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Silver Age
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Rivista Internazionale di Semiotica e Teoria dell'Immagine
Annali 10 - Giugno 2024

Silver Age
Nuove culture della vecchiaia

A cura di
Mauro Portello e Maria Pia Pozzato

SCRITTI DI
ALESSI E LOBACCARO, BELLENTANI E LEONE, BIKTCHOURINA,
BOERO, CARVALHO, CESARI, DE ANGELIS, GALLO,
GALOFARO, GRAMIGNA, LORIA, MAGLI, MONTESANTI,
PONZO, SANFILIPPO, TERRACCIANO, TSALA

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Silver Age
Nuove culture della vecchiaia

Images of the Elderly in Advertising: a Sociosemiotic Perspective

di Marianna Boero

Abstract

This paper aims to analyze the evolving portrayal of elderly individuals in advertising, specifically focusing on the transformation of their roles and functions in narratives. While elderly individuals in advertising are often categorized as "grandparents", they are commonly depicted as elderly, well-balanced, and cheerful, serving as the foundational figures in families, providing guidance, and sharing experiences with their grandchildren. However, these portrayals often do not align with the realities of modern society and family structures, which have undergone profound changes. Increased life expectancy and greater responsibilities towards children and grandchildren have led grandparents to become more active, youthful, and independent, deviating from traditional depictions prevalent in advertising.

To understand how changes in society and family structures manifest in advertising discourse, this study explores the image of the elderly in both online and offline contexts. It addresses questions about the portrayal of the elderly in advertising, aiming to uncover the shift from stereotypical depictions to more diverse and realistic representations. Adopting a sociosemiotic approach, the paper, following an overview of key studies on the topic, first examines changes in thematic and pathemic roles played by the elderly in advertising texts, along with exploring different actantial roles within narratives. The second part delves into Instagram posts, intended as an extension of the advertising discourse, analyzing various representations of older individuals' faces and bodies, with a particular focus on women. This includes social representations such as those embodied by elderly fashion bloggers.

Keywords: semiotics, advertising, social media, stereotypes, elderly

1. Introduction

Reassuring, smiling, wise, consoling. These are the adjectives that for many years have accompanied the representation of the elderly in advertising, mostly coinciding with the role of grandparents. Beyond this role, old age was perceived as an undesirable condition, associated with a state of unease or dissatisfaction. For this reason, it acquired its own representational legitimacy in specific contexts. Examples include instances involving irony, such as sketches, narratives centered around paradoxes, or those featuring intertextual references, like the use of elderly famous actors or characters from films referenced in commercials. Alternatively, the presence of the elderly was permissible in certain product categories (medicines, dental appliances, etc.) or in association with stereotypical situations (grandparents in the family context). The concept of old age, in this context, is always shaped by cultural constructs and is often juxtaposed with the notion of "lost youth", which is nostalgically emphasized throughout the narrative. Regardless of the specific industry, the presence of older people in advertising primarily catered to demographic segments different from the elderly themselves. The elderly individuals, in essence, served as "guarantors" but typically played secondary roles in the narrative compared to the primary target audience of the communication.

If the elderly in advertising are mainly inscribed in the category of "grandparents", vice versa, grandparents in advertising were always depicted as elderly, balanced and smiling. Their role is to act as the glue of families, always advising in the appropriate way and passing on experiences to their grandchildren. Such representations, however, do not mirror what is really happening in society and refer to traditional images linked to social and family contexts that have now changed profoundly. The change in society and family structures, in fact, has had an impact on the identity and role of grandparents who, thanks to the lengthening average life span but also to the increase in responsibilities towards children and grandchildren, are increasingly sporty, young, autonomous and less adherent to the traditional model proposed by advertising.

For the past few years, our society has witnessed a reversal of the trend concerning precisely the representation of ages. Whereas until a decade ago, multinational fashion and cosmetics companies set a limit on the age of models, today they are instead constantly looking for faces and bodies that defy time. The elderly thus become not only the target audience of advertising communication but also a positive role model within verbo-visual narratives.

How does advertising reflect these changes? What figure of the elderly emerges from innovative forms of texuality such as social media discourses? Building on similar questions, this study aims to analyze changes in the figure of the elderly in advertising through the sociosemiotic analysis of a corpus of advertisements in which the elderly person is present. Following a review of the existing literature on the topic, the initial section of the essay will focus on analyzing the transformations in the portrayal of elderly individuals in advertising. Subsequently, the second part of the essay will delve into elderly-themed Instagram pages, examining the diverse representational approaches employed for elderly women within the context of evolving beauty standards.

2. Studies and Researches on the Depiction of the Elderly in Advertising: State of the Art

The representation of elderly individuals has long been a part of advertising, albeit typically in secondary narrative roles (Brown, 1981). While there has been a gradual increase in the presence of elderly figures in advertising in recent years, they are often confined to specific contexts and roles. They tend to appear primarily during the Christmas season, akin to a Christmas tree or a panettone placed alongside their grandchildren, symbolizing warmth and inclusivity. Alternatively, they occasionally serve as "experts" in traditional product advertisements that seek to focus on their reassuring image.

The representational marginality of elderly people in advertising narrative terms is also reflected in the scarcity of scientific studies on the subject. In the Italian context, some hints are to be found in some publications linked to the field of sociology (Corradi, 2012), social psychology (Mucchi Faina, 2013), and historical-social research (Passerini, 2008). Internationally, the studies that have focused on the figure of the elderly in advertising are much more numerous. After a period in which the subject was put on the back burner, the topic has returned to the center of research, due to the weight that this consumer group has progressively assumed in brand communication strategy. However, even in the international context we can highlight the lack of specific studies on the topic conducted through sociosemiotics.

One aspect on which studies over the last ten years have focused is the issue of ageism and the stereotypes associated with it. Ageism, a discrimination on the basis of age, sometimes can resort to subtle strategies, such as focusing on specific characteristics and dis-abilities, which reinforce stereotypical representations. It is not surprising, therefore, that the majority of advertisements continue to show images of young, beautiful and smiling faces, while the ostentation of wrinkles remains a provocative exception, mostly aimed at making headlines.

The work of Eisend (2022: 310-312), for example, emphasizes the effects of stereotypical communications concerning the elderly and suggests how to proceed operationally to avoid this. While some advertisements portray the elderly within the family context in a positive and heartwarming manner, there have also been instances of stereotypes or ageist portrayals. In 2016, another study had been conducted concerning the portrayal of the elderly in advertising, with reference to stereotypes and students views: "It is well known that elderly people represent one of the most stereotyped social groups considering the criteria of age. Not only the young population but also the elderly people have negative cognitions regarding their peers and aging. […] The research data showed that most of the students assigned positive features to the elderly people such as happiness and health. Otherwise, the content analysis of the commercial scripts indicated that they would cast seniors to a stereotyped role rather than to an active one on the job market or in the business and showed them happy only in connection with the product usage" (Duduciuc 2016: 59)

Some works have been made with the aim of comparing the representation of elderly people in different cultural contexts. A work by Lee, Kim and Han (2006) sheds light on the differences in how older people are depicted in television advertisements between the United States and South Korea, reflecting both cultural influences and shared challenges in representation and stereotypes. Despite cultural differences, both Korean and U.S. prime-time television ads still exhibited problems related to underrepresentation and the perpetuation of stereotypes in the portrayal of older individuals. These findings align with the idea of cross-cultural advertising, highlighting that cultural values and norms in each country influenced the content of their advertisements. Both U.S. and Korean ads depicted older people less frequently than their proportion in the actual population, indicating a lack of representation of older individuals in advertising[1].

Other scholars analyzed the representation of older adults in UK advertisment. For instance, a study conducted by Williams, Wadleigh & Ylänne (2010), involving 106 British consumers, examines their impressions and categorizations of a representative sample of U.K. magazine advertisements featuring older characters. Through laboratory sessions involving sorting tasks, the analysis utilizes multidimensional scaling and hierarchical cluster techniques to identify four distinct portrayal categories: (1) Frail and Vulnerable, (2) Happy and Affluent, (3) Mentors, and (4) Active and Leisure-oriented older adults. These categories reflect both the content of the advertisements and the perceptions of the consumers themselves, aligning with commonly held stereotypes of older individuals.

Wenqian (2021) follows a constructivist approach for analysing on line representation of older adults. In particular, his study investigated how Swedish local authorities depict older people on their Facebook pages compared to other age groups. The author analyzed 1,000 Facebook posts and identified that older people, particularly those in nursing homes, were portrayed as socially engaged and moderately physically capable. This representation contrasted with negative stereotypes of older people as passive and dependent. However, older individuals were still depicted as less physically and technologically competent than younger age groups. Overall, the study found a recurring positive stereotype of older people as "golden agers" but with limitations in terms of diversity and recognition of care needs.

Those cited are just some examples of studies conducted on the representation of the elderly in the mass media and, in particular, in advertising. While these themes have been thoroughly examined in other academic disciplines, they present interesting insights for semiotic investigation. Indeed, these aspects closely align with the domain of semiotics applied to the analysis of advertising texts. The siociosemiotic approach seeks to dissect the portrayal of elderly individuals in advertisements and examine the intricate web of relationships that these portrayals create with reality[2]. With reference to italian semiotics, we recall the works of Cosenza (2007) and Boero (2018), who respectively examine in depth: the phenomenon of ageism in branding strategies, with particular reference to the cosmetic sector; the way in which the elderly person is represented in family, even in opposition/ juxtaposition to the role of children.

According to Cosenza (2007), in the press advertisements of agées testimonials, wrinkles and signs of aging rarely appear; rather, there is a tendency to make-up and photograph faces so that wrinkles are not noticeable[3]. Fashion and advertising, therefore, while on the one hand tend to exalt the idea of aesthetics disengaged from age data, on the other hand presuppose an adverse link between attractiveness and advanced age, especially in the case of female identity. Beyond the dimension of old age related to fashion and cosmetics advertisements, the signs and images that populate our collective imagination are accompanied by "scripts typical of old age, made up of images, words and stories of loneliness, infirmity, slowness of movement, abandonment, sadness, need for assistance" (Cosenza 2007)[4]. A common example is the attribution to older individuals of secondary roles, such as those of the guarantor of the family union, as in the case of the grandparents. The underrepresentation of elderly individuals in advertising can be attributed to the fact that the advertising industry predominantly focuses on themes, expressions, and values associated with positivity, euphoria, and success, often emphasizing the beneficial outcomes of purchasing products. Old age, on the contrary, is often associated with undesirable attributes such as frailty, physical and mental decline, resulting in reduced psychophysical efficiency, illness, and mortality.

While progress has been made in depicting the elderly in advertising more accurately and positively, challenges and stereotypes persist. In this sense, a still unexplored figure is precisely that of the elderly person within the family context and how this is represented in advertising. A study conducted on the portrayal of the elderly in advertising reveals that they primarily assume the role of grandparents (Boero 2018). The presence of older individuals in advertising aims to provide reassurance and offer guidance to the younger generation, emphasizing their experience and wisdom. This is a recurring narrative observed in the majority of commercials analyzed during the observation period: the elderly-grandparents play a supportive role, especially in the food industry and during family holiday seasons. In some cases, their presence remains more in the background, completing the family picture. Commercials in which the elderly take on a leading role are typically targeted at an older demographic or feature a humorous tone, demonstrating that aging is not viewed favorably and advertising endeavors to imbue this condition with positive emotions to reassure its audience. In these cases, elderly individuals may be featured in advertisements endorsing products related to family life, such as home appliances, insurance, or even family vacations. Their presence can lend credibility and trustworthiness to the products being promoted. Advertisements for healthcare providers and elderly care services often portray elderly individuals receiving respectful and compassionate care, emphasizing the importance of their well-being.

The studies cited show some common ways in which the elderly person within the family context has been portrayed in advertising. Nevertheless, it becomes necessary to revisit and update the research on this topic, considering the increasing significance that the elderly population holds within society and the rapid shifts in models and images of the elderly presented in media discourse. From a sociosemiotic perspective, it is interesting to contemplate how older adults are portrayed in the latest forms of communication, attempting to address the current dearth of research on this subject. The following paragraph examines the portrayal of the elderly in advertising, emphasizing shifts in their actantial, thematic, and pathemic roles within both familial and non-familial contexts.

3. Changing Portrayals of Older Adults in Advertising: Roles and Identities

In recent years, a confluence of socio-demographic and cultural factors has prompted numerous brands to reconsider the role of the elderly in their advertising campaigns. The extended life expectancy, increased financial resources, and evolving perceptions of significant life events in old age, such as menopause, retirement, and leisure activities, have piqued the interest of manufacturing companies in this demographic segment. Consequently, they are redefining the portrayal of the elderly in their narratives[5]. For instance, advertisements promoting home modification services or healthcare products now often depict elderly individuals as living independently in their own homes, emphasizing their desire for autonomy and the importance of accommodating their specific needs (Mucchi Faina 2013). Additionally, as older adults increasingly embrace technology, some ads illustrate how elderly family members maintain connections with their loved ones through social media, video calls, or messaging apps, showing an increasing self confidence with these tools. Through the analysis of a corpus comprising 10 european television commercials spanning the years 2016 to 2023, several recurring themes and narrative trajectories have emerged, warranting closer examination[6].

One of the initial discursive configurations that emerged from the analysis involves the changing portrayal of elderly loneliness. Traditionally a focus of news discourse and institutional campaigns, during the observation period, this theme has also found its way into commercial advertising, albeit with distinct nuances. On one hand, there is the loneliness associated with the elderly being marginalized by their own families, who are engrossed in the hustle and bustle of their daily lives. On the other hand, there is the loneliness forced upon them by external circumstances, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which has compelled many families into isolation.

An example of the first group is the Christmas commercial "Heimkommen"[7], produced by the German supermarket chain Edeka. The commercial portrays an elderly man spending Christmas alone with his dog, initially creating a melancholic atmosphere. His daughter and son leave a regretful voicemail explaining their inability to spend Christmas together; similarly, his granddaughter sends cheerful greetings, telling him the same. The man listens to the messages, reflecting on family photos and eating alone. In the second part, the focus shifts to the man's busy daughter and son, who receive shocking messages that hint at their father's passing. They return home, believing he has died. Upon their arrival, they find the man alive, surrounded by a beautifully set Christmas table. They embrace him with immense relief and joy, coming together to celebrate Christmas as a reunited family.

This commercial tackles the elderly loneliness with an emotional and impactful storytelling approach, becoming viral[8]. It encourages people to reflect on rediscovering the essential values of life. Considering the deep level of the text (Greimas 1983), in fact, a predominantly utopian valorisation (Floch 1990) can be discerned, which refers to the semantic categories of life/death, grief/joy, loneliness/conviviality. In the narration it is possible to observe various changes in the pathemic state of the characters: the first scenes describe the loneliness of the old man and are characterized by feelings such as melancholy, nostalgia, sadness; in the following sequences, after the message of the presumed death of main character, the emotional state is one of grief, caused by the loss of the loved one, by the sense of guilt for having left him alone in the last moments of his life and for not having given the right importance to the moments to be spent together. In the final scenes, a reversal of emotional states takes place: the negative emotional load generated in the first part is transformed into positive feelings of joy and relief, given by the unexpected return of the father. The man is the Subject of the narration, yet simultaneously, he fulfills the role of being the family's anchor (Helper): it is through his efforts that the family can reunite.

An example of the second type of elderly loneliness is given by the Linkem commercial (2021), which indirectly addresses the topic of loneliness of the elderly during the pandemic. The commercial features an energetic 89-year-old lady named "Grandma Rosetta". It starts with a young boy entering an apartment, searching for someone. He discovers Grandma Rosetta sitting in front of three computer screens, fully engaged in her virtual interactions, including online shopping. When he asks what she's doing, she replies with a grin, "I'm shopping online!". The commercial showcases Grandma Rosetta interacting with various individuals, like a greengrocer, delicatessen owner, and cheesemonger, all through online platforms. A male voice encourages viewers to consider purchasing Linkem's internet connection, emphasizing its value in providing social inclusion, interactivity, and the ability to transcend physical boundaries. The woman symbolizes someone who uses technology to combat loneliness and seeks assistance for daily shopping, entertainment, and relationships. The commercial challenges stereotypes by portraying an elderly lady as a proficient user of technology, highlighting its essential role in maintaining social connections during the pandemic. In this narrative, the elderly person becomes the central figure, focused on staying connected and combating loneliness, with technology serving as the enabler to achieve these goals. Rosetta is modalized according to "wanting to do", but in the first part of the narrative she grapples with the impediment of "not knowing how to do". However, it is precisely her determination that enables her to harness technology, albeit not without encountering Opponents along the way, and ultimately reconnect with her loved ones. From a pathemic point of view, the initial tension rooted in loneliness is alleviated through irony's intervention in the narrative, guiding the Subject on her journey towards achieving her goal. The narrative unfolds with a predominant infusion of playful and utopian values, intricately tied to the realization of the Subject's identity.

Despite their differences, both commercials share the same narrative structure, since they start from a state of solitude towards which the elderly person promotes change. No longer a passive or peripheral Subject of the narrative, but an active, autonomous Subject, capable of giving a new course to events. However, the advertising maintains a stereotypical representation of the family model, where grandparents are portrayed as wise and smiling, acting as a glue for families and passing on experiences to their grandchildren. In both commercials, the novel aspect is that the emphasis is on a broken family unit, albeit for different reasons. The united family is a shared objective in both narrative programs, rather than an assumed starting point. However, the identity of the elderly is consistently shaped in relation to the presence or absence of a family unit, comprising children and grandchildren. This aligns with the conventional representational framework, associating the elderly with the thematic roles of grandfather or grandmother.

Another theme that emerges from the commercials belonging to the observation period is that of nostalgia for a lost youth[9]. This pathemic state can be conveyed through precise thematic roles linked to the elderly characters present in the story or through the comparison between generations. In the commercial "Piace a tutte le ragazze del mondo", by the Kinder brand, the grandmother takes center stage, and unlike the Edeka commercial, she is portrayed within a more conventional family context. The brief scenes portray a family's breakfast time, featuring a father, mother, daughter, and grandmother. These sequences carry an ironic tone as the grandmother playfully "steals" the Kinder Colazione più product from her granddaughter, who had previously offered her a plate of biscuits. This creates a lively and joyful atmosphere within the family. The slogan "Every little girl in the world likes it" draws a parallel between two generations – the elderly grandmother and the young granddaughter – both enjoying breakfast with the Kinder product. This portrayal imbues the grandmother's character with youthful attributes, aligning with the principles of Ageless Marketing. However, in this case, the focus is not on physical youthfulness but on her demeanor and “spiritual” vitality. The grandmother is considered young because she exudes a carefree, ironic, and cheerful spirit, much like her granddaughter. Her physical appearance and attire reflect a typical older person, with no attempts to conceal her actual age. No special tricks or visual effects are employed to mask her real age in the commercial. Indeed, in this advertisement, the emphasis is placed on the dimension of youth, where it is the grandmother who adopts the youthful traits of her granddaughter by consuming a product primarily targeted at a young audience. The claim extends the term “young girls” to encompass women of all ages, connects seniority to a socially idealized and optimal youthful dimension, even though this may not correspond to reality for older women. This construction of old age is culturally tied to the notion of “lost youth”, and the entire narrative nostalgically gravitates towards this idea. While the advertisement depicts the elderly figure with balance and dynamism, it ultimately conveys a positive message by suggesting that adopting youthful traits and attitudes can bring a sense of euphoria and vitality to one’s life, regardless of age. This reinforces the cultural value placed on youth and encourages older individuals to embrace a youthful spirit, contributing to a positive and engaging narrative. Intergenerational storytelling is employed to create emotional connections.

Solitude can also be viewed as a deliberate reconnection with individualism, where individualism is understood as a heightened focus on self-care, including aesthetics. An example of this perspective can be found in the commercial featuring Iris Apfel, aged 95, for the Ds3 by Ds Automobiles[10], the premium brand of the Peugeot Citroën group, represents a significant departure from the traditional narrative around older individuals. The claim “Driven by Style” suggests a shift away from emphasizing values like wisdom, goodness, and love that are often associated with older age. Instead, it highlights the potential for breaking free from conventionality and embracing playful values, even in later life. In the commercial, Iris Apfel, behind the wheel of the car, delivers a powerful message: “Once, someone told me that I was not beautiful and that I would never be beautiful. But I had style, which is much better.” The focus here is not on family bonds or grandchildren but on the individual and their dedication to self-expression through style. This portrayal challenges the conventional roles and representations typically assigned to older individuals. Furthermore, the growing presence of “grey” models and over-60 style icons on social networks reflects a changing perspective. It underscores the idea that even in old age, one can lead a fulfilling life and reclaim their individuality outside of traditional family contexts. This shift in advertising and social media representation signals a broader societal recognition that older people can pursue a diverse range of roles and expressions, breaking away from stereotypes and expectations associated with aging. In this direction, it is interesting to note that the figure of the elderly is used to advertise a product not only aimed at a target of elderly people, marking a significant change in the strategies of contemporary brands discourses.

The depiction of the elderly in advertising has evolved in the observation period, reflecting changing societal attitudes and demographics. The three identified areas – loneliness, nostalgia, and individualism – entwine within advertising narratives, fluctuating between conventional portrayals and innovative, unconventional representative scenarios. Regardless, the identity of the elderly individual is consistently defined in relation to a family unit, whether that family is present or absent. When absent, the narrative often highlights a desire for a return to unity. Individualism is frequently depicted as an exception in advertising and is sometimes emphasized through paradox or irony. It is no coincidence that the third commercial analyzed refers to an unconventional character, who still aims to convey seniority outside of traditional narrative lines as something eccentric and exceptional. The following paragraph explores the portrayal of the elderly in social media posts, intended as an extension of the advertising discourse, with a specific focus on elderly women, examining how these dynamics manifest in a distinct context from television advertising.

4. Elderly Women and New Models of Beauty: Exploring Instagram Representations

While television and print advertising predominantly adhere to conventional representations of the elderly, with only a minority of commercials attempting to distinguish this figure from that of the grandfather or grandmother, it is in the field of social networks where the most rapid and transformative changes are evident (Cosenza 2014). Advertising is evolving in its modes of expression, extending its reach through the voices of influencers and bloggers, and experimenting with novel communication strategies. For this reason, it can be asserted that delving into social media posts significantly contributes to the broader objective of analyzing depictions of the elderly in advertising. Indeed, these communication channels act as conduits for both direct and indirect promotional content, presenting featured products through the discourse crafted by the influencers.

Specifically, this paragraph presents the first findings derived from the analysis of 10 Instagram pages dedicated to the theme of the "silver age". These pages are managed by individuals who belong to the senior age group or by user groups interested in fashion and cosmetics that transcend specific age demographics. The observation period spans from 2022 to 2023, and the pages were selected based on certain identifying hashtags. The analysis encompasses 5 posts (images, album, video or reel) for each page, with a total of 50 posts considered.

The analyzed Instagram profiles and pages are centered around the concept of positive aging, with a clear focus on promoting a positive image of growing older. Interestingly, they refrain from highlighting the typical attributes associated with seniority, such as wisdom and experience. Instead, they prioritize aspects like vitality, attention to health and wellness, fashion and beauty, travel and leisure, and the self-assured use of smartphones, tablets, and other digital devices by older adults. In doing so, they contribute to challenge ageist stereotypes. In particular, elderly women are represented in a diverse and inclusive manner on Instagram profiles. This includes featuring individuals from various ethnic backgrounds, sexual orientations, and gender identities within the elderly demographic. Authenticity became a key value, with a move away from idealized or stereotypical portrayals of older adults: a much more multifaceted and dynamic context than what is apparent from the analysis of television advertising.

These social discourses not only offer new avenues for the dissemination of representative values and trends but also create space for emerging models of beauty. A few years ago, this transformation was particularly evident in the case of social fashion, with the inclusion of plus-sized models ("curvy") and unconventional beauty models, who deviated from traditional standards. It occurred through two main avenues: firstly, through user conversations that found their own discursive niche within the social universe, and secondly, thanks to the web's capacity to enable fashion brands to personalize their content and incorporate unconventional beauty models into their communication strategies. A noteworthy example of this evolution is the normalization of pregnancy and imperfect motherhood (Boero & Greco 2022).

The "chic_style_and_fashion Beauty" page on Instagram offers makeup tutorials specifically tailored for older individuals. Several elements within these tutorials are particularly interesting when viewed through the lens of the trend towards embracing the natural aspects of aging. In the video analyzed[11], the makeup applied does not seek to conceal or erase the signs of age; instead, it aims to enhance the aesthetic qualities of old age. The elderly model's face is celebrated, illuminated, without undergoing any masking procedures.

The choice of hashtags used in these videos is indicative of their departure from prevailing ageist norms. Notably, references to seniority are relegated to the last two hashtags, such as #silverhair and #whitehair, while the bulk of the hashtags are geared toward placing the video within the broader makeup discourse. This approach normalizes the video, making it appear as part of the mainstream rather than an exception. Moreover, the predominant use of the color white, which is also echoed in the pearl earrings and the white wool sweater worn by the model, evokes notions of purity and innocence. This playful association of values with the color "white" in the context of representing old age contributes to the aesthetic dimension. In this perspective, white is not concealed or hidden; instead, it becomes a symbol of radiance and beauty.

The style presented in the posts on the "golden_ladies_style" page, particularly those dedicated to Iris Apfel, takes a markedly different approach[12]. These images lean into the exaggeration of contrasts, portraying old age as something extravagant and eccentric, far removed from everyday life. By portraying Iris Apfel and her unique style, this page encourages a reevaluation of stereotypes and expectations surrounding old age. It suggests that aging can be a time for embracing one's eccentricities and boldly defying societal norms, making a strong statement that old age is a phase of life that can be lived to the fullest and celebrated with unapologetic extravagance.

In another video on the same page, the focus shifts to the juxtaposition between different generations, featuring an elderly mother and her adult daughter[13]. The unifying element in this scenario is a black leather (or faux leather) sheath dress, worn by both women with ease, without attempting to hide their individual characteristics. Here, the comparison isn't about conveying the idea that an older woman should strive to look younger, but rather that the same clothing item can be worn regardless of age, yielding excellent results. This shift signals a departure from categorizing clothing as suitable for either young or elderly individuals, emphasizing instead the importance of adapting clothing to one's personality without imposing age-related barriers.

Beyond pages that share posts, reels, and videos featuring older models, it is interesting to observe the growing presence of Instagram pages maintained by older fashion bloggers. One internationally renowned example is Grece Ghanem[14]. The page's intent is explicitly stated in its introduction: "All about fashion and confidence, style knows no age". Indeed, the page adheres to the same visual storytelling techniques commonly associated with typical fashion pages on the platform. It showcases scenes from daily life alongside social moments, family snapshots, and vacation photos. The common thread is the freedom to embrace and promote a fashionable style, staying current with trends, and even introducing new ones, regardless of age. The page's owner is an elderly blogger who keeps a close eye on fashion trends, offering original and daring outfit combinations.

Several posts on this page celebrate the showcasing of the body, marking a departure from conventional portrayals of the elderly. This shift helps connect the image of the elderly to that of an individual capable of experiencing desire and eliciting desire in others. The body isn't just an object of desire but also something to be nurtured and cared for. Consequently, numerous videos are dedicated to fitness, no longer limited to gentle exercises for the elderly but encompassing high-performance and accessible training. The fact that the page attracts followers from various age groups underscores the profound transformation currently underway, not only in terms of influence but also as a source of stylistic inspiration. An elderly person can prioritize self-expression, revel in beautiful objects like shoes and clothes, and embark on solitary journeys without invoking pity or compassion from others.

The display of the body is a recurring theme on pages managed by older models and bloggers, exemplified by Caroline Labouchere[15]. On her page, photos feature the model in underwear or swimsuits, alongside images where her body is adorned with stylish clothing or presented in more conservative work attire. These posts showcase a body that doesn't conform to stereotypes of aging but rather celebrates its beauty and sensuality. Despite the occasional use of filters or rejuvenation procedures, the aim is not to conceal old age but to rediscover it. These representations play a pivotal role in naturalizing seniority, emphasizing the present rather than dwelling on lost youth. They underscore the notion that even the elderly can have a sphere of influence beyond their family roles, encompassing their bodies, faces, and passions.

In Italy, Carla Gozzi, an image consultant and television presenter known for her fashion-related programs, has achieved considerable success for years. More recently, Carla Gozzi has expanded her communication to social media platforms, where she positions herself as an expert in the field[16]. Her page features reels and videos offering expert advice to women of all ages. While this portrayal aligns with traditional representations of the elderly as knowledgeable and wise, the novelty lies in the content: her advice pertains to fashion and lifestyle, areas increasingly relevant to older demographics. This shift also indicates a user profile that differs significantly from that of mainstream television. While television often caters to a more conservative elderly audience, less inclined to consider roles and identities beyond the family context, social media attracts an older audience seeking self-discovery and a better quality of life during what is now commonly referred to as the golden age.

The emergence of social media has led to a rapid and dynamic transformation in the representation of older individuals. These platforms offer a space for the rediscovery and celebration of the elderly body, with a focus on beauty and sensuality. Additionally, the content shared on social media promotes a "naturalization" (Barthes 1957) of seniority, emphasizing the present rather than dwelling on the past. This shift is in stark contrast to the slower, more gradual changes seen in television advertising. Thanks to social discourses, there has been a growing trend towards the inclusion and acceptance of diverse beauty models beyond the anagraphic dimension: this way, social media has become a powerful tool for both reflecting and shaping societal changes, contributing to the evolution of our collective imagination regarding old age.

5. Conclusions

The path we have explored, despite certain limitations related to the low number of commercials and Instagram pages considered, has shed light on new narrative threads concerning the representation of the elderly in advertising.

One significant change involves the evolution of actantial roles. Previously, elderly individuals primarily appeared in advertising as supporting characters in family-related contexts, symbolizing family union and inclusivity. However, advertising has recently undergone a significant shift, placing older individuals at the forefront, utilizing their consoling image not just as Helpers but as narrative Subjects. This is evident in advertisements for products targeted at the elderly, as well as in those aimed at different demographics. Furthermore, at the level of discursive structures, we notice the emergence of new thematic roles for the elderly. They are no longer confined to the role of grandparents but are portrayed as sports enthusiasts, lovers of pleasure and travel, and technology experts. Similarly, grandparents are no longer exclusively portrayed as old and fragile; they are increasingly depicted as active and dynamic individuals. This shift is complemented by a diverse range of pathemic roles, with older individuals experiencing a spectrum of emotions, from loneliness and self-love to desire for their partners or new adventures.

However, despite these changes, traditional representations of older individuals often persist in television commercials, particularly in family-themed advertisements where they are frequently relegated to the background of complex narratives. While there has been progress in portraying older people more realistically and diversely, representing aging as a multifaceted process, conventional stereotypes and roles still prevail, perpetuating simplistic, one-dimensional portrayals, with older people taking on secondary roles.

In the case of social media, the range of representations associated with older people becomes more complex, comprehensive, and nuanced. The inclusion of older individuals intersects with various traditional forms of diversity, a dimension that is largely absent in television advertising, including unconventional beauty standards, disabilities, ethnic backgrounds, and gender differences. Additionally, there is a noticeable trend towards the aestheticization of the elderly body, face, and style, particularly within the cosmetics and fashion sectors. These representations of elderly women on Instagram promote inclusivity and work to normalize the presence of older individuals in narrative patterns that were previously reserved for young people. The faces and bodies of elderly women are no longer concealed or altered to the extent of appearing entirely artificial. Social media platforms convey a message of self-acceptance, and the integration of elderly individuals into narrative contexts from which they were previously excluded represents a significant stride toward complete inclusion.

This intricate landscape calls for additional scientific investigation, such as extending the observation period, or increasing the number of commercials/Instagram posts considered, as well as expanding the analysis to representations of elderly men in social media. This would strengthen the robustness of the findings, and help to gain a deeper understanding of how ageism, stereotypes, and cultural factors influence media portrayals of older individuals, regardless of the specific sector considered.

Note

[1] In this regard, see also the work of Chen (2015), focused on a comparison between advertising representations of older people in the United Kingdom and Taiwan.

[2] From a sociosemiotic point of view, the concept of representation transcends its literal definition, embracing a heightened complexity. Following Landowski's (1989) insight that reality, when reflected in discourses, undergoes transformation, the notion of representation takes on a nuanced character. Indeed, as highlighted by Marrone (2001, 2014), the conventional notion that distinguishes between tangible events and the discourses describing them is replaced by the proposition that an ongoing textual interplay shapes social meanings. Theoretical and methodological references on sociosemiotics and the analysis of advertising texts can be found in Marrone (2001; 2014), Pozzato (2001), Traini (2008).

[3] In this respect, see Kenalemang (2021). The analysis of L'Oreal advertisement shows, through a multimodal approach, that the underlying discourse pathologises ageing and presents ageing as something which can be evaded through the consumption of cosmetics.

[4] My tranlsation.

[5] The brand's discourse mirrors ongoing trends while being concurrently shaped by them, fostering a mutually influential relationship, as observed by Marrone (2007). Consequently, the brand strives to harmonize its communication with the prevailing values and cultural themes of interest.

[6] For exposure reasons, the following content does not encompass complete semiotic analyses of the commercials. Instead, it presents examples, intended as singular demonstrations representative of a broader category. The focus will be on describing specific functional elements to underscore the evolving shifts within the paradigm of loneliness, nostalgia, and individualism.

[7] www.youtube.com/watch?v=V6-0kYhqoRo (last accessed date: September 30, 2023).

[8] www.youtube.com/watch?v=yboz8pt2bJA (last accessed date: September 30, 2023).

[9] On the semiotic analysis of nostalgia, see Greimas (1986).

[10] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p8G9VpehDNg (last accessed date: September 30, 2023).

[11] https://www.instagram.com/p/Cv6mGtfKigB/ (last accessed date: September 30, 2023).

[12] https://www.instagram.com/golden_ladies_stylee/?img_index=1 (last accessed date: September 30, 2023).

[13] https://www.instagram.com/p/CyDN7KAI2Ae/ (last accessed date: September 30, 2023).

[14] https://www.instagram.com/greceghanem/?hl=it (last accessed date: September 30, 2023).

[15] https://www.instagram.com/carolinelabouchere/ (last accessed date: September 30, 2023).

[16] https://www.instagram.com/carlagozzi/ (last accessed date: September 30, 2023).

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