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ALONE? OUTSIDER? HELPLESS? BUY ME!

Rogue strategies for activation in advertising.

Advertising relies on activation strategies to attract attention, occasionally weaving even negative aspects, including loneliness, into sales pitches

In winter 2015, the German supermarket chain EDEKA sparked a country-wide debate about the appropriateness of broaching the issue of loneliness for promotional purposes. The Christmas commercial #ComingHome (#Heimkommen), created by the Hamburg-based creative agency Jung von Matt, revolved around an elderly man, whose children and grandchildren cancelled on him for Christmas. Appearing visibly upset at a large dining table by himself with his roast dinner, in a gloomy looking room, the man evidently struggles with being alone during the holidays. However, instead of accepting his fate and celebrating on his own, he forges a plan to fake his own death by sending out mourning announcements in which he invites his family to his wake, sparking noticeable regret in his next of kin for not having visited their father, grandfather and father-in-law more often. Arriving at the alleged wake, the guests quickly realise that the death notes were just a stunt to gather his loved ones for a meal at Christmas, resulting in relief and a family celebration of the Christmas holidays after all.

The reactions on social and traditional media were mixed. Whilst some thought the spot hit home with an emotional message that depicted the reality for many elderly Germans who lack social contact and are lonely over Christmas; others criticised the approach to the issue as tasteless and exploitative for the sake of financial gain. The campaign also sparked corporate responses from several industries, such as from the German train operator *Deutsche Bahn*. In their similarly styled social media campaign, the elderly man from the original EDEKA spot sits at a table in the on-board restaurant of one of *Deutsche Bahn*'s high speed inter-city trains all by himself. The advert's copy reads, 'Dear granddad, don't wait for them to come to you.' (*Lieber Opa, warte nicht bis sie zu dir kommen.*)

Research shows that in the perception of German society, loneliness and old age are connected (Klie, 2017). Jung von Matt, the creatives behind the 2015 spot, also pointed to this in the aftermath of the social debate: "Instead of telling the people a nice Christmas story, we confronted them with the harsh reality: especially the elderly are often forced to spend Christmas alone! Above all [,] in a society, in which families are often spread across continents, this insight was more than just relevant. It met the zeitgeist. And we used it as a trigger to encourage everyone to go home for Christmas and celebrate with their loved ones again." (Jung von Matt, 2016) In this statement, the creative agency also broaches another interesting point: the fact that loneliness was used as a strategic device to trigger a response in the audience.

For advertising to potentially leave a mark in the minds of its target audience and trigger a response, the advert needs to be perceived first. This might seem simple, but in the information age, this basic requirement has become increasingly challenging, with information overload having amplified drastically over the past few decades. More than ever, audiences nowadays process only the tiniest fraction of the vast amount of information that is offered to them daily; consequently, they 'blank out' the large majority.

As a coping mechanism to deal with the constant instream of information produced by an increasingly globalised and digitalised world, audiences consciously and subconsciously select information to which they dedicate their limited cognitive resources. Unsurprisingly, advertising rarely finds itself amongst the audience's conscious choices. Hence, more than ever, one of the main challenges of advertising is to activate and draw attention in order to overcome the threshold created by the overwhelming noise of information.

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DON'T BE LONELY.

Several strategies exist that can help advertising increase the probability of making it through to the audience's attention. Established strategies include physiological stimuli such as colour or dimension of the advert, emotional stimuli such as faces or sex appeal, and cognitive stimuli such as surprise or humour; all of which have received significant attention within the academic discourse (Felser, 2015). They have in common that they attempt to create script deviations, that is, breaking with the norm to stand out from the rest. Deviation, however, can only work as long as the chosen stimulus is somewhat novel; in consequence, this means that a stimulus can wear off or lose its effectiveness when it is overused over time or used by too many advertisements at the same time.

In the case of the EDEKA commercial, 'loneliness' was used as a strategy to cut through the 'information smog' at the opening of the spot, by using a combination of emotional and cognitive stimuli, jumping on board a long-standing idea of ageing as a process of physical, psychological and, in this case in particular, social decay. This deficit model of ageing has dominated public discussion around ageing for decades and has been reflected in the presentation of old age in the German media, including advertising. The core of the deficit model is that losses throughout a person's life accumulate to the point of inevitable isolation with increasing age, with the oldest generation ending up socially isolated and not having the physical or mental capabilities to avoid this downward spiral.

However, this overwhelmingly negative idea of ageing and the connection between old age and loneliness has been challenged repeatedly. The deficit model of ageing has been considered outdated in gerontology since the 1970s and has been replaced with other, more balanced ideas of gains and losses throughout one's life (Lehr, 2007). In addition, recent research has cast doubt on the connection between increasing age and loneliness altogether. In 2017, a representative survey amongst 1,039 adults in Germany, between the ages of 18 and 70 years, revealed that those aged 60 years and over felt the least lonely out of all age groups: with only 4% of over 60-year-olds feeling often or always lonely and almost one third never reporting feelings of loneliness at all (Splendid Research, 2017).

Despite debunking the myth of deficit-only old age, advertising has still been dominated by this idea up to and including the new millennium (Olsen, 2016). This seems particularly concerning, when looking at advertising from a structurationist point of view, which assumes a mutual relationship between advertising and society, where society can change advertising and advertising, in return, can change society. With this in mind, the connection between loneliness and old age might be an outdated idea, yet it is still being picked up by advertisers and potentially reinforces a negative stereotype within society.

	Younger adults (18 – 49 yrs)	Older adults (50+ yrs)
Social interaction*		
No interaction	35.0	32.1
Part of a couple	18.3	35.4
(Grand)parent with (grand)child	5.0	6.3
Other family member	11.7	6.3
Friend / acquaintance	28.3	10.1
Work colleague	–	7.6
'Layperson – expert' situation	1.7	2.1
Total	100.0	99.9
Self-sufficiency**		
In need of assistance	–	3.0
No need of assistance	100.0	91.6
n/a	–	5.5
Total	100.0	100.1

*results are statistically significant $X^2(6, N = 1,017) = 114.32, p < .001, \phi_c = .335$

**results are statistically significant $X^2(2, N = 1,017) = 67.14, p < .001, \phi_c = .257$

TABLE 1: Social interaction and self-sufficiency of the character (in %)

Does this mean contemporary advertising in Germany uses this outdated idea of ageing by utilising loneliness as a narrative device on a broader basis? This article is trying to shed light on this question. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first attempt at approaching loneliness as an activation strategy in the narratives of German advertising.

Method

Both quantitative and qualitative media content analysis (Macnamara, 2005) were employed for the current study, to examine a selection of contemporary print advertisements featuring adult characters, aged 18 years and over, with a particular focus on adults aged 50-plus. Variables for the quantitative component were derived from the three questions proposed in the Campaign to End Loneliness Measurement Tool (CEL, n.d.), resulting in variables concerning the mood of a person and the context of social interactions, as well as risk factors that have been identified by previous research to mainly contribute to loneliness in old age, such as poor health, being widowed and a lack of social interaction beyond close family (Petrich, 2011).

The data set comprised a total of 1,017 adult characters that were found in 1,422 advertisements from four of Germany's most circulated weekly magazines (*Stern*, *Bunte*, *Bild der Frau*, *Hörzu*) that were published between January and March 2014, reaching a combined readership of over 20 million people every week.

Findings and discussion

Overall, older adults were socially engaged, with two-thirds of older characters being presented interacting with other people. The data even showed



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a slight overall rise in social engagement with age – older adults appeared to interact more often with others compared to younger adults (table 1). In respect of the mood when interacting with others, the majority of older characters were cheerful and happy (68.3%), indicating solid relationships that they felt comfortable and satisfied with. Heavy or sad moods were very rare (6.2%). Similarly, older adults in need of assistance or help beyond the product advertised were rarely found in contemporary advertising, showing almost exclusively self-sufficient and independent older people (table 1).

With regard to the context of social interactions, older adults were often shown interacting with family members, partners, friends and co-workers. In particular, the interaction with work colleagues was surprising, as most previous research has found a lack of portrayals of older people still in employment (e.g., Lohmann, 1997) and this being one of the identified risk factors for loneliness in old age. In the investigation sample, almost every tenth older adult was depicted in the workplace or in a professional context, still enjoying a successful career with a defined purpose and role within society, thus allowing older people social interactions beyond their close family.

A further risk factor for loneliness in old age is the person's state of health. Within the sample, the health of older adults was generally portrayed as good (table 2). The visuals mainly craft a picture of healthy and vital older people, or at least an idea of ageing without noticeable health-impairments. Although textual elements of the adverts could show a slightly more negative presentation, for the most part, the text simply ignored the health status and deficits of older adults altogether, thus rarely ever clouding the overly positive idea of good health. Both of these strategies are well-documented traditions in German advertising with older adults (e.g., Röhr-Sendmeier & Ueing, 2004) and seemed to still have applied to contemporary advertising practice.

Although older adults are first and foremost shown in good or at least neutral health, this does not mean they were just as healthy as the younger generations (table 2). The age comparison underlines that advertisers still define ageing as a process of health decay – which is indicated by the lower number of visuals featuring good health in older compared to younger adults. However, in contrast to previous studies (e.g., Kautt, 2013), health deficits are no longer central to the presentation of old age.

The typical contemporary advertising strategy is therefore to create a visual narrative in which older adults embody health and vitality, by being shown in a variety of settings inside and outside their homes, always smiling, often towards the camera, promoting a wide variety of products and services which they themselves consume. In those rare exceptions where sickness or impairment were addressed, it was issues that relate to ageing that afflicted the character, such as problems with memory or arthritis. The health of an older person was never shown to deteriorate to the point where they had to go into actual care or had to be removed from their normal life and home, thus steering clear of circumstances that might increase social isolation.

Loneliness as strategic advertising narrative

Based on the quantitative insight, it seemed that the deficit model of ageing has almost disappeared. Does this mean, loneliness in old age does not exist in contemporary German print advertising? The answer is: it does, but it is rare. In the few cases where loneliness in older adults was used as a narrative device, all of the advertisements were for charitable organisations or social causes. The narratives of the adverts could be assigned to one of two clusters:

The first narrative cluster revolved around 'otherness' threatening the older adult with potential loneliness. An example for this strategy is the advert for the advisory centre and living quarters *LEBENSORT*

	Younger adults (18 – 49 yrs)	Older adults (50+ yrs)
Visual elements*		
Vital / good health	90.0	57.0
Neutral	8.3	37.1
Sick / impaired	1.7	5.9
n/a	–	–
Total	100.0	100.0
Textual elements**		
Vital / good health	6.7	3.0
Neutral	8.3	11.4
Sick / impaired	1.7	16.9
n/a	83.3	68.8
Total	100.0	100.1

*results are statistically significant. $\chi^2(2, N = 1,017) = 136.62, p < .001, \phi_c = .367$

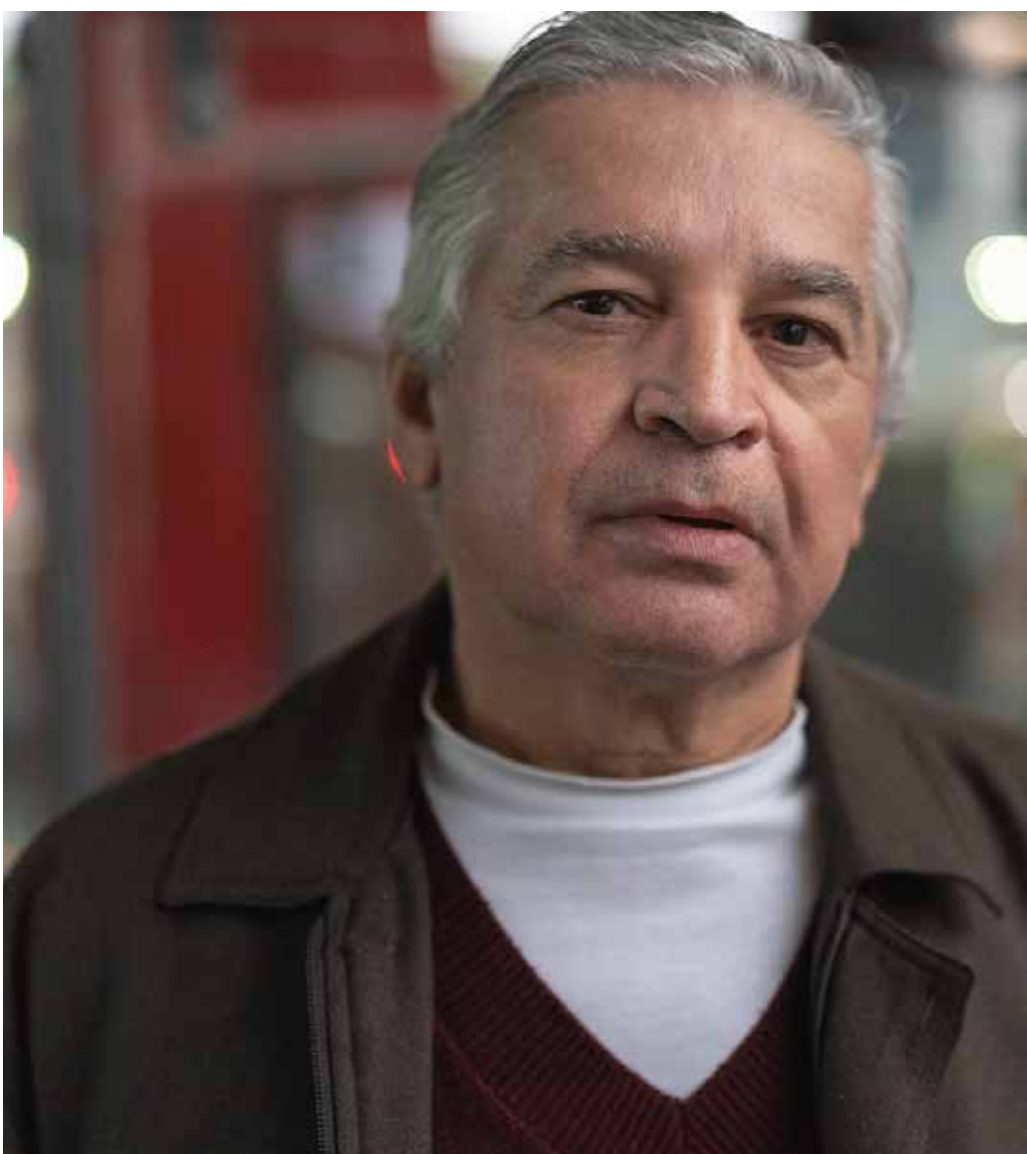
**results are statistically significant. $\chi^2(3, N = 1,017) = 91.72, p < .001, \phi_c = .300$

TABLE 2: Health of the character in visual and textual elements of advert (in %)

VIELFALT in Berlin, Germany. In the advert, the 82-year-old man Gottfried was depicted in front of a grey background with rainbow colours fading out at the top, looking wearily into the camera and asking the question: 'I am old! I am gay! Does this mean I have to be lonely now?' (*Ich bin alt! Ich bin schwul! Muss ich deshalb heute einsam sein?*). It was a question about exclusion because of innate otherness, which is at the core of this advertising narrative. Whilst otherness in this example was represented via the character's sexuality, in other adverts of this cluster it resulted from, for example, ethnicity. Loneliness is something that is out of the control of the older person, as the narrative constructed a situation of being outside the society, with the advertisers throwing a lifeline to escape the vicious path of loneliness.

The second narrative cluster encapsulated the idea of 'helplessness' that is the cause of loneliness. The advert for *HILFETELEFON*, a helpline funded by Germany's federal government aimed at women who are experiencing (domestic) violence, is an example of this category. The visual showed a woman in her 60's sitting on a sofa, with a drink on the coffee table in front and a couple of sofa cushions untidily piled up next to her, indicating that the audience is catching a glimpse into the woman's private living room. Her face showed bruising and she had her hands folded on her lap, giving the impression of being intimidated and introverted. Looking wearily into the camera, she asks the question: 'Should I give up 30 years of marriage because of this?' (*Soll ich deshalb 30 Jahre Ehe aufgeben?*). Unlike the previous example, this advert does not refer to loneliness explicitly, but implies it by the character's helplessness. Here, the woman is in need of help to make a decision after a traumatic experience. Her loneliness is therefore rooted in having nobody in her life who she can rely upon for help – despite being in a partnership. Whilst the helpless situation in this example was caused by domestic violence, it might also result from homelessness, or an older person falling victim to scammers.

In both narrative clusters, the older adult had not yet escaped loneliness, and was used by advertisers to show a potential 'consumer' at the crossroads of a life changing decision, that is, whether they should be using the service promoted, which would spare them from the otherwise inevitable destiny of loneliness. Further, both clusters only showed older adults by themselves, never surrounded by other people in the visuals; even though social connections might be implied by the text, such as with the marriage of the woman in the *HILFETELEFON* example.



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Conclusion

There are two conclusions in this article, concerning the methodology and the advertising content. With respect to methodology, the use of both the CEL Measurement Tool and risk factors for loneliness in old age to derive variables for the media content analysis has proven to be a suitable approach for a systematic and multi-faceted access to the topic within advertising. The variables were found to be easy to distinguish for the purpose of the coding process of the sample and the insights gathered were both rich and multi-faceted.

Regarding the content of the investigated advertising: with deficits on the retreat, healthy, socially engaged and happy older people dominate contemporary narratives of German print adverts. It therefore is not surprising that loneliness only plays a very minor role in these narratives. However, when loneliness appears, it is striking that only one of the risk factors is picked up as a recurring theme: the lack of an extended social network. Although social research has identified that impaired health has the biggest impact on potential feelings of loneliness (Petrich, 2011), it appears advertisers, and potentially

the public, perceive social risk factors as more crucial when it comes to loneliness in old age.

As an activation device, loneliness was not found to be a common strategy within contemporary advertising narratives in Germany. Whilst its activating potential therefore might not yet have worn off, caution should be paid when its use is considered, to avoid potential social backlash on grounds of stoking fear for financial gain, and thus possibly negatively impacting a brand.

Whilst the findings of this article might also apply to the UK, further research is required to confirm similar trends. With Tracey Crouch appointed in early 2018 to take the ministerial lead for tackling loneliness in the UK, and nationwide campaigns such as the Campaign to End Loneliness, the topic has gathered an unprecedented level of attention in Great Britain. It would therefore be of interest to see whether and how this new-found awareness of loneliness might be reflected in the media in general, and in advertising more specifically



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Key words

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