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The Effects of Emotional Television Advertising on Older and Younger Adults

Margot J. van der Goot, Eva A. van Reijmersdal, and Mariska Kleemans

1 Introduction

Understanding older adults' responses to advertising is vital for the industry because older adults constitute a large and lucrative market: The world population is aging (United Nations, 2012) and consumers of 50 years and older have more disposable income than younger consumers (e.g., Ahmad, 2003; Carrigan and Szmigin, 2000; Moschis, 2012; Yoon et al., 2009). Surprisingly, research on older adults' processing of advertising is rather limited (e.g., Gunter, 1998; Micu and Chowdhury, 2010; Moschis, 2012; Simcock and Sudbury, 2006; Yoon et al., 2009).

The current study focuses on older adults' responses to emotional television commercials, because emotions are a crucial factor in advertising (e.g., Holbrook and Batra, 1987; Poels and Dewitte, 2006). Importantly, it is to be expected that older adults respond differently to emotional appeals than younger adults. Extensive psychological research, particularly work based on the socio-emotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 1992), shows that older adults differ in their emotional goal setting from younger adults (Carstensen et al., 2003). Potentially, television ads that relate to these emotional goals are particularly effective for this target audience.

To the best of our knowledge, only a few studies (Drolet et al., 2007; Fung and Carstensen, 2003; Williams and Drolet, 2005) aimed to answer the question whether the age difference in emotional goal setting leads to differences in advertising responses. These studies focused on print advertising, and found the expected age differences. However, we cannot simply extrapolate these findings to television advertising; in particular because television stimulates a larger number of senses and thus evokes emotional responses more than print advertising does (e.g., Chaudhuri and Buck, 1995). These more intense emotional reactions may either mean that the age difference in responses to emotional appeals is more pronounced for television than for print, or that both age groups are so used to emotions in television ads that the difference between the two groups is smaller.

Therefore, the present study aims to examine the differences between older and younger adults in liking and recall of emotional (versus knowledge-related)

television commercials. We used real television commercials to enable the study to generate recommendations for practitioners.

2 Theoretical Background

A large body of psychological literature theorizes and tests how emotional goal setting and the regulation of emotions change as people grow older. One theory that is exceptionally widely cited in this body of research is the socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 1992).

2.1 *Socioemotional Selectivity Theory*

The main tenet of the socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 1992) is that as people age their future time perspective becomes more limited and therefore their goal setting changes. Future time perspective entails that human beings perceive their time as either limited or extensive (Carstensen, 1992): individuals view the time they will live as very long, or about to end. This perception of time has an impact on the assessment process that leads to a selection of life goals.

The theory distinguishes between *emotionally meaningful goals* and *knowledge-related goals*. Together, emotionally meaningful and knowledge-related goals are seen as the essential constellation of goals that guides social behavior throughout people's lives (Carstensen et al., 1999). Emotionally meaningful goals are defined as goals directly related to feelings such as balancing emotional states or sensing that one is needed by others. Knowledge-related goals are defined as goals that optimize the future, often through attainment of novel information (Fung and Carstensen, 2003, p. 163).

In cases when time is perceived as extensive and open-ended, priority is given to knowledge-related goals and information is accumulated for being used in the future. In contrast, when time is perceived as limited, emotionally meaningful goals are much more relevant because they are accomplished at the same time as they are being pursued, and, thus, are immediately gratifying (Fung and Carstensen, 2003). Growing older is inextricably connected to having less time left in life. Therefore, the socioemotional selectivity theory predicts that as people age, they attach greater importance to goals aimed at deriving emotional meaning from life than to goals that increase future preparedness (Carstensen et al., 1999). The prediction is also that older people are more likely to emphasize emotionally meaningful goals than younger people (Fung and Carstensen, 2003). Empirical research on social preferences has provided ample support for these central tenets of the theory (e.g., Carstensen et al., 1999).

2.2 *Previous Studies on Print Advertising*

A few experiments (Drolet et al., 2007; Fung and Carstensen, 2003; Williams and Drolet, 2005) were designed to test whether age differences in goal setting, as postulated by the socioemotional selectivity theory, are reflected in preference and recall of emotional magazine advertisements. Fung and Carstensen (2003) argued that goal-relevant information is not only remembered better, but is also evaluated more positively. They therefore hypothesized that older adults would prefer advertisements with emotionally meaningful appeals over those with knowledge-related appeals, and would also better remember information presented in such advertisements. They found support for these hypotheses, albeit not for all measures of preference. In addition, Fung and Carstensen (2003) hypothesized and found that younger adults' preference and memory were not influenced by type of appeal.

Williams and Drolet (2005) also found that older adults had higher liking and recall of emotional appeals compared to knowledge-related appeals. In contrast, younger adults had higher liking and recall for the knowledge-related appeals. Drolet et al. (2007) also reported that older adults liked and remembered affective print ads better than rational ads, regardless of type of product (hedonic versus utilitarian).

Our aim was to test whether these findings also apply to television commercials. In line with the print studies, we assumed that older adults' focus on emotionally meaningful goals would render the emotional advertising more appealing to them, whereas younger people would not show this bias:

H1: Older people like emotionally meaningful television commercials better than knowledge-related ones, whereas younger people do not show this difference.

H2: Older people remember brands in emotionally meaningful television commercials better than those in knowledge-related ones, whereas younger people do not show this difference.

3 **Method**

An experiment was conducted, using a 2 (type of commercial: emotionally meaningful versus knowledge-related commercial) x 3 (product: coffee, sweets, banking services) x 2 (age: older versus younger adults) mixed design. Both groups watched the same six television commercials: three emotionally meaningful and three knowledge-related ones.

3.1 Stimulus Materials

We selected six commercials: an emotionally meaningful and a knowledge-related commercial for each of the three product categories. In line with the study by Fung and Carstensen (2003), the emotionally meaningful commercials were chosen because they showed people sharing love, warmth, happiness, and special moments. The knowledge-related commercials were selected because they contained informative and factual content (as in Drolet et al., 2007; Williams and Drolet, 2005).

We chose the product categories coffee, sweets and banking services, because a pretest showed that the two age groups did not differ in product involvement and product use for these categories. The three emotional commercials featured the brands Tim Hortons, Werther's original and Visa, whereas the three knowledge-related commercials featured Nabob, Callebaut and Bank of America (see Table 1 for a description of the commercials).

Table 1: Description of the Commercials

	<i>Emotionally meaningful commercial</i>	<i>Knowledge-related commercial</i>
Coffee	Brand: Tim Hortons Content: Parents visit their daughter. They drink a cup of coffee and share a special moment in which they express that they miss each other.	Brand: Nabob Content: A person explains the procedure through which Nabob selects only the best quality coffee beans.
Sweets	Brand: Werther's original Content: A grandfather explains how his grandfather used to give him Werther's original. Now he gives Werther's original to his own grandson because he is very special.	Brand: Callebaut Content: A person explains that chocolate is a descendant of the cacao bean and that Callebaut has a long history of making chocolate.
Banking services	Brand: Visa Content: An olympic iceskater promised his sister -before she passed away- to win gold. Six years later he succeeded, skating a victory lap with his child. Visa made this possible.	Brand: Bank of America Content: A person lists the advantages of the credit card, such as 1% cash back, and shows how paying with the credit card works.

All commercials were in English. We ensured that the commercials had approximately the same length, and were not broadcast anymore at the time of the experiment. In the questionnaire, the three emotionally meaningful commercials and the three knowledge-related ones were presented randomly. We measured brand familiarity in the study in order to check whether the two age groups were equal in this respect.

3.2 *Participants and Procedure*

A total number of 83 participants took part in the experiment. The older age group ($N = 39$) consisted of people aged between 50 and 80 years ($M = 58.28$; $SD = 7.75$) and the younger group ($N = 44$) consisted of people with ages between 20 and 30 years ($M = 25.09$; $SD = 2.57$). Men ($N = 37$) and women ($N = 46$) were almost equally represented in the sample. The sample was highly educated, with a majority of participants having completed higher professional education ($N = 51$) or scientific education ($N = 29$). Most participants were from Europe ($N = 64$), while also participants from North America ($N = 14$) and the other continents participated.

The experiment was conducted online and in English. Participants received an invitation by e-mail including a link to the online questionnaire in which the commercials were embedded. They were instructed to watch each commercial only once.

3.3 *Measures*

As a manipulation check, emotional arousal was measured with four items on 7-point scales: “The commercial left a deep impression on me”; “The commercial really touched me”; “I felt involved with the commercial” and “The commercial left me unaffected” (Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2008). For each commercial, the four items proved to be one factor with sufficient reliability ($\alpha > .86$). The scores on the items were averaged to create a single measure of emotional arousal ($M = 3.92$; $SD = .55$).

Liking was measured as attitude toward the commercial (Drolet et al., 2007; Williams and Drolet, 2005). After each commercial, respondents were asked to evaluate the commercial on four items with 7-point scales: unfavorable/favorable, not enjoyable/enjoyable, dislike very much/like very much, bad/good ($M = 4.42$; $SD = .59$). Principal component analyses for each commercial showed that the four items loaded on one factor with sufficient reliabilities ($\alpha > .92$).

Unaided recall was measured with an open-ended question at the end of the questionnaire. Participants were asked to write down the brands they remembered seeing in the commercials. Each correct answer was coded as 1.

Based on the answers, sum scores for unaided recall of emotional meaningful commercials ($M = 1.33$; $SD = .99$) and knowledge-related commercials ($M = 0.66$; $SD = .80$) were calculated.

To measure aided recall, respondents were provided with a list of twelve brands: six that were in the commercials and six filler brands from the same product categories. The twelve brands were listed in a random order. Based on the answers, sum scores for aided recall of emotional meaningful commercials ($M = 2.31$; $SD = .81$) and knowledge-related commercials ($M = 1.70$; $SD = 1.04$) were calculated. These scores reflect the number of brands that were correctly recalled for the two types of commercials.

Brand familiarity was tested at the end of the survey. For each of the brands that were shown in the commercials, respondents were asked two questions: whether they knew and whether they used this brand (“yes” or “no”).

4 Results

4.1 Manipulation and Confound Checks

To test whether the emotionally meaningful commercials were indeed perceived as more emotionally arousing than the knowledge-related commercials a repeated measures ANOVA was conducted. The manipulation check showed that self-reported emotional arousal was indeed significantly higher ($F(1,82) = 104.36$; $p < .001$; $\eta^2 = .56$) for the emotionally meaningful commercials ($M = 4.73$; $SE = .11$) than for the knowledge-related commercials ($M = 3.12$; $SE = .09$).

To control for alternative explanations, we first checked whether the two age groups differed on several background characteristics. The two groups did not differ with respect to gender ($\chi^2(1) = 1.11$, $p > .05$), education ($\chi^2(2) = 0.51$, $p > .05$), or continent of residence ($\chi^2(4) = 3.43$, $p > .05$). However, the two groups did differ with respect to brand familiarity (using and knowing the brand) of Bank of America ($\chi^2_{\text{using}}(1) = 4.97$, $p < .05$; $\chi^2_{\text{knowing}}(1) = 4.16$, $p < .05$) and Werther’s Original ($\chi^2_{\text{using}}(1) = 28.67$, $p < .001$; $\chi^2_{\text{knowing}}(1) = 8.30$, $p < .01$). This brand familiarity was not related to ad liking, and it was related to recall of Werther’s Original but not to the full recall variable; therefore brand familiarity was not included as a covariate in the analyses.

4.2 Liking of Commercials

To test the hypothesis for liking (H1), we conducted a repeated measures ANOVA with type of commercial and product category as within-subject factors, and age as the between-subjects factor. The ANOVA with liking of the

commercial as the dependent variable showed a main effect for type of commercial, $F(1,81) = 38.90$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.11$, with higher liking for emotionally meaningful commercials ($M = 4.81$; $SE = 0.10$) than for knowledge-related commercials ($M = 4.03$; $SE = 0.08$). There was no main effect for age ($F(1,81) = 1.19$; $p > .10$).

The analysis showed the expected interaction effect between type of commercial and age, $F(1,81) = 9.65$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = 0.03$. Post hoc tests showed that older adults liked the emotional commercials ($M = 5.08$; $SE = 0.15$) significantly ($p < .001$) more than the knowledge-related ones ($M = 3.90$; $SE = 0.11$). The same applied to the younger adults (emotional commercials: $M = 4.55$; $SE = 0.14$; knowledge-related commercials: $M = 4.15$; $SE = 0.11$), but for them the difference between the two types of commercials was smaller ($p < .05$). For emotional commercials, the difference in liking between the two age groups was significant ($p < .05$). For knowledge-related commercials, the difference between the two groups was not significant ($p > .10$).

Thus, hypothesis 1 was confirmed in the sense that we found the anticipated pattern for the older adults. However, we did not hypothesize that also the younger adults would like the emotional commercials more than the knowledge-related ones.

4.3 Recall of Brands

To test the hypothesis for recall (H2), we conducted two repeated measures ANOVAs (unaided and aided recall) with type of commercial as within-subject factor, and age as the between-subjects factor. The ANOVA with unaided recall as the dependent variable showed a main effect for type of commercial, $F(1,81) = 32.93$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .27$ with higher recall for brands in emotional commercials ($M = 1.31$; $SE = 0.11$) than in knowledge-related commercials ($M = .65$; $SE = 0.09$). There was also a main effect for age, $F(1,81) = 8.39$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .09$, with younger adults ($M = 1.21$; $SE = 0.11$) remembering more brands than older adults ($M = .76$; $SE = 0.11$). However, there was no interaction effect between type of commercial and age on unaided recall, $F(1,81) = 1.05$, $p > .10$.

For aided recall, the ANOVA showed a similar pattern. First, there was a main effect for type of commercial, $F(1,81) = 30.37$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .27$, with higher aided recall for brands in emotional commercials ($M = 2.30$; $SE = 0.09$) compared to knowledge-related commercials ($M = 1.68$; $SE = 0.11$). Moreover, the main effect of age, $F(1,81) = 15.68$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .16$, showed that younger adults ($M = 2.31$; $SE = 0.11$) remembered more brands than older adults ($M = 1.68$; $SE = 0.12$). No interaction effect between type of commercial and age, $F(1,81) = .75$, $p > .10$, was found.

In all, as the results did not show an interaction between type of commercial and age for both unaided and aided recall, the second hypothesis was rejected.

5 Conclusion and Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine whether there are differences between older and younger adults in responses to emotionally meaningful (versus knowledge-related) television commercials. For liking, we found that both age groups liked the emotionally meaningful commercials more than the knowledge-related ones, but the difference between the two types of commercials was larger for older adults. Moreover, older adults liked the emotional commercials more than the younger adults did. For recall, we found a main effect for age, with older adults remembering fewer brands than younger adults (as in for example Dubow, 1995; Fung and Carstensen, 2003; Johnson and Cobb-Walgren, 1994), but we did not find the anticipated age difference in recall of emotional advertising.

When comparing our findings to previous studies, it seems that the studied medium plays an important role. It is interesting that for print media younger adults preferred knowledge-related ads (Williams and Drolet, 2005) or did not show a bias (Fung and Carstensen, 2003), whereas for television they aligned with the older group in liking the emotional ads more. Potentially this is caused by the fact that a defining characteristic of television advertising is that it is directed at emotions, and that it evokes emotions more intensely than print advertising (Chaudhuri and Buck, 1995). We therefore recommend future research into the effects of emotional advertising on older and younger adults to focus specifically on the comparison between effects for television and print advertising.

The second unexpected finding, namely that we did not find the hypothesized effect for recall, could also be caused by a specific characteristic of television. Potentially, older adults remember less from television commercials than younger adults because of the audiovisual production features of commercials regardless of the type of content, thus ‘overriding’ the positive effect of emotional content. Future research is called for to test this explanation, and to delve into the question of how such production features differentially affect older and younger adults' processing of advertising (Van der Goot et al., 2015).

For practitioners who develop television commercials that need to appeal to an older target group, it is important to pay special attention to the emotional content. The current study, in combination with previous research based on the socioemotional selectivity theory (Drolet et al., 2007; Fung and Carstensen, 2003; Williams and Drolet, 2005), strongly implies that older adults are particularly attracted to loving and warm messages. The present study suggests that this approach would not scare younger audiences away, because they also liked the emotionally meaningful commercials more than the knowledge-related ones, although for them the difference between the two was less pronounced than for the older group.

To the best of our knowledge, the current study is the first to test whether the propositions of the socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 1992) translate to age differences in responses to television commercials. Although the results were not univocal, we do see this study as an incentive to continue on this path of research.

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