Saturday, 19 August

14.30-16.15

Panel: Media images of ageing and older age: Brazil, Finland and the UK

Gisela Castro
Brazilian advertising for an ageing population: stereotypes challenged or further reinforced

Kirsí Lumme-Sandt
Three Decades of Images of Ageing in one 50+ Magazine’

Virpi Ylänne
Print media advertising portrayals of older adults in the UK: typological change and continuity
Brazilian advertising for an ageing population: stereotypes challenged or further reinforced?

Gisela G S Castro

Unlike our ancestors, today we understand that the way we are varies in time and space, crisscrossed by multiple vectors. In modern thinking, the individual and the social, the human and the nonhuman intertwine in relational and sociotechnical networks of action, mediation and delegation. Even Psychology, which legitimized itself as the science capable of unveiling the ingrained subjectivity hidden within the interiority of the human psyche, lately admits the constructivist character of its knowledges and practices. We currently understand the production of subjectivities as a complex and continuous process, always in becoming. In this sense, to be is to become; to know is to intervene.

Highlighting the social role of academic work, it makes sense to think in terms of an ethical-aesthetic paradigm of existence. In tune with this inspiring idea, this paper considers the overwhelming presence of media narratives and images in our everyday lives, and ponders on the question of how media help challenge or further reinforce stereotyped conceptions of what it means to be old. Ageism is a widespread form of prejudice that often functions in a hidden way and causes discrimination and embarrassment, notably towards older people. By focusing on the portrayal of the elderly in advertising, we examine the influence of media productions in the formation and maintenance of cultural assumptions about old age.

Media play a major role in shaping the ways we make sense of the different stages of the life span. In order to reflect upon this, we need to go beyond the naturalization of ageing as the mere consequence of the passage of time during the course of life. It is imperative to examine the socio-cultural dimension of ageing, including the effect of mediated images of ageing on the production of contemporary subjectivities. We strongly believe it is high time for a deeper understanding of how the socio-cultural construction of ageing is affected by processes of mediatisation.

Research on such topic becomes especially relevant in the context of an ageing world population, which helps place old age at the centre of social debate. The so-called ‘longevity revolution’ means not only that more people are living longer, but that current birth and death rates are decreasing. The combination of these factors strongly redesigns demographics around the world.

As we know, the interplay between media and old age is spelled out differently in different parts of the world. By focusing our discussion on advertising, we investigate the ways the elderly are portrayed in selected Brazilian advertising campaigns and consider how such representations contribute to shape – and
may eventually help change – some of the ongoing cultural assumptions about old age in this rapidly ageing Latin American country.

The transformation of the so-called third age in a market segment helps set the economy in motion and renders new configurations in the cartographies of consumption. In its logics of production, advertising mobilizes well-established stereotypes and contributes to build new social imagery of older adults. While different models of youth, adulthood and old age coexist today, this is precisely the symbolic richness in which advertising finds elements to build its rhetoric.

From an interdisciplinary approach based on communication and media studies, grounded on sociological and cultural perspectives, this paper examines in particular two recent Brazilian commercials made for audio-visual media (television, the internet) in which older adults play a leading role. Empirical data is analysed in their relevant sociocultural contexts. In this paper, we closely examine representations that follow specific media and marketing strategies in order to reflect upon the current questions of ageing in a mediated world.
The aim of the ET-lehti 50+ magazine is to produce entertaining and beneficial articles for its readers, while also engendering a 50+ lifestyle. The ET-lehti magazine has retained its place as one of the most popular consumer magazines in Finland for decades now. This alone is a testament to the magazine’s ability to resonate with its target audience.

The present study focuses on how the ET-lehti magazine presents ageing, old age and seniors. This presentation focuses on the kind of ageing person's identity which is constructed by the ET-lehti magazine and how this has evolved during a 20-year interval.

The data consists of the 1996, 2006 and 2016 volumes of ET-lehti magazine. A discourse based examination was employed to find themes associated with age and ageing, as well as activities, which are presented by the magazine as worthy of aspiration in older age.

Old age itself and especially old-age complaints have never featured prominently in the ET-lehti magazine’s content. However, during the 1990’s, topics such as coping with workload as an ageing worker, retirement and widowhood were discussed with a problem-based approach. In the early 2000’s, articles in the magazine featured positive facets of ageing, such as mental growth, being a grandparent, and rekindling one’s romantic relationship. In the 2010’s, a discourse of active living has become increasingly more prevalent. Whereas in the 1990’s becoming a pensioner was a time of letting go and settling down, in the 2010’s it is no longer crucial whether a person is 52 or 72 – one may start a new career or a hobby at any age.

In two decades, the category of activities appropriate for seniors has become broader. The magazine encourages its readers to fulfil their dreams and to try out new things. The ET-lehti magazine’s image of getting older in the 2010’s is one of positivity, activity and individuality. Although there are ever fewer norms to do with chronological ageing, there is now a new norm of being active and taking care of oneself.
Interest in the nature and the possible effects of media portrayals of older adults has been growing in recent years across the globe in communication and media studies, as well as in social and cultural gerontology. This research has demonstrated older people’s under-representation in the media. Media and advertising depictions about ageing and older age also continue to be somewhat limited in scope. In particular, what might be considered ‘positive’ portrayals can turn out to be more ambiguous in their constructions of older age than might at first appear to be the case.

This paper looks at the extent of and the nature of any change in the depiction of older adults in UK print advertising by adopting a chronologically comparative method – comparing adverts from 2010 – 2016 with those from c. 10 years previously (1999-2004, collected for a previous project). It is anticipated that the typology devised in an earlier study (6 main categories of portrayal of older adults in UK advertising) is insufficient for the 21st century and that we might (or might not) now see older adults depicted in more varied ways.

In addition to analysing what types of depictions can be found of older adults in UK print media advertising, a closer analysis will be carried out of how that depiction is semiotically and discursively achieved. This will also offer a theoretical counterpoint to the predominance of content analysis in much of other work in the field of advertising and ageing. So in addition to describing the data at the level of types of depiction, I will investigate how the depictions are constructed and how they relate to stereotypes of ageing in the 21st century (in the UK and more widely). Under-representation of older people in the media is reported across the globe, but much current research does not address or acknowledge the specific context of representation, nor the goals of advertising. The analysis will therefore take the specific context of representation into account (whether older-age targeted or not, for example).

The paper will build on existing interdisciplinary literature on ageing and the media by contextualising the data in advertising, consumption and ageing demography.