

# Chapter 18

## Silver Advertising: Elderly People in Japanese TV Ads

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**Abstract** About 10% of Japanese commercials show elderly people. They advertise a relatively small range of product categories, such as pharmaceuticals/health products, financial/insurance plans, and food. Elderly people are the main target group, especially for the first two product categories, and often are the only age group that appears in the ads. In contrast, for products targeted at more age groups or for which elderly people are not the explicit targets, elderly people either do not appear at all, appear in a family setting, or in a more general way as a representative of one generation, e.g., in commercials showing that all generations use the product. This leads to the situation in which only about 20% of commercials with elderly people advertise products that are explicitly for elderly people. The representation and function of elderly people in commercials is not only connected with the age groups they are appearing with, but there also are differences within the representation of elderly people. This is especially the case of male versus female representations, in which the latter are clearly underrepresented. On the whole, most of the findings of this study confirmed previous research results from other parts of the world.

### Introduction

Advertising theorists agree that if ads are to resonate with target audiences, “they need to reflect the social norms practiced in a given society” [5]. This also is certainly true in the context of elderly people. However, advertising does not just “reflect” society; it also has, together with other media, some form of influence on society. O’Barr states that “depictions of society in advertisements have their bases in the social order, and the social order is continually re-created by reference to ideals in advertisements and elsewhere about what it should be” [14]. Williamson philosophizes in a similar direction, stating that “advertisements are one of the most important cultural factors moulding and reflecting our life today” [19]. These theories naturally lead to the question of how far advertisements reflect the realities of

Japanese society; if they do not reflect society, it could be regarded as a form of distortion that might have an influence on society.

These considerations certainly are not to be underestimated by companies that think about their general image among consumers or even as a part of a Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) strategy. The way television viewers feel portrayed by a company certainly has an influence on the overall company image. The other important question in the marketing context is how and with which models elderly people are addressed adequately in order to be reached through advertisements. Existing research findings suggest that elderly people do not necessarily want to be targeted with elderly people but with people 10 or 15 years younger than their actual age [6]; i.e., with models of their cognitive age rather than their chronological age. As a result, it can be assumed that this chapter cannot fully answer the question of what commercials target elderly people, but only the question of whether there is a connection between elderly people in and the target group of these commercials.

This chapter focuses on the use of elderly people in Japanese TV commercials, how they are represented, how far these representations reflect the realities of Japanese society, and what reasons there might be for possible differences. After showing the depiction of the elderly, as well as under what circumstances this age group is used and for what purposes, important marketing questions of this chapter include: in using elderly people in commercials, how much of this is connected with products targeted at them, and what product categories are elderly people advertising? These results will be discussed and set in a global context in order to determine if these results are special for Japan or similar in different parts of the world.

## The Use of Elderly People

Although elderly people certainly are not the leading age group in Japanese commercials, a significant number of the systematically-collected television commercials (see Appendix for details) included elderly people, as can be seen in Table 18.1.

This amount, however, does not say anything about how many advertisements actually are targeted at elderly people; it only indicates how many commercials use elderly people. Within the commercials employing elderly people, the amount of commercials advertising products only for elderly people is relatively low (22.4%,

**Table 18.1** Elderly people in Japanese TV ads

Type of ad	Appearance in ads (%)
All ads <sup>a</sup>	10.4
Ads with people <sup>b</sup>	13.6

<sup>a</sup> Number of all ads = 3352.

<sup>b</sup> Number of ads with people = 2557.

In summary, in 10.4% of all commercials appear elderly people. And in 13.6% of commercials featuring people are appearing elderly people. The commercials with elderly people are 348.

$n = 78$ ). On the other hand, various product categories are not intended solely for elderly people but can be used by them; sometimes they even are a main target group. It can also be assumed that there are various commercials not depicting elderly people that also target them as customers. This is true for a wide range of product categories that are age-neutral, such as foods, drinks, detergents, and many others.

### *The Representation of Elderly People*

So, how are elderly people represented in Japanese television commercials? Are they shown mostly alone or together with other people and, if so, with whom and what age groups?<sup>1</sup> What role do they play and is there any difference in the representation of elderly people in terms of gender?

In about one-fourth of all commercials with elderly people, they appear alone without any other age group (26.1%,  $n = 91$ ). In contrast to commercials in which other age groups also are represented, these commercials clearly are focused on advertising products that are solely for elderly people; in many cases, the merchandise is of no use to younger people. These products include pharmaceuticals and other health-related products for the elderly, such as diapers for the elderly, hearing aids, products for dentures, food supplements, and wrinkle creams. Another common product category is health insurance, which is especially created for people over 60 years. For products exclusively advertised for elderly people, the actors typically are older than 60 and mostly even older than 70. This might be an indication that the perception of age has shifted during the years and common definitions connected with retirement age have changed at a time in which elderly people live longer and are more active. In cases in which the product is not exclusively for elderly customers, elderly people still are being used for products for which they are a main target group: pharmaceuticals (including those used by younger people) and traditional Japanese food products are a few. The elderly seen in the latter case often act as an endorsement for the product and its consistent taste or quality; in other cases, they are verifying that even a cup of noodles can have the same traditional taste, convincing their critical husband of its value and encouraging him to have another cup. Naturally, there are also some elderly celebrities depicted in commercials, which appeal to a wide audience and not only to elderly people. Not surprisingly, it was observed that the use of commercials with only elderly people (in contrast to other commercials including other age groups) are connected with programs that can be regarded as clearly targeting an elderly clientele, though this question was not explicitly part of this research.

An age group with which elderly people hardly ever appear is babies (1.1%,  $n = 4$ ; there is no commercial with *only* elderly people and a baby). Elderly people seem to be at the other end of the age spectrum and don't have much in common with babies. In contrast, elderly people appear in various cases with children (23.6%,

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<sup>1</sup> Age groups in this research consist of: baby, child (age 1–17), young adult (18–29), middle age adult (30–59), old/elderly adults (60+).

$n = 82$ ), and at times even alone with children (2.9%,  $n = 10$ ). In the former case, these combinations are used mostly in a general family setting, or in the latter case indicating that elderly people have to stay fit in order to play with or handle children. To do so, they need to use the advertised product, which usually is a pharmaceutical product. In one commercial, a woman is shown pushing the swing for a child but having to stop the activity because of knee pain. She can only continue after using the advertised product. In a follow-up commercial, the grandmother happily is helping the grandchild swing and is the proud consumer of the advertised product.

In cases in which elderly people are shown with young adults (31.3%,  $n = 109$ ; with only young adults 8.0%,  $n = 28$ ), they are shown either as members of a family or as representatives of different generations in general. In a few cases, these generations show a boss and employees. In all these representations, however, no products exclusively for elderly people are advertised.

The biggest group that appears with elderly people is middle-aged adults (62.4%,  $n = 217$ ). Elderly people appear even relatively often alone with them (28.4%,  $n = 99$ ). These commercials use many patterns already mentioned in other configurations. Some of them advertise products highly associated with the elderly (e.g., pharmaceuticals, hair products, insurance, wheelchairs, and hearing aids) and the appearance typically is in the form of a family group with one or two parents and an adult child. One commercial played with the assumed notion that elderly people are ignorant about recent technology. It starts out with an older mother speaking with her son on the telephone and saying that she could not connect to the Internet because it is too complicated. Then, the son appeared surprisingly some minutes later to find that the mother had not even opened the package yet, and he shows her how easy using the Internet is.

Commercials that use more than two age groups, including the elderly (34.5%,  $n = 120$ ), mostly are in a family setting or show different generations in a general way. In one commercial, three generations of women show that they all go to the same supermarket; in another, three generations enjoy the same dish at the table, while in yet another one, all generations of a household use the same toothpaste. These commercials show clearly that the advertised product has an appeal to all generations, no matter the age. The advertised products in these commercials hardly ever target one clear age group but are accessible to all different ages. Another commercial that illustrates this point, again using the stereotype of elderly people being weak regarding technology, is for a mobile phone provider. In this commercial, grandparents called their grandchildren from a fireworks display (often taking place in the summer in Japan and connected with traditional festivals). However, they not only call but make a video call with a television mobile phone. The grandchildren are really surprised and impressed that the grandparents were able to do that, but the grandparents insist that it really is easy. This commercial indicated indirectly that the product is so easy to handle that it even can be used by the elderly; it also shows elderly people that it is a product for them to connect with the world, including calling and even seeing their grandchildren.

Looking at the representation of elderly people, there is one really significant finding besides different representations connected with different age groups – the

**Table 18.2** Male versus female elderly in commercials

Sex of character in ad	Appearance in ads <sup>a</sup> % (number)
Male	77.3 ( <i>n</i> = 269)
Female	48.3 ( <i>n</i> = 168)
Only male	51.7 ( <i>n</i> = 180)
Only female	22.7 ( <i>n</i> = 79)

<sup>a</sup> Number of ads sampled = 348.

different usage of male and female characters. There is an overwhelming difference in the usage, with one-third more elderly males in commercials, as seen in Table 18.2.

Also, previous research in the Japanese context has shown that older males in adverts outnumber older females [7, 8]. It would be wrong, however, to bring this finding solely into a Japanese context, since it seems to be a global phenomenon. This was shown, for example, by Moore and Cadeau [13] in a Canadian context, by Simcock and Sudbury [17] in a British context, and in a US context by several researchers [2, 9, 16, 18]. This phenomenon is evident in society because women more than men are under pressure to remain young and beautiful and being old is often a negative trait. It must be questioned here how much such a development is based on Japanese tradition or on Western influence, but this is beyond the scope of this chapter.

What was already mentioned partly in this section should be apparent in the following in more detail, namely the different usage of elderly people in connection with different product categories.

### *Elderly People and Product Categories*

As can be seen in Table 18.3, elderly people are used predominantly to advertise some product categories; these include pharmaceuticals, financial/insurance, and food. When thinking about the needs of elderly people, these results are not surprising. In Japanese commercials, many pharmaceutical companies target elderly people either explicitly or implicitly (i.e., they also can be used by other customers but have a strong hold for elderly people).

Financial/insurance is another category that often is targeted directly at elderly people in Japan. Although this form of advertisement is not as common in many other countries, in Japan a huge number of insurance companies especially target elderly people who want to explore new options or want to improve the conditions of their current insurance. Whereas these two product categories are usually targeted specifically at elderly people, food products are slightly different. Here, elderly people are used either as representatives of a three-generation household or as endorsers of the quality and authenticity of traditional Japanese products.

**Table 18.3** Percentage of product categories in commercials with elderly people

Product category	Appearance in ads <sup>a</sup> % (number)
Financial/insurance	16.4 ( <i>n</i> = 57)
Pharmaceuticals	14.1 ( <i>n</i> = 49)
Food	11.0 ( <i>n</i> = 38)

<sup>a</sup>Number of ads sampled = 348.

## Discussion

Japanese commercials use elderly people; however, they do not reflect the actual realities of Japanese society. In Japan, 24.2% of the population is older than 59 [1], whereas in Japanese commercials the ratio is only 13.6% in commercials with people. This also is a typical phenomenon in other countries [13, 15–17]. There are several reasons for this difference. One probably is the so-called cognitive versus chronological age. It can be assumed that many elderly people in Japan feel younger than they are and therefore want to be represented by younger models. Another factor that should not be overlooked is what Greco [6] found after surveying the opinions of hundreds of advertising executives on the use of elderly people in advertising. Most of the agency executives held the same opinion, namely that advertising with elderly people works best with elderly-oriented products. This was also the case in this sample, especially in commercials using only elderly people but also partly in commercials with elderly and middle-aged people in which products that are only or mainly for elderly people are advertised. These products included pharmaceuticals and other health products, financial/insurance plans, and food. Also, the results for these product categories are rather similar to findings in other parts of the world [2, 9, 16, 17]. Most of these commercials, however, used not only the 60+ elderly, but also 70+ elderly people. This can be an indication that either the borders within society are shifting upwards, based on a longer life expectancy and a more active life, or simply that elderly people can and should be separated further into different age segments.

In this context, what Dyer [4] writes about advertisements in general should not be forgotten, namely that they “teach us ways of thinking and feeling, generally through fantasy and dreaming.” Advertisements aim to show an illusion or dream, a world one can attain at least partly through consuming a product. Based on current perceptions of age in society, one of the dreams of elderly people seems to be becoming younger than they are.

So, why are elderly people not used for products not explicitly targeted at them? It is not that elderly people are not also used in other commercials; however, in such cases, elderly people either are a main target group or are shown simply as a part of a family or a more general part of a generation also enjoying and consuming the advertised product. Greco states that “the transgenerational approach incorporating persons of varying ages can be used to show the ‘universal’ appeal of the prod-

uct” [6], and that is certainly also true in the Japanese context. Showing different age groups using the same products simply shows that they all are satisfied with the product.

One of the main reasons for seldom using elderly people is that many products are targeted at other age groups (only 22.4% of commercials with elderly people target them explicitly), and there is the risk of alienating younger customers [6]. It is assumed and partly shown in some studies [11] that younger people are not interested in products advertised by elderly people, so their use in advertisements for products for other age groups might be limited. Conversely, elderly people consider middle-aged and older models more credible than younger ones [12]. In short, advertising agencies have the difficult decision of choosing the target market they really are aiming for and have to be careful not to alienate some of their targeted groups one way or another.

Although this chapter is interested first of all in the marketing side of the representation of elderly people in Japanese commercials, one final aspect should be mentioned. As previously outlined, there is a huge gap in the representation of male and female elderly people in Japanese commercials (and also in other countries). This picture refers clearly to a general image of (elderly) women in society and especially in the media. More than men, it is women who have to look young and beautiful. Naturally, advertisements are not the creator of such images, but they also reflect social trends, and an additional medium to support and even increase such trends. Similarly, as in the cases of super-slim women in culture, media, and fashion advertisements [3], the image of elderly women is influenced partly by media and advertising. As a result, with the countertrends and discussions about the representations of slim women, there also should be more discussion about the representation of elderly women and women in general.

## Summary and Conclusion

The most important findings of this research were the following. First of all, elderly people and especially elderly females are underrepresented. Elderly people are used mostly to advertise a relatively small range of product categories (financial/insurance, pharmaceuticals/health products, food) and are used in other circumstances mostly as a representative of one generation.

Just looking at these few findings, we can learn that all of them seem more or less universally applicable. This should not neglect cultural and regional specificities and certainly does not support the idea of international advertising campaigns, but these findings support the idea that maybe other findings from other studies in other countries also should be tested for their applicability in a rather different cultural and social context, such as Japan. This also is true the other way around: results from Japan, which is the most advanced country concerning demographic change, should be tested in Western environments. As could be shown at several points in this chapter, there are many similarities in how elderly people are used

and targeted in Japanese commercials and in commercials in the West (especially Britain and the USA). This chapter cannot determine whether these are really based on cultural similarities or on some kind of Westernization of Japanese advertising and/or culture.

The importance of elderly people for the economy will increase during the coming years, not only in Japan, but in most industrialized countries. As a result, it must be the intention of more and more advertising researchers to deal with this topic more systematically. There have already been studies in the USA on this topic, but research is still rather scant in many countries, including Japan.

As a result, within advertising, the study of elderly people and how they want to be addressed can be one important topic for the years to come. There still is a wide field of research that can be undertaken. This study certainly can be regarded only as a first step in analyzing the usage of elderly people in Japanese TV commercials. There still are several research questions that can be addressed by follow-up research, either solely on TV commercials or on print advertising as well. One question can focus on commercials targeting the elderly, including those that do not use elderly people. Only this type of study can answer clearly the question of how many Japanese advertisements use models in the “cognitive age” of elderly people instead of their chronological age for advertising products targeted at them. A longitudinal study to see how the aging society already leads to changes in the use of elderly people in advertisements also could be useful.

It also would be interesting to learn (as was done in the USA and in Britain) what advertising executives think about the use of elderly people in advertising, what elderly Japanese think about current advertising, and what they would like to see changed. If forecasts are accurate, the market for elderly people will become more and more important during the years to come, so it is only natural for marketing researchers to put a greater emphasis on this area.

## Appendix

This research is based on a total of 2 weeks recorded from four private TV stations in Sendai, Japan (each affiliated with a mother station in Tokyo). Each recording covered 20 h a day, from 6 am to 2 am, using two VCRs simultaneously. Sample 1 was recorded 23–29 August 2004; Sample 2 was recorded 4–10 April 2005. Since the overall results of the sample weeks were extremely consistent, I merged the samples here for purpose of readability. This leads to a total number of 19,805 commercials, 3352 of which were unique (2557 ads with people).

To analyze the data, content analysis using a coding sheet was used at first, since measures extend our senses, and content analysis allows a “discovery of patterns that are too subtle to be visible on casual inspection and protection against an unconscious search through the magazine for only those which confirm one’s initial sense of what the photos say or do” [10]. Lutz and Collins refer here to magazines, but the same is true for any visual or sense-based text, including television commercials.



In short, an important advantage of content analysis is that it can make hidden significances visible within a huge sample; that is what I tried to do in my research. Afterward, the most significant findings of the content analysis also were analyzed qualitatively.

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