

Special Issue Intersectionality

FUORI LUOGO

Journal of Sociology of Territory,
Tourism, Technology

Guest Editors

Mariella Nocenzi

Università degli Studi di Roma "Sapienza"

Silvia Fornari

Università degli Studi di Perugia



Editor in chief: Fabio Corbisiero
Editorial manager: Carmine Urcioli

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Gender and Age. The Myth of Eternal Youth in Advertising²

1. Introduction

As Simone de Beauvoir pointed out in the 1970, it seems that the desire to appear younger than one actually is has become in contemporary society a real "social duty" to be carried out with commitment, unlike in the past when at the most it was occasionally referenced in myths and novels (for example *Faust* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*), but it did not have the same wide-spread cogency.

Concepts of youth and old age are «social constructions» (Berger e Luckmann, 1966) and as such, vary in time and space. If we look at Nineteenth century literature, for example, we can see that in previous epochs the period of life known as 'youth' covered a very limited arc of years: it was a brief passage from childhood to adulthood, and one was deemed almost elderly at the age of forty.

As for geographical variations, in non-Western cultures, such as China, special prerogatives are granted to old age. In this country, the proverbial respect and consideration for the elderly, along with the prestige attributed to them as disseminators of knowledge, probably originates in the Confucian religion, centred on devotion to the family, particularly to parents, and worship of ancestors (Sciolla, 2002, p. 183) and, by extension, of the elderly. In the West, on the other hand, people who have dropped out of the productive system are no longer considered to be able to take an active part in society, except as agents of family welfare, and are devalued.

In his essay on the generations, Mannheim (2008 [1928/1929]) explains how the concept of youth was different in the past. In his opinion, youth began to be considered as a distinct period of life only between the two world wars, becoming idealized and praised during the Fascist dictatorships.

After the second world war, the condition of youth began to be discussed, and studies on the theme flourished; however, this only took into consideration the young themselves who, for various reasons, were more visible³. Several studies⁴ have been published on the subject of youth since the 1980s, giving rise to the origins of *Youth Studies*.

The psychologist Erikson (1974 [1968]) coined the term 'psychosocial moratorium' to describe the tendency typical of Western societies to stretch the period in life in which one is considered young.

A cultural climate that exalts the values of youth induces people to prolong the characteristics of youth over time and to judge those who have passed this stage of life in a negative way. An example of this is the fact that there are some Italian politicians who call for the *rottamazione* (a term with a negative connotative value that means replacement) of representatives in politics who are no longer young.

Although ageism gives rise to «differential and demeaning treatment that harms the rights or image of people belonging to [a certain] age group or cohort» (Corradi, 2012, p. 166), and thus can affect young people as well, «research in this area of social inequalities indicates the prevalence of discrimination against older people everywhere» (*ibidem*). Therefore, the widespread tendency to prolong the qualities of the early stages of life should come as no surprise.

The myth of eternal youth particularly concerns women, albeit to varying degrees in different

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3 The hippies at the end of the '50s; the "young rebels" of the '60s; the Beat Generation; the young protesters of 1968; then the yuppies, expressive of the retreat from politics; the new "Metropolitan Indians", etc.

4 In Italy, *Indagine Iard sulla condizione giovanile* (1984); Bobba e Nicoli (1988); Cavalli e De Lillo (1988); Cavalli (1990); Colucci (1984); De Masi and Signorelli (1978); Garelli (1984); Milanese (1989); Nicoli e Martino (1986); Rauty (1989). More recently, among others, Spanò (2018).

cultures. For example, Mernissi (2000) highlights the fact that the difference between the genders regarding this aspiration is particularly accentuated in Western societies. The Moroccan sociologist argues that in the East, in order to dominate women, men use "space" - particularly by forcing them to wear the veil if they want to go into public places - while in the West they use "time": a woman who does not appear young has no value; she is almost invisible⁵. This message has been embraced by several Western women who consequently live with an obsession to always look young.

The signs of this trend are the gradual spread of exercise and fitness activities, dietary control, body care, cosmetic surgery, and, on the communication level, the growth of advertising messages on topics related to youth and ageing, which are largely directed at women.

Therefore, the intersection of gender and age can produce discrimination's multiple forms: «numerous studies have added age to the list of factors that can create additional risks for women with regard to sexism» (Corradi, *op. cit.*, p. 175).

In order to effectively promote products, advertising images and commercials propose lifestyles (Fabris, 1997) by invoking easily recognizable values (e.g. beauty, elegance, youthfulness). In doing so, they rely on other values that remain implicit. Although the viewers do not perceive these hidden values, they are nevertheless influenced by them because they reproduce assumptions assimilated since primary socialization. This is the case, for example, with stereotypes regarding gender roles.

In order to achieve their goal, advertising creatives resort to emotional cues (linked to internalized values) rather than cognitive ones: in commercials, the informational element is often in a secondary position. Emotional cues, as Berger and Luckmann (*op. cit.*)⁶ point out, have a powerful persuasive force. And the more we identify with deeply assimilated values, the better the advertising messages are conveyed.

For the reasons described above, advertising images seem to me to be a reliable source of data gathering for social values (traditional and emergent). However, as suggested by cognitivist psychology and sociological trends, such as symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology, the deepest values are those we are least conscious of, which are therefore difficult to recognize and interpret. I resorted to the conceptual framework of interactionism, which helps us to see things that usually remain hidden.

I was particularly inspired by the notion of «sensitizing concept» put forward by Blumer (1969, p. 148-49) and I used the concept 'definition of the situation' in the analysis. On this subject, Thomas (1931, p. 331) writes «Before any action that is self-determined there is always a phase of examination and decision which we may call 'definition of the situation'». This concept sheds light on the fact that it is the vision of the objects that guides reactions to them (Perrotta, 2009, p. 445). Subsequently, Berger and Luckmann highlight how the definitions of reality, assimilated during primary and secondary socialization processes, take on the meaning of objective truth, and become confused with "reality *tout court*".

2. Methodology

The methodological approach used is qualitative. The main aspects relevant to this study, which characterize it and differentiate it from the quantitative approach, can be summarized as follows:

a) Using this method, hypotheses about relationships between variables are not established; instead, an exploratory attitude is adopted. At most, conjectures are formulated (which do not involve, as in the case of hypotheses, causal models with possible cause-and-effects links)

5 On the images of women in the West and the Middle East, see Fobert Veutro (2010).

6 During primary socialization, the authors maintain, affective and emotional identification with agents of socialization is necessary in order to learn and interiorize values and models of behaviour, and even knowledge and skills.

- about the phenomenon under investigation. From the exploration of these conjectures (for example, that multiple discriminations related to gender and age exist in our society), useful hypotheses for subsequent studies with a different methodological approach can also emerge. This falls within what Reichenbach calls the 'context of discovery', as opposed to the 'context of justification' (1938) in which the researcher's task is to "explain" the identified relationships between variables.
- b) The purpose of the analysis is descriptive, not explanatory: the focus is on the "how" the phenomenon manifests itself, rather than the "why" (Perrotta, 2009, p. 82). The different objectives are consistent with the different ways of considering the object of study in the two approaches. In the qualitative approach, the object of study (whether it is a person, document, or event) is studied in its entirety, and its manifestations are described, creating classifications and typologies (such as those presented in the results and conclusions of this essay) that shed light on the motivations behind certain phenomena. In the quantitative approach, on the other hand, the object of study is broken down into operationalized properties as variables, and the purpose of the analysis is precisely to "explain" any identified relationships using statistical procedures (absent in qualitative analysis).
 - c) Regarding the sample, qualitative research does not have the constraint of size and representativeness typical of quantitative research. The selection of cases studied depends, each time, on the relevance attributed to them by the researcher(s) for the investigated phenomenon. It is not uncommon for research to be conducted on a few cases or even just one case (for example, Shaw, 1939; Castaneda, 1968). However, for this investigation, around 450 documents have been considered (see later on).
 - d) In quantitative research, it is assumed that the researcher's observation in conducting the investigation is «scientific, detached, neutral» (Corbetta, 1999, p.55), even though methodologies following this approach have long argued that standardized instruments do not eliminate the influence of the interaction between the researcher and the observed phenomenon and that «data must be constructed and, above all, interpreted» (Campelli, 1996, p. 29). In qualitative research, the researcher's personal knowledge (including tacit knowledge⁷), experience, empathy, are not only unavoidable but also constitute a fundamental hermeneutic resource for the researcher, to the benefit of the research (see, among others, Cipriani, 1996; Diana, Montesperelli, 2005; Marradi, 2007). The need to reduce the subjectivity of the researcher can be addressed by revealing to the reader, as much as possible, the interpretative process of the researcher (see Montesperelli, 1988; Cardano, 2003), as I have attempted to do in describing the criteria I used for analysis.

I followed an intersectional approach and employed qualitative techniques of document analysis, particularly guided by the principles of ethnographic content analysis (ECA) proposed by Altheide (2000 [1996]).

Institutional documents (as distinct from personal ones) include items from mass media (such as news articles, television, radio and new media broadcasts, and the new media including commercials, advertising images,⁸ etc.), fiction, teaching materials, fairy tales and stories from popular culture, legal material⁹, political documents, company and administrative documents.

In quantitative content analysis, the primary aim is «to verify or confirm hypothesized relationships rather than discover new or emerging patterns» (*ibidem*, p. 26). Conversely, in ethnographic content analysis (ECA) great importance is given to «the reflective and highly inter-

7 On the study of implicit knowledge, see also Marradi, Fobert Veutro (2001); Fobert Veutro (2006).

8 Altheide notes that «most of the document analysis is oriented towards the written text, although public information and popular culture are mainly composed of images»(2000 [1996]: 84). Moreover, there is a branch of sociology, known as "visual sociology", that deals specifically with the analysis of fixed and moving images (Mattioli, 1991; Facioli and Losacco, 2010; Frisina, 2013).

9 See, for example, Perrotta (1994).

active nature of the investigator [...] Unlike quantitative content analysis, where the protocol is the instrument, in ECA the investigator is continually at the center [...] Categories and variables initially guide the study, others are allowed and expected to emerge to be taken into account in the course of the study, including an orientation towards constant discovery and constant comparison of relevant situations, settings, styles, images, meanings and nuances» (*ibidem*, p. 27). Regarding the images, Altheide points out that there are various approaches «that go in search of underlying messages or cultural signs, within images, which can then be related to sign systems» (*ibidem*, p. 84).

For this study, I examined several advertising images, taken from magazines published in Italy, in which the theme of contrasting ageing appears. The investigation took place over three different periods.

During the first phase, in 2012, I reviewed issues of three weekly magazines by different publishers in Italy (*Venerdì di Repubblica*, *Oggi*, and *Panorama*) in the first three months of the year (39 issues in total). During the second, in 2019, I analysed eight issues of the same magazines published in January of that year¹⁰.

The third survey period began on October 30, 2021 and ended on October 15, 2022. In this phase, I focused the research on *D di Repubblica* (henceforth *D*), of which I analysed 29 issues: I initially considered all the issues; from April 2022, following the criterion of saturation in the composition of a sample (Bertaux, 1981), I then examined only one issue per month since the analysis of additional cases added little or nothing to the knowledge previously acquired. I also looked at nine issues of other Italian weeklies with a wide circulation (*Chi*, *Donna moderna*, *Elle*, *Oggi*, *Tv Sorrisi e canzoni*, and *Vanity Fair*) and analysed five television commercials broadcast in Italy.

To sketch a comparison with another country in the West, I also examined 13 television commercials broadcast in the United States and a billboard on this theme displayed on a street in New York City. The results arising from material addressed to an American public will be presented after those for the *corpus* of documents intended for Italians. Obviously, the scarcity and extemporaneity of the considered material do not allow for a direct comparison with the results derived from the analysis of the much more substantial and systematic material aimed at the Italian audience. However, the American documents can provide insights into a reality that is different from the Italian one, even though it is also Western.

Browsing through Italian journals, as I flipped through them page by page, I dwelt on advertisements that referred to the theme of ageing in various ways: I observed their overall composition and details, and I read the caption texts. In the first two investigation periods, I explored about 200 advertising pages; in the third period I examined 211. I cut out and analysed those that struck me because they contained the following features:

- a) excessive and inappropriate use of numbers;
- b) situations and scenarios (rural landscapes; presence of animals) in which the advertised product did not have a prominent position;
- c) expressions or terms that were emotionally strong or that recalled an idea that I felt was familiar, for example: face them, challenge, forbidden, triumph, victory, global, exclusively, absolute, the original, limited edition, ritual;
- d) pharmacological and cosmetological terms that are specialized and mostly unfamiliar to the uninitiated, for example: hydrolyzed collagen, resveratrol, niacinamide, multi-fermented longoza, peptide complex, viniferin, makgeolli, cicawax, oxygeskin;
- e) images showing biological processes *in vitro*, that are unfamiliar to non-experts.

¹⁰ The investigations carried out in the first two periods covered a broad set of values, and the topic was the subject of a teaching workshop aimed at classes of student as part of the courses in Metodologia qualitativa and Teorie e tecniche della comunicazione. The results of the research and the modalities as well as the outcomes of the workshop were published in Fobert Veutro (2019).

Subsequently, I put together advertisements that reported similar situations and elements and classified them. As the research went on, I identified criteria that I found interesting and significant. Sometimes I would find references to scholarly contributions in them. Finally, with a mental disposition sensitive to the concept of 'social value', I wondered what definitions of the situation might refer to those aspects that had seemed strange or incongruous to me to some extent. Needless to say, this part of the work was informed and enhanced by the aforementioned references, by my experience of research and my general socio-psychological and community background, deriving in good part from a tacit introjected knowledge ever since my primary socialization, which I made an effort to bring to consciousness. When I felt that I had identified a concept of value, a certain definition of the situation, I imagined an expression or term that I thought was appropriate and which I report in the results.

3. Results

As noted in other studies (Corradi, *op. cit.*), the first thing you notice in advertisements promoting products that combat ageing is the lack of presence of older people. As will be seen, they almost always appear in some commercial sectors, particularly drugs for specific diseases. On the contrary, people (almost all women) who are young or youthful - as well as beautiful - are mainly depicted to advertise cosmetics and the like, with few exceptions. Thus, the supposed outcome of anti-ageing products is shown, not the starting state, probably because the state of old age arouses unease and the sight of it would make the advertised merchandise unattractive. Delving deeper into the analysis, a general finding is that the promotion of items that embody the manifest value of aspiring to look young all the time is mostly "encapsulated" in certain taken-for-granted, and thus uncritically accepted, definitions of the situation that easily convey the main message, i.e. the effectiveness of certain products to stay young. Here are the identified definitions.

a) "This anti-ageing product is good because the numbers give credence to an indisputable truth". We could call this definition of the situation 'the cult of numbers'. In our society, the attribution of scientificity and truthfulness tends to be linked to the use of numbers; therefore, they attract our attention and influence definitions about the merits of a product. In many advertisements for anti-ageing cosmetics, efficacy is evidenced by statistics that show percentage numbers sometimes even with decimal points, with improbable and even ridiculous results.

There are many examples found in each of the issues considered. Here are a few: *Dior* advertises *Capture Totale* products by reporting that «women noticed an improvement in their skin of +51% in plumpness, +56% in firmness, and +77% in elasticity». In microscopic type it reports the procedure leading to these results: «Self-evaluation of skin condition upon awakening of 32 women after 28 days of application». With *Bioscalin*, hair is 75% stronger in 15 days (*Elle* 15/10/22). *BioNike* (*Chi* 17/11/21) attests that its cream is «recommended by 96% of women at age 60» (self-evaluation test by 50 women, aged 55-70). The cosmetic company *Matis* omits the number of test subjects but details six different percentages of improvement (from 77% to 96%) of various aspects of the skin: radiance, wrinkles, firmness, smoothness, etc. (*Donna moderna* 4/11/21).

The emphasis on quantification, with an obvious deference to research practices in use in the natural sciences¹¹, clashes with the technique that gives rise to the above statistics.

11 European sociology, with Saint-Simon, Comte and Durkheim, was born under the influence of a positivist and epistemological outlook and that in our societies, in the wake of this thought that grants superiority to the research method used in natural sciences (and which must also be adopted in the other sciences), has spread a conception of scientific activity linked to the use of numbers.

As reported above, this technique is mentioned in the captions below in tiny and almost illegible characters: «self-evaluation», an eminently qualitative and subjective mode of detection.

In this regard, it should be noted that the quantitative approach in the human sciences has for quite some time used techniques (so-called scaling) that allow a certain degree of quantification of constructs that are not directly or hardly observable. These techniques are evidently not used in cosmetology research, except in one case where the test proposes a fixed response from the users, but with only two options: very satisfied or fairly satisfied; uncertain, little and not at all are not even envisaged (a serum by *La Roche Posay* in *D 30/04/22*).

Another incongruous element, given the display of so many figures¹² and percentages, is the small size of the sample, which is also published in microscopic font. For example, only 20 women (between the ages of 20 and 76) tested a *Korff* facial serum, an *Euphidra* anti-ageing eye contour and an *Arval* anti-blemish treatment (*D 11/27/21* and *7/05/22*; *Vanity Fair 12/10/22*) and only 22 tested a facial treatment from *Filorga* (*Elle 10/15/22*): tiny groups such as these appear most frequently¹³. Once again from the minuscule captions, we are sometimes also informed of the ethnicities of those tested regarding products that, let us remember, are advertised and sold in Italy: African-American, Asian, Hispanic, Caucasian (*L'Oréal Midnight Serum* and *Dior Capture Totale*) and Chinese (*Guerlain Advanced serum*) women.

This, therefore, is the framework that attests to an efficacy that supposedly derives from numbers constructed in such a way that completely diverges from serious research practice. These figures are in any case taken seriously because they invoke an entirely familiar value in our society: numbers are a guarantee of scientificity and therefore of truth.

- b) “This anti-ageing product is good because Science says so”. In modern and contemporary Western societies, the authority of science has replaced that of religion¹⁴, and in several advertising images, emphasis is placed on the fact that the quality of the anti-ageing product is guaranteed by, for example, the «science of regeneration» (which inspired a *Lancôme* product) and technology. Among many cases, *Shiseido* claims to be «a world leader in innovation [...] after decades of study, it brings to light a revolutionary technology: *Molecushift* Technology, inspired by cosmetic medicine» (*Elle 15/10/22*). The same cosmetic company asserts that «The new *Cool & Warm Eye Care* technology delivers visible results» (*D 11/27/21*). *Caudalíe* informs us that «TET8 Technology, co-patented with Harvard after 10 years of research corrects eight indicators of age»: from 1, persistent wrinkles, to 8, hydration (*D 5* and *19/02/22*). Among other things, the mention of substances and active ingredients with strange names unknown to many (see above) lends an aura of esoteric scientificity to products containing them, as does the *in vitro* depiction of «plumping» and «restorative» biological processes. Moreover, stereotypical exoticism can help instil confidence in a cosmetic: the *LaboFillerina* is the result of a «Swiss Patent». Also reassuring is the cream «*Sensai* - the sense and science of Japan» (*D 7/05/22*). Switzerland and Japan are scientifically and technologically advanced countries; an item produced in a Central African country would not have the same effect.
- c) “This anti-ageing product is good because it is natural. We need to go back to Nature”. This definition is applied in certain corporate communication strategies called ‘Greenwashing’. The anti-ageing effect is supposedly promoted by “natural” herbal products, by non-chemical active ingredients, such as «Hyper-Fermented Aloe» or «edelweiss native cells + ginger root» (*D 30/10/21* and *13/11/22*). *Erboristica* proclaims «The natural revolution [...] using

12 For example: +3.39 mm.: cheekbone volume; - 2.87 mm.: Oval facial sag; 315.55 mm²: Collagen reticulum area, etc. (*LaboFillerine* and *Cosprophar Facial and Eyelid Lift* in several *D* numbers).

13 As if wishing to pillory a practice of deceptive advertising, the cosmetic company *Élève* thus invites purchase: “Try our products. If they work, you say so!” (*Vanity Fair 12/10/22*, *D 30/09/22*).

14 As shown by Auguste Comte in *Opuscles de philosophie sociale* and *Cours de philosophie positive*.

authentic formulas with natural, selected and exclusive active ingredients» (*Donna moderna* 4/11/21). The relevant captions state that *Garnier* hair colour restructuring treatment and *L'Erbolario* products are «98 percent natural in origin» (*Oggi* 25/11/21 and *D* 13/11/21). *Nuxe* uses a «vegan formula» (*Vanity Fair* 12/10/22). Other cosmetic companies boast that even the wrappers are made of natural and recyclable materials, and the prefix *Bio* appears on many products, such as *Biocollagenix*. Some companies are actually proposing a «Green Impact Index» to measure the social and environmental impact (e.g. on the marine ecosystem) of cosmetics and healthcare products (*D* 20 and 11/27/21).

The exhortation to return to nature can also be seen in the spread of animalier-style fashion. Not only are there fabrics with prints recalling animal coats, that were also made in the past, but also the depiction of a real interpenetration between women's faces and bodies and those of animals: a woman's face recalls the pride and majesty of a lion (not a lioness, as she flaunts thick blonde hair that resembles a mane) and the caption is «Naturally Sustainable» (*D* 9/04/22); another female face is juxtaposed with that of an innocent lamb (*D* 13/11/21)¹⁵.

This value, which seems to contradict the previous one, is an example of how in modern and especially contemporary society, values of different, sometimes even opposing, signs coexist (Gallino, 2006; Sciolla, *op. cit.*): for example, one anti-pollution face serum is created thanks to «Bioscience and biotechnology» (*D* 27/11/21) and another by *Collistar* «from the encounter between science and nature» (*D* 19/02/22). *Guerlain* attests to «the restorative power of science and bees» (*D* 3/09/22).

- d) "This anti-ageing product is necessary because it is important to be special". The exclusivity, the fact that they are "selected", is emphasized by many products. The implicit message is as follows: "by using this cosmetic you will be part of an inner circle that enjoys benefits reserved for the few". In order to advertise an *lbsa* cream, for example, a woman's face is displayed framed as if it were an art painting, with the words «*Ritratto di rimodellamento. Ognuno di voi è un capolavoro* (Remodeling Portrait. Each One of You is a Masterpiece)» (in several issues of *D*). A *La Mer* cream repairs and regenerates thanks to its «unique and precious ingredient [...] A luxurious daily pampering» (*D* 30/10/21). *Collistar* offers «tailor-made solutions [...] targeted treatments» (*D* 19/03/22). Some of the expressions and terms that appear with some frequency are: «limited edition», «the best», «excellence».

Like the title of Bourdieu's (1983 [1979]) famous work, one can name this set of aspirations 'Distinction'. The desire to distinguish oneself is certainly an old one, but it became rather widespread with the advent of industrial production and its related mass consumption.

Baudrillard (1972 [1968]) illustrated the seductiveness of the language of advertising and stressed the symbolic value of the commodity: consumption of the product, as a source of identity, can make you feel special and unique. It invokes similar feelings through the presence of extreme adjectives, such as «global», «absolute», which recur frequently.

- e) "You need to use this anti-ageing product on a daily basis because if you follow a daily ritual, you will gain well-being." This definition follows from the fact that repeated activities elicit a sense of security. Several scholars have highlighted the importance of rituals for human beings: they have the effect of preserving individual identity and a sense of cohesion in the groups to which they belong and in the larger society. Durkheim (1912) identified the concept of a state of «collective effervescence» that is created during communal rituals and that would forestall the dangerous condition of anomie. Goffman (1969 [1959]) argued for the relevance of micro rituals in the interactions of everyday life. Berger and Luckmann (*op. cit.*) identified «reality-preserving mechanisms» in «routine» and «casual conversation».

15 However, other images (in several issues of *D*), which exhibit the mischievous juxtaposition of figures of women with those of big cats, echo the cliché of the panther woman, the tiger woman, with a «feline gaze», a dangerous enchantress in short.

The captions of several anti-ageing advertisements feature just the word 'ritual', a term particularly emblematic of repeated actions. Here are some captions associated with images of cosmetics: «The *Lotion soin Anti-Âge* is the prelude to the *Supremya* night ritual» (D 19/02/22). *Chanel* urges people to practice «the new *Le lift pro* ritual [...] to act on the triangle of youth» (D 1/10/22). «Your youthfulness ritual» is proposed by the face of a well-known actress regarding three anti-ageing products (D 7/05/22). The cosmetic company *Isdin* points out the secret to ever-youthful skin: «taking care of it every day» (D 13/11/21).

Therefore, this definition can draw attention to advertisements because it invokes a widespread individual and societal need.

By quantifying the number of advertisements according to the target audience, it is evident that advertising on these issues targets women to the maximum degree, pushing them more than men to pursue certain models. It is interesting to note the ways in which the portrayals differ depending on the gender to which they are targeted. Here are some observations below.

- a) "Ageing is a woman's problem". There are very few advertisements about ageing in which (only) men are depicted. In my *corpus* I have encountered just one (preventing hair loss) in which only a male figure appears. As is well known, the gender most afflicted by baldness is male, but products that claim to have the effect of invigorating hair are largely aimed at the female gender. For example, ads for *Bioscalin Tricoage 50+* and *Nova Genina* display a woman's long, full-bodied hair (TV *Sorrisoni e canzoni* 4/10/22; *Elle* 15/10/22; *Vanity Fair* 12/10/22). In the *Miglior Cres* advertisement, which features a woman with long flowing hair, the reference to a man appears only in a small caption: «Also available for men» (TV *Sorrisoni e canzoni* 4/10/2022). Here is a further exception: next to an anti-wrinkle fluid (*Lierac homme*) appear the words, in very large letters, «New. For men» (D 29/01/22). But it is, indeed, a "novelty."

In noting that the largest number of advertisements of these hair products are aimed at women, it may be considered that long female hair can also be seen as sexually appealing: it is no coincidence that obscurantist and sexist cultures require it to be covered. Moreover, according to a widespread popular belief, male baldness is supposedly caused by an excess of testosterone, which allegedly also has the effect of enhancing sexuality. It follows that in order to sell certain hair products, it is more useful to target women than men, even though the latter may need them more. It is not the object itself that directs consumption, but the meaning attached to it by the definition given to it.

There are some advertisements that depict a woman and a man together at a rather advanced age; however, they do not promote cosmetic products to preserve beauty and youthfulness but supplements or drugs, i.e. health remedies: *Rubaxx Articulations* (TV *Sorrisoni e canzoni* 2/11/21); *Kilocal* against cholesterol (D 18/12/21); *Pharma's Abiogen*, a drug that combats osteoporosis (D 6 and 13/11/21).

- b) "Women are ancillary and caring figures". In the few advertisements that are aimed only or mostly at men (in which they are also depicted there) there is almost always also a woman, in whom an affectionate caregiver figure may be discernible (*Sanders Helvetic Institute for Hair Treatment: Chi* 17/11/21 and TV *Sorrisoni e canzoni* 2/11/21) or, in other images, a sexual partner. I have not come across any advertisements with similar situations in reverse, i.e. men contributing to the protection of women's mental and physical well-being. Thus, reference to traditional definitions of gender roles seems implicit.

- c) "Women must fight to maintain youth and beauty". Bellicose terminology is used in certain advertising images aimed at the female sex: *Capture Sculpt* by *Dior* «triumphs over time» and has «the mission» to improve your profile, «wrinkles and loss of tone are terrible enemies»,

«the greatest victory of all: preserving your youth!». Another proclaims «Growing old is not allowed». (*Planter's* face cream).

These expressions do not appear in the few advertisements on the subject aimed at men. This confirms the definition that "ageing is a dangerous threat for women, much more than for men". A TV commercial aired in Italy, in which three women of different ages take pleasure in looking younger than their age, testifies to the fact that appearing younger is considered to be a kind of personal and social obligation. In the weekly magazines I examined, the depiction of three women of different ages (who obtain differential benefits from the proposed cosmetics) on the same advertising page is recurrent, as if throughout her life, a woman must always be on her toes and arm herself against the dreaded and disastrous ageing. None of this is depicted with male protagonists.

In the weekly magazine *Donna moderna* (4/11/21), the advertisement of two facial creams recommended specifically for use during menopause reports much lower percentages of skin improvement than in other examples (39% tone, 22% elasticity, 17% density), thus pointing out that at this time of life a woman has less chance of prolonging a youthful appearance, and therefore perhaps has to work harder.

In the advertisements viewed, the potential loss of attractiveness of older men is not shown at all. Moreover, the term 'andropause' (the male counterpart of menopause) as a sign of aesthetic decline never appears: this phase of life does not appear relevant to a man. Instead, for example, the advertisement for the dietary supplement *KilocalAge* shows, once again, three figures of women with the respective captions: Pre-menopause 45 years; Menopause 50 years; and Post-menopause 60 years (in several issues of *D*). Unlike for men, the idea that women's lives are punctuated by events that threaten their appearance is reinforced, to the point that *Laboratoires Lierac* accredit themselves (with a caption in very large print) as «Menopause Experts» (*D* 7/05/22). We do not find any cosmetologists who are experts in andropause. d) "Old age can exert charm". In the images examined, it seems that this applies only to men: people who have greying or white hair but are decidedly attractive are almost only of the male gender, as in an advertisement for Radio Monte Carlo (*Elle* 15/10/22) and in another for glasses, the *Cucinelli* brand (*D* 2/07/22). «In advertising discourse, the intersectional approach between age and gender is fundamental: we could not otherwise understand why the signs of mature age [...] in men can be considered fascinating while in women they are to be hidden in every way» (Corradi, *op. cit.*, p. 179). If anything, the white-haired woman derives her prestige not from her attractiveness but from the professional position she has attained, like the director of *D* (13/11/21). Or from a charitable disposition, such as the depiction of a sober old lady who put in her will a bequest to the *Opera San Francesco per i Poveri* (a charity) (*D* 3/09/22) and another who, by buying *L'Oréal* products, «donates her wrinkles» (*D* 6/11/21) to support the Umberto Veronesi Foundation (which deals with cancer research).

- e) Some advertisements suggest the following definitions: combatting the ageing of men involves their sexual performance, while the possible sexual activity of women in old age is not relevant. This can be exemplified by two TV commercials concerning incontinence: one aimed at men (*Prostamol*) in which the scene is dominated by a double bed; another at women (*Tena*) in which the advertised product (mini sanitary pads) facilitates conviviality and entertainment with girlfriends. The two contexts are very different.

An exception, among the material viewed, is a commercial (again about *Tena* sanitary pads), devised by director Yorgos Lanthinos, which instead depicts the sensuality of women in old age: this, too, is an example of the emergence of coexisting alternative values (see above), and of the fact that women tend to claim spaces in the imaginary traditionally considered to be only masculine.

- f) In some advertisements aimed at women, a competitive attitude toward other women, focused on the aspiration for youthfulness, comes through. For example, the caption of an image advertising a face cream (*Cera di Cupra*), with a man and a woman dancing is, «They saw your husband with a younger woman: it was you» (obviously due to the effect of the cream). Nothing like this appears in images with male protagonists. We are thus going back to the stereotype that women (and not men) compete with each other about looking young.

Analysing the material directed at the American public, we can find some similarities and some differences with certain findings that arose from examining the *corpus* of documents published and broadcast in Italy.

As regards the similarities, the commercials broadcast in the United States confirm the traditional gender roles mentioned above.

A commercial, which focuses on the special needs of the elderly, urges them to purchase a «Safety Bath Tub»¹⁶ in which one opens a door to a seat in the tub without having to climb into it. The elderly male protagonist is a well-known and attractive actor who moves with agility; a mature-aged lady, also with white hair, appears only for a couple of seconds and is barely discernible: probably because it is believed that an elderly woman cannot have the same qualities as her male peer who appears in this video, and therefore would not be attractive to the product. As has already been pointed out, old age can give charm to men, but not women.

The *Dove* chocolate advertisement¹⁷ shows several stereotypes regarding gender roles. With a catchy musical background (the song *La vie en rose* performed by Edith Piaf) a woman's life, from childhood to old age, unfolds in a few frames. In addition to the chocolates of the advertised brand, it is punctuated by emotional encounters, and the encounter with the mirror, the fearsome judge of women's adherence to the imposed canons of beauty. In old age, the mirror's verdict is lenient in that it sends back the image of a face marked by wrinkles, but satisfied and proud (thanks to the mood-boosting chocolate). In her youth, the girl quickly climbs a ladder, playfully pursued by a boy of the same age; in old age, she climbs a ladder slowly and wearily, and alone: no one follows her; a beautiful and comfortable bedroom with a double bed awaits her, in which she falls asleep serenely, alone (after enjoying a chocolate). The definitions underlying the advertisement are clear: in a woman's life, the most important thing is romantic encounters with men in youth, for which she must carefully prepare herself by consulting the mirror (as the protagonist does). Moreover, love and sexuality, which are vibrant in youth, are completely expunged in a woman's old age, as is also evident from one of the commercials aired in Italy. Finally, it comes to mind that if the protagonist of the chocolate advertisement had been a man, perhaps his moments of success in work would have been presented rather than those in the realm of love.

On the subject of love and sexuality in old age, in the billboard advertisement posted on a street in New York City in 2019, there appears (only) an elderly man who, unlike the protagonist in the video just described, claims the desire to have a partner. In fact, it is an advertisement for a dating app for single people over 50: the *Lumen Dating App*. According to the well-known cliché, this character is advanced in years but handsome: shirtless, seductive-looking and sporting a large youthful tattoo. The caption (which plays on a pun) mentions the Christmas party («Pull a cracker this Christmas!»): the man resembles a reassuring Santa Claus with a white beard and braces, but he is slender and handsome. It is as if recalling the most traditional of holidays in the West compensates for the transgressiveness of an older man's search for a partner.

There are some noteworthy differences between American and Italian advertisements in this regard: as mentioned above, in the Italian magazine advertisements examined, the elderly mostly appear in certain commercial sectors, particularly drugs for specific pathologies; or in some cases, usually in television commercials, they promote goods whose choice requires experience

¹⁶ <https://youtu.be/udhyKvF68mg>

¹⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TWJ2ThGFg-o>

and wisdom (the grandmother bestowing advice regarding household cleaning products; the grandfather together with the grandchildren around the Christmas cake).

In the American commercials I reviewed, the elderly depicted advertise drugs for various illnesses to a considerable extent, but also other goods and services that are not usually promoted in Italy: nursing homes; insurance or financial investments (befitting the elderly more than the young); home or supplementary health care; and even lots in cemeteries and funeral planning (to relieve their children of these tasks in advance).

The focus on certain goods and services in a nation that does not have health and pension welfare (unlike Italy) is understandable. On the other hand, the explicit mention in several American commercials of death and the end of life is not easily interpretable. In Italy, with few exceptions, one does not encounter promotional activities on these issues, which are mostly kept private. Below I describe a commercial that promotes a *Funeral and Memorial Information Center*¹⁸; it also carries a definition of the situation that falls within the usual canons of family representation. In the video, children are urged to be told by their parents about memories and what was important in their lives («Have the Talk of a Lifetime») so that they can best honour them at the time of their passing. No lonely elderly people appear, but three married couples of a certain age, well brought up; one of these people shows an album with photographs showing her with her children. Only traditional families are presented.

Another difference, compared to Italian commercials, is that more commercials feature older women and men promoting goods that are not necessarily intended for people of advanced age, but are used mostly by young people. Here are two examples: *Nike* sports shoes and a Mexican fast-food chain that is mainly frequented by teenagers and young people (*Taco Bell*).

What is also striking in these two commercials is that these people are presented in a caricatured way. In the first commercial (Unlimited Youth)¹⁹, the elderly woman («The Iron Woman») wearing *Nike* shoes engages in feats and sports that are far too strenuous and implausible for her age. In the second²⁰, a clique of elderly people in bad shape, who have been admitted to an old people's home, escape the staff's surveillance at night and run off to indulge in the dishes of the advertised fast-food restaurant, and then continue their night out at the disco, which is crowned by a sexual encounter with a young man.

Another commercial, that uses this kind of humour, advertises an insurance company²¹ that guarantees support in old age; it presents elderly men and women in a grotesque way, showing them being forced to work late in life because they have no pension or medical insurance. In the United States, instances of political correctness are widespread, but this is not the case for the elderly people in these videos. In Italy, on the other hand, there are no such portrayals of old people as they would be seen to put people who are advanced in their years in an undignified light.

4. Final discussion and considerations

Advertisements sell products by invoking a value that is appreciated in our societies and easily recognizable (the preservation of youthfulness), and their message is enhanced by the fact that they rely on another value that remains implicit, usually not directly perceived by the recipients. However, these are influenced by a definition of the situation that is taken for granted because it reproduces assumptions assimilated since primary socialization.

Through the analysis of advertisements considered in this investigation, the ways in which the phenomenon under study is presented, often in a subtle manner, have been articulated and

18 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jGm_nHIXh-K

19 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=anbpHZbk8aM>

20 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_afZ0H7V0vQ

21 <https://youtu.be/PJbyV-InCCo>

detailed. This phenomenon employs the objective portrayal of numbers and science, bestows validity upon “natural” product, and assigns importance to exclusivity and rituals.

Furthermore, some representations mirror discrimination’s multiple forms the multiple forms of discrimination, such as those generated by the intersection of age and gender: they send back images of identity and gender relations in which a woman who is no longer young is affected by a stigma that is difficult to dismantle. It rests on definitions of the situation incessantly reiterated by advertising, which guide consumption and confirm certain beliefs and thus certain patterns of behaviour, that are unfavourable for older women in particular. It has been highlighted that aging is portrayed as a problem exclusively affecting women, who engage in a daily battle, often in competition with other women. Women are depicted as affectionately caring for men, who are rarely shown with the early signs of aging, which, however, can make them more attractive, unlike in the portrayal of women. The greatest concern for men seems to be the decline in their sexual performance, whereas this aspect is not regarded concerning considered regarding aging women.

These outcomes of the analysis unite the documents considered, both Italian and American. Other findings, however, such as the readiness, or reluctance, to mention death, and the disinhibition, or vice-versa the reticence, to ridicule the elderly, seem to differentiate the advertisements in the two countries.

As can be seen from some of the results presented, advertisements embody widespread values yet at the same time propose, in certain cases, emerging values, sometimes in contradiction to other strongly entrenched ones: for example, the credit assigned to both science and technology and to procedures according to nature, or the legitimate aspiration for sexuality on the part of women in old age.

These “new values” may appeal to individuals who are sensitive to change or novelty that is in the realm of elites or that may be transgressive to some extent. Here are the other instances I have identified in Italian documents.

- Sensitivity to ethical issues. For example, the manufacturer of *Acqua Rocchetta* (fountain of youth), together with *Differenza Donna* (nationwide network of anti-violence centres), supports the «Autonomy Project, helping to provide safe housing and concrete help to women and their children escaping violence» (D 13/08/22). *L’Erborario* is a «Benefit Society, because [...] cosmetics rhymes with ethics» (D 04/23/22).
- Depiction of same-sex relationships. In an advertisement for a handbag (D 4/12/21) two women, who are not exactly young, are depicted kissing; and in a TV commercial there are two young gay men.
- The display of non cisgender identities: both transgender (in *Chi* 17/11/21 there is a seemingly non-stigmatizing article on the «trans world») and gender fluid, as in a *D* article (*Towards a Unisex Future*: 1/15/22) which explicitly states that «no-gender perfumes are in high demand among the public today».
- Aesthetic canons that do not correspond to traditional gender roles. In a special issue on men’s fashion (D 15/01/22) the models have an ethereal appearance, not at all macho, and even the clothing is not traditionally masculine, albeit not on a par with the transgressiveness of the well-known musical group *Måneskin*, for example. Models with similar characteristics also appear in *Vanity Fair* (12/10/22).
- Forms of countering body shaming: in *D* dated 11/20/21 an obese model is depicted.
- Presence of models of non-white ethnicity in several issues of *D*.
- Some ambiguity in the portrayal of the ages of some model couples (a man and a woman) simulating an emotional relationship: they could give the impression of being a mother and child but also of a woman and a much younger partner.

- One gets the impression that the portrayal of “transgressive” values in the United States is less frequent than has been found by analysing advertising produced in Italy. Obviously, we are referring to American broadcasters targeting a mass audience, although the example I give below comes from an influential newspaper oriented on liberal positions: the New York Times. An article in this newspaper (Sept. 23, 2019 of the New York Edition) stigmatizes the mentioned billboard advertisement because it presents a “sexy” version of Santa Claus.

Concerning the co-presence of contradictory instances, Weber had spoken of the *polytheism of values*. As several scholars have pointed out (for example, Gallino, 2006; Sciolla, *op. cit.*), in modern and above all contemporary societies, there are values that coexist with opposing traits, values that are contradictory; there is the co-presence of various symbolic systems that are not always correlated.

In a sense, even if they jar or conflict with traditional values, the “new values” redefine the situation and promote the liking of perhaps initially niche products.

According to the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, the «culture industry» (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1966 [1947]), of which advertising is a full-fledged part, performs a political action of legitimizing the dominant ideology in the capitalist world; and the market engulfs everything, even new claims to rights and transgressive values. This ideology is also recognizable in the «consumer society» mentioned by Baudrillard (2010 [1970]): it creates a “pastiche”, which amalgamates all cultural forms into a single language, absorbing even contradictory instances. However, in the Cultural Studies tradition, which has been developing in Birmingham, UK, since the 1960s and which subscribes to the Marxist approach along with the Frankfurt school, the dominant culture is not considered homogeneous and incontrovertible, inevitably imposed on the subordinate classes. Alternative values can spread through arduous processes of negotiation and conflict, which is why we speak of “public” in the plural (Paccagnella, 2004).

Highlighting and dismantling the dynamics underlying the perpetuation of stereotypes and prejudices encourages the setting up of critical communications that tend to expose and combat them.

If gender and age roles are not to be traps or prisons, we must foster socialization processes that accustom us to a critical consideration of proposed and imposed traditional models, and push towards renewal, respectful of the dignity of each individual.

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