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ON THE FRINGE OF SOCIETY?

Investigating the standing of older people in the perception of German society

In a previous paper, I discussed the value of looking at a social group through the lens of media studies to fully understand stereotyping (Otrebski, 2015a). Now, having spent the past twelve months considering the portrayal of older people in advertising, I am able to challenge the claims made in previous research that older people are 'eking out a shadowy existence' in the perception of German society (Kuehne, 2007: 108); a perception allegedly marked by scant attention, marginalisation and dismissiveness.

My research since the 2015 paper has shown that the so-called 'shadowy existence' or invisibility of older people is, in fact, a myth. However, when this segment of society is looked at more closely and not treated as a homogenous group, one can see that certain sub-groups are indeed being ignored – the elderly aged 75 years and over and non-white older people.

Vitality theory

The present paper considers this subject – which is of interest to many academic disciplines, including sociology, anthropology and gerontology – from a media studies perspective, following the idea of 'vitality theory' (Ehala, 2010). According to this theory, the standing of any social group within a society is reflected by the media and, thus, can be successfully determined through the examination of, for example, advertising. Vitality theory is based on the grouping of individuals via socio-demographic variables, such as their proportion of a population, geographical distribution, political awareness and social status. Behind this lies the assumption that groups of greater number and social importance are considered to have greater 'vitality', and thus continue their survival as groups; and their groups' specific features are propagated. A group that possesses more vitality will receive much greater support and representation in society as a whole, including in the media. Therefore, by looking at how groups are portrayed within the media, one can gain an insight into the social standing and the perception of these people within a society.

The present paper shows how the perception of a social group can be examined and interpreted through analysing advertising and how it can be theoretically framed by vitality theory. Three dimensions seem to be particularly suited to evaluating the vitality of the social group of older people, aged 50 years and over, in this regard – the occurrence of older people in absolute terms, the occurrence of older people in relative terms, and the role prominence assigned to older characters within advertising.

A content analysis, comprising a frequency analysis complemented by qualitative insights, was chosen to examine a selection of contemporary German print advertisements featuring adult characters. The data set comprised a total of 1,017 adult characters that were found in 1,422 advertisements from four of the country's most circulated weekly magazines (*Stern*, *Bunte*, *Bild der Frau*, *Hörzu*) that were published between January and March 2013, reaching a combined readership of over 20 million people every week.

The myth of invisibility in old age

Looking at contemporary print advertising in Germany, it appears that older people are established characters in the stories told by advertisers. There is an undeniable notion of vitality – in the sense of *visibility* – of this social group, with almost every fourth advert involving an adult character also featuring at least one character aged 50 years and over.

Although the trend towards greater visibility of older people in marketing communications is difficult to trace with great precision in Germany, due to the scattered research on this topic and the varying findings of previous studies (Otrebski, 2015b), it seems legitimate to say that, overall, there has been an increase over the past five decades; from below 5 % of characters featured in advertising in the 1960s and 1970s to more than 23 % today. This social group is therefore acknowledged in today's perception of German society and furthermore, it holds an increasingly prominent social standing and therefore can be considered far from the 'fringe' or the shadows of German society.

This rise in visibility, however, does not automatically go hand-in-hand with a proportionate representation of this population group, where circa 42 % of the population are currently aged 50 years and over. In this regard, Germany's older generation seems still to fall somewhat short of an 'authentic' reflection
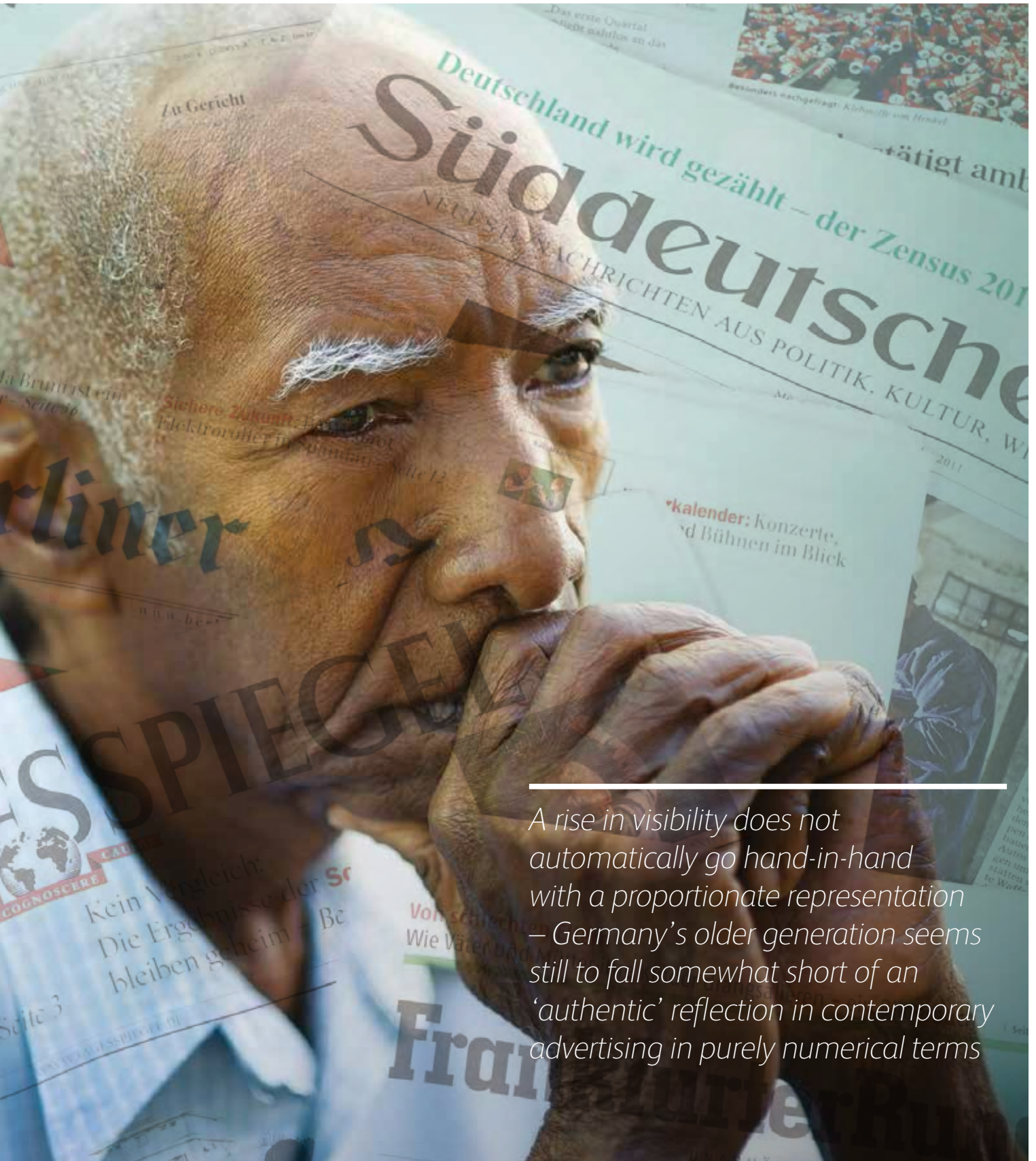
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in contemporary advertising in purely numerical terms. Although this does not contradict the finding above that older people have visibility within German society *per se*, it could indicate a negative bias against this age group.

An under-representation of older characters does not come as a surprise, as this has been pointed out before by other researchers – such as Hastenteufel, Dennersmann and Ludwig, or Roehr-Sendlmeier and Ueing (*cf*. Otrebski, 2015b) – and is often interpreted as a negative public attitude towards old age. Yet, in his study from 2009, Schwender highlighted that, in addition to older characters, teenagers (aged between 13 and 17 years), for example, were also largely under-represented in German television spots; something that appears to still hold true for contemporary print advertisements. This suggests that the under-representation of old age might be part of a phenomenon of favouritism towards younger adults rather than an old age-specific negative preconception.

A case of favouritism

An explanation for this favouritism towards younger adults is easy to find – being, or at least appearing to be, young, active, spontaneous and self-determined is a central element that most advertisers work with, in order to arouse desire in the audience for a brand, product or service. Kochhan (1999) summarises these kinds of characteristics under the term *youthfulness* and puts them on the same level of importance in terms of successful advertising, as the actual presentation of the goods or services promoted within a campaign. It is easier, of course, to create youthful characters and situations believably and convincingly by utilising age groups that embody these desired characteristics. Whilst teenagers often lack the monetary funds – as well as social and legal self-determination – to authentically embrace every sort of activity and act of spontaneity in life, in the minds of advertisers older generations often struggle with appearing to be young and active enough. The older a person is, as is commonly believed, the more this person is set in his/her ways, often shying away from spontaneity in life – thus potentially being a less attractive choice for advertisers compared to a younger adult.

But there is more to this apparent favouritism than just the embodiment of visible youthfulness. The chronological age of the target audience also plays a role in the casting of characters in advertising campaigns. This choice is also influenced by the target audience's *desired age*; this means, for teenagers, appearing to be slightly older; and for older adults, slightly younger – in both cases depicting a desired age works in favour of younger adults.

That the under-representation of older people in contemporary print advertisements is unlikely to be due to a negative bias against this social group is also supported by insights into those characters' role prominence. Older characters are frequently shown in lead roles within the stories told by advertisers, thus regularly demonstrating their relevance in a variety of reflections of social situations. In fact, characters aged 50 years and over are significantly more often assigned lead roles in contemporary advertising, and less often seen in minor roles – in the period I considered for this research – compared to younger adults, weighing palpably against the theory that there exists a negative bias against old age.

In light of these findings, older people in general can by no means be considered invisible or eking out a shadowy existence in Germany. Based on vitality theory, the group's regular occurrence does not only indicate visibility, but, in combination with the pronounced role prominence of older characters, speaks for a solid standing within German society, despite the prevailing under-representation with regard to their share within the population demographics.

A whitewashed 'young-olds' representation

Whilst older people in general might not be invisible, there are two aspects of this social group where invisibility appears to be very much the case in contemporary German advertising, and thus potentially in the perception of German society. Those are ethnic diversity and 'old age diversity'.

Although Germany might not have the reputation of being a particularly culturally diverse nation, in terms of older people, the country currently boasts a fairly multi-cultural cohort. This is mainly due to Germany's federal recruiting programme from the

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1950s and 1960s, during which a large number of foreign workers were purposefully recruited by the government to migrate to West Germany, in order to meet the demands of a booming post-war economy. The recruitment programme predominantly targeted young men in their early 20s from Mediterranean countries; hence, most foreign workers during that time arrived from Italy, Spain, Greece, Turkey, Morocco, Portugal, Tunisia and the former Yugoslavia.

As a consequence of the active recruitment policy, the foreign population in Germany rose from 1.2 % in 1960 to about 4.9 % in 1970. By 1973, some 2.6 million foreign workers had migrated to Germany (Tews, 1999). Unlike the original plans of the programme's initiators, who foresaw only a short average residence of a few years for each new recruit, a large number of workers stayed in Germany after their individual working cycles ended. Thus, these former *Gastarbeiter* – i.e., 'guest-workers' – and their spouses, who arrived in the following years in the course of a subsequent federal family reunification programme, have become an integral part of the country's society and are now part of its older generation (Bernstein, 2015). Today, approximately a quarter of Germany's population has a migrant background. Slightly less than one third of this group is currently aged 50 years and over, equalling approximately 6 million people, or every sixth older person in Germany, making this age group moderately multi-ethnic.

Despite the fact that Germany's society is multi-ethnic, older characters in advertising do not demonstrate a level of ethnic diversity remotely commensurate with the ethnic composition of this age demographic. In contemporary print advertising, less than 1 % of characters presented are of a non-white / non-Caucasian background, making ethnic diversity elusive and also signalling that scant attention is given to the specificities of old age within Germany.

Once again, however, the lack of 'authentic' representation – or, in this case, adequate multi-ethnic reflection – appears not to be limited to older people. Looking beyond the age group of 50 years and over, the lack of ethnic diversity in advertisements appears

to be a phenomenon that is irrespective of age – pointing at a potentially bigger issue with regard to the perception and standing of ethnic minorities within German society.

Old age diversity appears to be particularly critical in relation to the current perception of older people, with characters beyond the age of 75 years being almost invisible in contemporary print advertising. *Prima facie*, it might seem surprising that this age group should be more severely under-represented than their younger counterparts as, after all, the elderly are the fastest growing age demographic in almost all Western societies, including the US, the UK and Germany (Brooks, 2013 for example). A more thorough look at this particular age group, however, reveals a number of possible reasons for their particular under-representation in advertising that need to be considered. For one, it may relate to the wealth, spending power and attitude to spending of this social group; or it may be due to the fact that the depiction of very old characters might be unappealing, even to this age group itself.

Over the past two decades, countless market reports and surveys from governmental bodies have established the increasing discretionary income of the target audience '50-plus' relative to other age demographics in Germany. Compared to previous older generations, the attitude to spending of this golden market segment has changed – they wish to treat themselves and enjoy their own wealth. The target group '50-plus', however, is not a homogenous group. With an average life expectancy in Germany nowadays of 80.57 years, this group subsumes people from well over three decades. The increase in wealth and discretionary income is largely documented for the younger end of this market segment. Similarly, the change in attitude towards more spending appears to be only registered in those younger than 75 years of age. It therefore seems unsurprising that the elderly do not attract the same attention from advertisers as younger old people, and thus that they are under-represented within advertising, whose primary goal is to sell.

In addition, there might be an extra layer of difficulty in portraying the upper end of the age scale in a way that is both positive and authentic. Advertisers may struggle to portray the elderly without showing old age deficits that are unappealing, and a visual image of old age deficits may give a negative connotation to the product through mere proximity or being presented within the same context (Cook, 2001). Hence, the elderly may be seen as somewhat risky characters and a challenge that advertisers are not prepared to take on. There may not even be any reward for taking it on, as the elderly may prefer to see 'young-olds' in advertising, who portray their desired age which is, according to representative studies, approximately 10 to 15 years younger than their own chronological age (RUB, 2006).

Finally, advertisers may struggle with the role that elderly people are able to play believably within advertising. Typical strategies such as desirability through beauty, or status through a prominent position in society, might be more challenging to adopt with very old characters. Trying, for example, to convey expertise or authority in order to attach cachet to a product – a common strategy when employing older models – might be difficult with an elderly model, as people aged 75 years and over are likely to have been outside of the job market for a significant period of time, with the average age of retirement currently at 63.5 years in Germany; so their knowledge may be seen as outdated and unconvincing. Using beauty and sexual appeal to sell products, another common strategy, with very old models might also confound advertisers.

Overall, the under-representation of elderly people therefore is not necessarily a reflection of marginalisation within society, but is likely to be due to a mix of reasons. It appears that advertisers are not targeting the upper end of the age scale as potential customers because of their assumed lack of financial resources and / or their unwillingness to indulge in consumerism. Furthermore, this age group is not conventionally understood to have visual appeal (including to the elderly themselves), and the difficulty in creating *authentic* and at the same time *appealing* elderly characters would require advertisers to come up with new, or at least different advertising strategies.

From a socio-political point of view, a positive-authentic image appears to be important, as public images of social groups have the power to shape people's perception of others – in the long as well as in the short run

Conclusion

Vitality theory has enabled me to show that older people in general are a well-represented demographic group in advertising, and are likely to have a good standing within the perception of current German society. However, the findings also show that despite the apparent visibility and vitality of older people as a social group as a whole, there are still prevailing aspects of old age that are clearly neglected in advertising, and possibly within the perception of society.

Creating an authentic and positive image, however, could and should be in the interest of both businesses and politicians. For businesses, the inclusion of, for example, ethnic diversity in advertising might lead to improved penetration of existing markets. According to insights from *ethnic marketing*, the use of a more realistic ethnic composition within communications campaigns might be beneficial in creating a broader appeal for a brand and thus increasing demand in consumer groups within existing markets (Ayguen 2016). This seems particularly relevant in times where most markets appear saturated and new target groups are desperately needed.

From a socio-political point of view, a positive-authentic image appears to be important, as public images of social groups have the power to shape people's perception of others – in the long as well as in the short run (Otrebski, 2015a). Public discourse – largely shaped by the media and thus by advertising – influences in many ways how people perceive and evaluate members of a particular social group. Public images can assign a specific place within society to individuals and create conditions that lead to the confirmation of that image – like a self-fulfilling prophecy. Furthermore, they can cause compliant behaviour, by the mere fact that the group members concerned are aware of the existing public perception. However, in rapidly ageing societies, such as in Germany, maintaining an open mind regarding the potential social contribution of older people is crucial in order to remain competitive.

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