Socioemotional Selectivity Theory: Implications for Advertising to Senior Consumers

Lisa Edgar & Lynn Sudbury-Riley

Abstract

This developmental paper discusses an empirical study-in-progress that applies Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (SST) to analyse recall of and attitudes towards different advertising execution strategies among consumers of different ages. At the time of writing the survey has been designed, piloted and launched. Research has long acknowledged that older adults process information, including marketing information, differently to younger adults. Younger adults tend to score better in tests of brand recall and recognition, and for many years the advice to those wishing to communicate with older consumers was to use a message containing factual information as opposed to emotional appeals. SST suggests this advice may be incorrect, and emotion-based communication may be more suitable for older adults. This study tests the theory in an advertising context.

Senior Consumers

The United Nations (2010) describes the current ageing of the world’s population as probably the most profound demographic change in the history of humankind. It is a pervasive and truly global phenomenon, without precedent or parallel, largely irreversible, and with the young populations of the past unlikely to occur again. Over five decades, life expectancy at birth increased globally by almost 20 years – from 46.5 years in 1950-1955 to 66 years in 2000-2005. Indeed, at the world level, the number of older persons will exceed the number of children by 2050, when one in every three persons in the developed world will be over 60 years old, and 379 million people will be aged 80+.

Recently age 50 has become the inclusion point for studies, policies and target markets comprising seniors. Globally therefore, according to the US Census Bureau (2011), the over-50s market currently comprises 1.4 billion consumers, or 20.8% of the world’s population, many of whom are relatively wealthy and willing to spend (Jones et al., 2008; Hurd and Rohwedder, 2010; ONS, 2011). Figures suggest Baby Boomers have an annual spending power of $3.4 trillion (CBS News, 2011), own the most assets across many countries including the UK (ILC-UK, 2010), and it is known that older consumers are now the highest purchasers for a range of goods and services, including new cars, beauty products and a range of leisure activities (ONS, 2011, Zolpho Cooper, 2012).

In addition to their size and spending power, the Baby Boomers (born after the Second World War to 1964) are a unique cohort from a cultural and marketing perspective. In contrast to the so called ‘silent generation’ who preceded them and grew up with the austerity of the post-
war years and tended to conform (Lifecourse Associates, 2012), Baby Boomers have experienced a very different life course with an emphasis on choice, autonomy, self-expression and pleasure (Jones et al. 2008). The ad men of Madison Avenue created a youth culture as a reaction to the Depression, and a shift from class differences to age-related lifestyle differences was born. The cultural shift took a little longer in Europe, but nevertheless it came. By the 1960s, for the first time in history, the focus in society was on working class teenagers and this is the period in which the origins of mass consumption are found. Subsequently, “socialisation into the new lifestyles of consumption has permeated the lives...of the participants of post-war youth culture” (Jones et al. 2008:39). In a nutshell, Baby Boomers shaped modern marketing (Thompson and Thompson, 2009) and Boomers grew up being prime targets. It is unlikely, then, that just because they reach a milestone birthday they will cease to crave what they want: after all, they are healthy enough to consume it and wealthy enough to afford it. The old adage, “50 is the new 40” is perhaps particularly pertinent to today’s older adults, who feel more than 10 years younger than their actual age (Edgar and Bunker, 2012; Sudbury, 2004) and who want to maintain their relatively active lifestyles for as long as possible.

However, there is a major problem in that business, and marketing in particular, has been slow to adapt to the needs of the ageing population. Many businesses still have not developed viable strategies to target Baby Boomers (Giegetich, 2012) and the majority of advertising spend still goes on targeting the under 50s (Nielsen, 2012; Wise Branding, 2012). Yet, what works for younger audiences will simply not work for this older, wiser, and relatively discerning group of seniors who are less influenced by peer group pressure and have different values (Sudbury and Simcock, 2009) and motivations (Wolfe, 2004) to the young audiences that marketing has for so long concentrated on.

**Age Differences in Recall and Recognition**

Previous research demonstrates major differences in the way older and younger adults process marketing information (Yoon, 1997) and make product-related decisions (Yoon, Cole and Lee, 2009), and many studies demonstrate the superiority of young over older adults when comparing memory performance (Cole and Houston, 1987; Dubrow, 1995; Law, Hawkins and Craik, 1998; Phillips and Stanton, 2004). Whether this is due to differences at the encoding stage, possibly due to a failing on the part of many older adults to spontaneously employ deep processing (John and Cole, 1986), or the retrieval stage, due to either difficulties in using organisation strategies, and/or difficulties in the ability to self-generate associative cues to aid retrieval (Cole and Houston, 1987), is unknown (Moschis, 2000). Nevertheless, on the basis of such findings, traditional advice to marketing communicators was to use an information-oriented strategy in order to increase recall and recognition of marketing communications (Zaltman, Rajendra and Rohit, 1978). Best viewed as a continuum, advertisers choose between rational/informational claims (clinically proven to reduce tarter) and emotional claims (this toothpaste makes you feel more confident because it gives you fresher breath). As Wei, Donthu and Bernhardt (2012) note, consumers receive marketing
information from which they decide if a product is utilitarian (functional and rational) or hedonic (experiential and pleasurable). Past research suggested a purely informational (utilitarian) appeal would be most effective with older consumers (Cole and Houston, 1987).

Socioemotional Selectivity Theory

More recently, however, a theory that has been attracting increased attention in the psychology literature lends doubt to the conventional wisdom that suggests informational appeals are better for older adults. The theory is Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (SST). Originally suggested by Carstensen (1991, 1993, 1995), the theory takes a life-span developmental approach and posits that observed age-related changes may not be caused by ageing per se, but by “a complex network of interactions representing the person's past, present, and future percepts” (Carstensen, 1995: 152). The theory was originally developed as a way of explaining changes in social contact after researchers noted that older adults tend to by-pass opportunities for some social interactions, preferring instead to socialise with people who are familiar to them. The theory holds that these preferences are as a result of changes in the salience of different goals, which alter throughout the life-cycle. Emotion regulation, a goal that is salient in infancy, is also salient in older age: thus just as infants turn to their mothers for comfort, so too will older adults turn to their closest family, with a corresponding decrease in the desire to associate with unknown people. In contrast, when information acquisition is the goal, unfamiliar people may be better sources. At the same time, because experience means older adults have already stored a wealth of information, information acquisition becomes less salient than emotion regulation.

The focus of SST is not just chronological age. Indeed, the theory views chronological age as a proxy for experience (Carstensen, 1995), and an important aspect to the theory is time perceptions. Thus, as well as experience, social motives are influenced by a person’s perception of the future. If a person perceives the time left in life as limited, emotion regulation takes preference over knowledge acquisition. SST has therefore been used in experiments where time is manipulated and results show that decision making is different under different time perceptions. When time is perceived as expansive, knowledge-related goals take priority; in conditions where time is perceived as restricted, emotional goals are prioritised (Carstensen, Isaaacowitz, and Charles, 1999). While the theory is not without its critics (Gruhn, Scheibe and Baltes 2007), there is nevertheless a body of empirical evidence from the psychology and gerontology literature that does lend it support (Carstensen and Fredrickson, 1998; Carstensen and Turk-Charles, 1994; Fredrickson and Carstensen, 1990; Fung et al., 1999; Lang and Carstensen, 1994; Lansford, Sherman, and Antonucci, 1998). A recent marketing application of SST (Wei, Donthu, and Bernhardt, 2012) found that when respondents' time views were successfully manipulated, consumers whose time view was limited evaluated hedonic product attributes more positively than those respondents whose time view was expansive. Conversely, those with expansive time views evaluated utilitarian
product attributes more positively than those who viewed time as limited. Other marketing related applications include explaining age differences in materialism (Wei and Talpade, 2010) and the experience of negative emotions after a service failure (Varela-Neira, Vázquez-Casuelles and Iglesias, 2010).

Three previous studies have attempted to apply SST to advertising, and all have found some support for the theory. However, all three have some methodological limitations that the current study aims to overcome. Fung and Carstensen (2003) used fictitious advertisements where the copy was manipulated, and respondents were only exposed to either the rational or the emotional copy. Moreover, perhaps because these researchers are psychologists and not marketers, the ad copy was not always sufficiently contrasting in terms of emotional and rational appeals – indeed, some of their ads had to be discarded from their experiment for this reason. Williams and Drolet (2005) and Drolet, Williams & Lau-Gesk (2007) used descriptions of advertising copy also for fictitious brands, but did not use actual ads, nor did they use mock-up ads with images: their experiment comprised manipulation of copy that participants were asked to read and then recall.

Method

While the pioneering studies outlined above are no doubt valuable, claims that SST is useful in an advertising context will be strengthened if studies are conducted using actual advertisements pertaining to a real brand and comprising images and copy. For this reason, the current study uses three advertisements for a real brand (Homebase Home Improvement stores), and manipulates the advertising headlines and copy, so that each ad has one version which contains an emotional appeal and one that contains a rational appeal (see Appendix 1 for the advertising stimuli). An on-line survey was sent to 261,000 Nectar card owners.

Participants were exposed to both versions of each ad, and asked to recall as much as possible from each. The order in which participants were exposed to the ads was randomised. Additionally, respondents completed the Informational and Transformational Ad Content scale (Puto and Wells, 1984), and an adapted version of the Cognitive Age scale (Barak and Schiffman, 1981). Cognitive age is a measure of self-perceived age, and as such is a measure of where a person places themselves in relation to their own lifespan. The cognitive age scale therefore adds an indication of time perspective to the study.

At the time of writing, over 2500 responses have been received from people aged 19-85 years. Of course, due to differences in memory ability, we do not expect older adults to recall more emotional information than younger adults. What we would expect, in order to lend support for SST in a real-advertising context, is that of the copy that is recalled by older adults, relatively more will be emotional as opposed to rational. We also hypothesise that as self-perceived age increases, the relative amount of emotional as opposed to rational copy
recalled will also increase. By the time the BAM conference is held, preliminary results will be available for discussion.

References


### Rational: Living Room

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Headline</strong></th>
<th>Living room furniture at Homebase</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-headline</strong></td>
<td>The latest designs with fantastic prices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Body copy</strong></td>
<td>With a sofa range that offers a choice of up to 9 styles, in 29 fabrics, and 3 leathers, we have something to suit everyone’s taste and budget. Choose from our selection of tables, cabinets and sideboards, all of which are created from real wood veneer and solid oak. Plus, over 500 soft furnishings to pick from.</td>
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### Emotional: Living Room

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Headline</strong></th>
<th>Whatever your heart desires</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-headline</strong></td>
<td>Create a den of sophisticated snugness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Body copy</strong></td>
<td>Combine the perfect mixture of class and comfort, and be ready to enjoy this room on any occasion. With a variety of soft furnishings and on trend pieces, you can create a room that is both a refuge to relax in and where you will enjoy entertaining</td>
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### Rational: Lights & Mirrors Ad

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<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Headline</strong></th>
<th>Lighting and mirrors at Homebase</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-headline</strong></td>
<td>A huge range to suit every style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Body copy</strong></td>
<td>With over 700 lighting options to choose from, ranging from lamps to light fixtures, we have a selection that will match everyone’s style and budget. A collection of 200 different mirrors will also offer the finishing touches to any room.</td>
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### Emotional: Lights & Mirrors Ad

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<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Headline</strong></th>
<th>Lighting and mirrors to reflect your every mood</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-headline</strong></td>
<td>Illuminate your home with a welcoming glow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Body copy</strong></td>
<td>With classic lamps, retro pieces and stylish spotlights, there is an option for everyone to add a bit of sparkle in their lives. Choose from an array of mirrors that will add the finishing touches to any room. Brighten your dark corners, and fall in love with your home all over again.</td>
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<td><strong>Rational: Garden</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Headline</strong></td>
<td>Plants and pots at Homebase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-headline</strong></td>
<td>A top quality range to fill your garden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Body copy</strong></td>
<td>A garden range with over 300 different flower species, 400 plants, and 50 trees, we have everything you need for your garden. Along with over 70 plant pots, ranging from terracotta to brass, and a selection of 30 garden ornaments.</td>
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