances. But the problem is that some of the baby boomers already have body changes due to aging and sometimes, on another scale, could need some of these products or services. Brand discourses face a kind of a dilemma: they need to speak about aging and adapted products to people that will be repelled if they feel too much involved for themselves too.

The problem can be circumvented by presenting in media the products related to aging and/or assisted living as mass consumption products, regarding a wide range of people of different generations, completely standardized in order to normalize their consumption and open new markets. In this respect brand managers use the educational capacity of advertising [21, 22] in traditional and new media. Education can be thought as a paradoxical effect of brands and advertising, but it is one of their long-standing missions that began at the end of the nineteenth century when brands of soap or tooth-paste started to educate people to body and dental hygiene in order to sell their products

better. In this respect, the fact that an object or service becomes a good, its *commodification*, acts as a sign of its normalization since there is no need to go in a specialized or dedicated to professionals store. When a supermarket chain like French *Intermarché* starts to exhibit in its weekly promotion advertising catalogues, delivered in every mail-boxes, assisted living products in between shampoo, baby food and shoes, these small products linked to assisted living mixes with promotions on food, kid products and adult clothes. It gives to the main population the information that these products can be bought at any time, by everyone, in a well-known and familiar neighborhood store and, at the same time, it provides the information that this kind of products are now common, part of everyday life. And they go further, implying that it is normal to need as to buy these goods along with the groceries and, at the same time, that it is strange not to buy them if you need them (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Intermarché hypermarket advertising catalog

The presence, almost on a daily basis of this kind of products in mass consumption communications, is a first step towards the education of the whole population and it can help older people to accept and eventually buy themselves or with the advise and help of their senior children, these goods. But the commodification and the massification have to act deeper and be more present in everyday advertising and media in order to really reach and educate down to the baby boomers, being themselves *senior* who are not really thinking of themselves as old people especially since they are caregivers for their elders. New ways of communicating relying on this generation great knowledge of consumption have to be found using both traditional and new media.

Advertising is once again used as a user's manual for life. It brings into full light former taboo topics related to aging an one can see on TV, computers and tablets, especially at mass viewing hours and largely general public, news or women magazines. This is the case for health issues like cholesterol, diabetes etc. and their numerous everyday products such as special Omega-3 enriched margarines. It also goes toward more delicate subjects such as bladder control problems for both women and men. This is not the kind of topic people usually talk about, even with their own family. Since a significant number of senior of all ages are concerned by the problem, advertising tackles this issue directly by generalizing the point, speaking very directly about it and extending it to very young senior women and men. At the same time, brands use advertorials in magazines on and off-line in order to explain the phenomena and build a common knowledge about it, as French brand *Tena* and international brand *Always* do. These ads are targeting more «young» senior than their parents.

They do two things at a time, saying that age issues services and products are mass products, they will be consumers as ever and not «turning old» and the offer will be both sanitary safe and aesthetically acceptable (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Tena and Always print advertisings

Aging in Consumption as Aging in Beauty: Stereotypes and Taboos

This opens a new field of expectation for marketing people who develop a single new target of *senior baby boomers* and specific products are regularly launched such as magazines, radios, TV broadcasts and programs, websites, specific food and so on. These new *seniors* appear in more and more commercials for cars, insurance, banking, and rather expensive goods. We can say that brands and advertising are using a stereotype to change a stereotype for a new one. Advertising makes the work of stereotypy,

choosing carefully nice looking not so old people, very dynamic, beautifully tanned, hair magnificent gray or white, doing easily physically and intellectual demanding activities [4, 8, 18, 19]. The new generation of senior appear as a most acceptable socio-marketing built artifact using a stereotype to replace the previous one of old people as turned towards past. This new representation spread by commercials depicting people looking forward future with confidence and buying power. Being senior is no more about aging but about staying young. Baby boomers appear to stay «younger later» and most of all they still have money to spend after retirement (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Young senior stereotype in mass advertising

Brand managers and advertisers begin to be well aware about how baby boomers become old and most of all how they dealt, all their lifelong, with IT change, from radio to TV, from tape-recorder and CD's to streaming, from video-recorder to DVD and blue-ray players and then router boxes. At work, they started everyday use of computers and web services and keep on using once retired, coping with new devices as often as necessary. They commonly use travel applications to buy plane tickets and hotel reservations. The newcomers in the senior class of age are totally users of IT devices and will go on like this for a while, inventing new uses and new sociabilities.

It is a challenge to be able to keep these very well trained, experienced consumers that do not stick to international brands as oldest people do. And the main issue will be to provide safety, comfort and aesthetics at the same time and show it in advertising on and offline.

As a matter of fact, it appears that baby boomers start to plan assisted living devices before needing them, using the experience built while convincing and helping their parents. When older senior people change, *in extremis*, their old bath tube for a plastic built in a day shower when they are no longer able to step over the side of the bath when

entering or leaving it, the younger ones plan to change their entire bathroom to something more adapted but still stylish. Some brands are playing on these two sides like the French store specialized in home decoration *Leroy Merlin*. On their website one can find a two step proposition with different offers regarding aging and home adaptation. The first one is for very old people needing instant change in their bathroom because of a physical degraded condition; it's built in a day shower with practical issue and no aesthetical concern. The second one is presented as a guide to go towards aging beautifully and harmoniously in a redesigned bathroom, adapted with style and value to future issues linked to great age (Fig. 4).

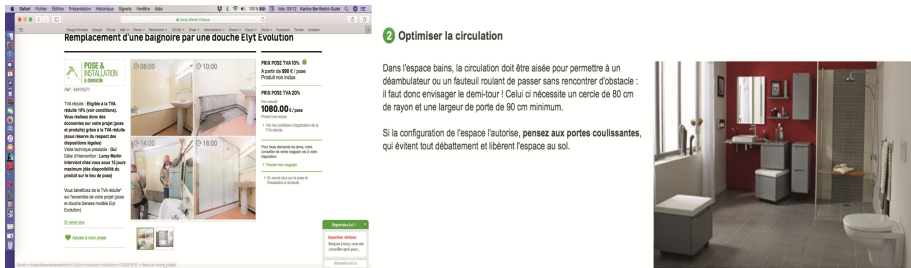


Fig. 4. Leroy Merlin Website about adapted bathtub and bathroom (01.02.2018)

Other options can be analyzed in the press, off and online, dedicated in France to *senior* persons. The two main publications are *Pleine Vie* (meaning *living fully*) and *Notre Temps* (meaning *nowadays*). *Pleine Vie* gives a great place to consumption as a main topic, especially on its website where *consumption and finance* is section in itself. That implies that aging with fulfillment is linked to consumption and that advices are given about the good or best way to consume. *Notre temps* has the same point about consumption and goes further on its website since the third element, presented as an information, is an advertorial dedicated to a conference about *silver economy* obviously training senior people to think about themselves as consumer, and more, as a specific kind of consumer, designated with the gratifying word *silver*. This is a three months marketing operation delivering three videos featuring the same «self-invested» expert who is CEO of a French company *Indépendance Royale*, specialized in home adjustments for elder people like walk-in showers, stair lifts, specialized beds etc. These three conferences are dedicated to French demography, International demography, Digital and Senior and, as they are advertising at core, we can say that they prepare good consumers feeding them with facts and statistics leading to the idea that baby boomers generation is *THE* senior consumer generation not in the idea of aging, but of being smart consumers. Some other marketing discourses speak about a *new generation of senior*.

The point now is to keep in touch with this generation through their uses of new media.

4 Conclusion and Limitations

As a conclusion after this exploratory research regarding how marketing and advertising people try to address, on an off-line, to baby boomers, taking into account their very complex situation in between generations, feeling not or not so old and dealing with their parents great age, we have discovered three main communications strategy to reach baby boomers: 1/address to the main population in order to reach baby boomers senior working sometimes on taboo facts linked to aging, 2/work on offer and messages addressing a double target (young senior and their parents) or 3/changing the representations of old people in communications by promoting a new stereotype of “longer young seniors” or “silver generation”. These is in fact a first approach and we need now to conduct specific and extended research on the three of them in order to provide a global reflexive approach on communications toward Elderly but also in order to understand how the rise of this new class of consumers is changing the whole system of advertising and media discourses putting former taboo themes in full light and how on and off-line discourses play their parts. There is a research to conduct on the circulations among different discursive spaces of the new stereotypes of aging to do, taking into account how economic, sometimes state driven topics or denominations like “silver économie” in France has travelled along different media spheres and ends perfectly naturalized, as presented by Roland Barthes [XZ], that is to say given as perfectly normal while hiding the ideology at work. In other words, the full extent of this research will enable starting with commercial discourses to deal with the ideologies at work within society regarding aging.

References

1. Pison, G.: Le vieillissement démographique sera plus rapide au Sud qu’au Nord. *Population et sociétés*. **457**, 1–4 (2009)
2. Colombo, F.: Ageing, media and communication. In: Paper Proceedings, ICA, Puerto Rico, 21–25 May, pp. 1–13 (2015)
3. Beard, J., Biggs, S., Blomm, D., Fried, L., Hogan, P., Kalache, A., Olshansky, J.: Global Population Ageing: Peril or Promise? PGDA Working Paper 89 (2012). <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/pgda/working.htm>
4. Berthelot-Guiet, K.: Elderly and IT: brand discourses on the go. In: Zhou, J., Salvendy, G. (eds.) ITAP 2016. LNCS, vol. 9755, pp. 186–193. Springer, Cham (2016). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-39949-2_18
5. Colombo, F., Aroldi, P., Carlo, S.: New Elders, Old Divides: ICTs, Inequalities and Well Being amongs Young Elderly Italians, *Comunicar, Media Educ. Res. J.* **45**(XXVIII), 47–55 (2015)
6. Colombo, F.: The long wave of generations. In: Colombo, F. Fortunati, L. (eds.) *Broadband Society and Generational Changes*. Peter Lang, Frankfurt, pp. 19–36 (2011)
7. Defrance, A.: Penser, classer, communiquer. *Publicité et catégories sociales*, *Hermès* **38**, 155–162 (2004)
8. Loos, E.F., Ivan, L.: Visual ageism in the media. In: Ayalon, L., Tesch-Roemer, C. (eds.) *Contemporary Aspects on Ageism*. Springer (accepted)

9. Loos, E.F., Designing for dynamic diversity: representing various senior citizens in digital information sources. *Observatorio (OBS*) J.* **7**(1), 21–45 (2013)
10. Loos, E.F., Ekström, M.: Visually representing the generation of older consumers as a diverse audience: towards a multidimensional market segmentation typology. *Participations* **11**(2), 258–273 (2014)
11. Berthelot-Guiet, K.: Mort de pub, stéréotypie des discours publicitaires, 5, *Effeillage Revue*, pp. 28–31 (2015)
12. Feillet, R., Bodin, D., Héas, S.: Corps ages et medias: entre espoir de vieillir jeune menace de la dependance. *Etudes de communication, Langues, Information, Mediations* **35**, 149–166 (2010)
13. Berthelot-Guiet, K.: La marque médiation marchande ou mythologie adolescente, In: Lachance, J., Saint-Germain, P., Mathiot, L. (eds.) *Marques cultes et culte des marques chez les jeunes: Penser l'adolescence avec la consommation*, Presses Universitaires de Laval, Laval, pp. 23–38 (2016)
14. La filière Silver Economie. www.entreprises.gouv.fr/politique-et-enjeux/la-silver-economy, consulté le 3 janvier 2018
15. Mather, M., Jacobsen, L.A., Pollard, K.L.: Aging in the United States. *Popul. Bull.* **70**(2), Population Reference Bureau (2015), www.prb.org
16. Jeanneret, Y., Ollivier, B.: *Les sciences de l'information et de la communication*, HERMES, 38. CNRS Editions, Paris (2004)
17. Jeanneret, Y.: *Critique de la trivialité. Les médiations de la communication, enjeux de pouvoir*, Le Havre, Editions Non Standard (2014)
18. Berthelot-Guiet, K.: *Paroles de pub. La vie triviale de la publicité*, Le Havre, Éditions Non Standard (2013)
19. Berthelot-Guiet, K.: *Analyser les discours publicitaires*. Armand Colin, Paris (2015)
20. Foucault, M.: Le jeu de Michel Foucault, entretien avec Colas, D. Grosrichard. In: Le Gaufey, A., Livi, G., Miller, J., Miller, G., Millot, J.-A., Wajeman, C., Ornicar: *Bulletin périodique du champ freudien* **10**, 62–93 (1977). Repris in: *Dits et Ecrits II. 1976–1979*, Paris, Gallimard, pp. 298–329 (1994), texte n° 206, p. 299
21. Cochoy, F.: *Une Histoire du Marketing. Discipliner l'Économie de Marché*. Paris, La Découverte (1999)
22. Berthelot-Guiet, K.: Grandir en publicité: marques et mythes d'enfance, In: Bahuaud, M. et Pecolo, A. (Dir.) *Naître et grandir en terres publicitaires, Jeunes et Médias*, 9 (accepted)
23. Barthes, R.: *Mythologies*. Editions du Seuil, Paris (1957)