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On the Sidelines of Communication: Age as a Marginalizing Factor of Representation in Advertising

Abstract

This paper explores representations of people over 65 in television advertising in Serbia in 2023. Addressing a significant gap in regional scholarship, the study contributes to the limited body of knowledge on the intersection of aging, media, and commercial communication in Serbia. A comprehensive quantitative content analysis of 625 unique commercials revealed notable underrepresentation of older adults, the dominance of positive stereotyping, and the prevalence of six representational profiles: Golden Agers, Perfect Grandparents, Legacy/Mentors, Copers, Comedic representations, and Celebrity Endorsers. The Golden Ager profile emerged as the most prominent. This aligns with global patterns identified in other research, especially in Western countries. However, the interplay between global representational patterns and local cultural and economic constraints also emerged as important. The portrayal of Golden Agers reflected modest lifestyles, limited mobility, and a focus on leisure within the bounds of community and family rather than adventure or consumerism.

Keywords: aging, advertising, representation, communication, Serbia

1. Introduction

Age functions as a noun and a verb. It denotes an undisputable biological fact expressed numerically but also signifies “a sequence of stages and statuses to which specific age-based normative expectations are attached” (Vincent, 2006, p. 682). Media, including advertising, contribute to the shaping of these age-based norms. The representations and narratives encountered across various media help shape understandings of what aging entails and inform expectations of interactions with older adults. By doing so, media go beyond merely reflecting reality and actively construct public perceptions and societal attitudes toward aging.

The global population is getting older at an unprecedented rate. A demographic shift is underway, presenting both challenges and opportunities. With increased life expectancy and improved quality of life, older adults are emerging as a powerful economic group. Their growing

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consumer potential is most evident in sectors like healthcare, dietary supplements, beauty, cosmetics and a range of service industries that increasingly cater to their needs.

In building desirable perceptions of brands targeted at seniors, advertising disseminates specific ideas of aging. Like much of the media landscape, it is quite youth centric. Younger audiences are more visible and prioritized, seniors severely underrepresented. Aside from visibility, the ideal of youth is even more problematic. The anti-aging narrative is global, pervasive and deeply embedded in mass media and popular culture, influencing not only consumption patterns, but also lifestyles, communication norms and perceptions of (social) value. Rather than a natural and valuable life stage to be embraced, aging is often framed as a problem to be solved or a condition to be cured.

Existing international research on aging in advertising has primarily explored the reproduction of age stereotypes. However, compared to fields such as gender or race representation, scholarly attention to age remains limited. In Serbia, research is even more scarce. The most recent study of print advertisements dates to 2017, and there is no large-scale analyses of aging in television advertising at all. This clearly underscores the need for updated and more comprehensive research and the academic contribution and value of the paper.

This paper addresses this gap by analyzing how older adults are represented in Serbian television advertising. More specifically, it examines and questions roles, activities, contexts, and representational profiles, and compares these findings to global patterns, highlighting local specificities.

In terms of structure, the first section sets the theoretical foundation for the study. It presents an overview of global aging population trends, followed by country-specific analysis of demographic shifts in Serbia. The second section explores the economic implications of aging populations with particular emphasis on the rise of older adults as an influential consumer group. The third segment introduces a media-oriented perspective. It presents relevant theoretical frameworks like cultivation theory and examines how seniors are represented across mass media and popular culture. Following this broader context, the focus shifts to advertising. Key representational profiles of older people are defined and operationalized as an analytical framework for the empirical segment of the study. The limited local insights into advertising representations in Serbia are also reviewed in this section.

The subsequent parts of the paper outline methodology, present the research findings, and offer a critical discussion of the results in relation to the established profiles and theoretical frameworks. The paper concludes with reflections on the implications of the findings and suggestions for future research and media practice.

2. The aging world

In 2024, Generation Z (born between 1995 and 2010), represented 24.6% of the world population (Statista, 2025) making them the largest generation globally. The same source projects that Millennials (born from 1980 to 1995) will reach 21.6 % of the population by 2030. These 2 cohorts are considered the most influential globally, drawing intense cultural, social, and economic attention. Mass media is saturated with content about and for them.

Meanwhile, the global population is aging. About 10% are 60 or older, a share expected to more than double by 2050, reaching 22% (Statista, 2025). In the older cohort, WHO (2024) projects that the share of those aged 80 years or older will triple by 2050, reaching 426 million.

These shares vary by country and correlate with development – more developed nations have older populations (UN DESA, 2024). In 2024 21.6% of the EU's 449.3 million people were 65 years and over (Eurostat, 2025). Italy and Portugal (24%) are leaders, followed by Bulgaria, Czech Republic, and Finland. The U.S. reached 17.4% in 2023, projected to rise to 22% by 2050 (O'Neill, 2025), up from 8% in 1950 (O'Neill, 2025). China is facing the same trend. In 2020, people over 60 years of age made up 17.8% of the population, expected to increase to 32 % in 2040 (Textor, 2024).

It is important to note that defining old or older varies individually, by country and in time. There is an overall trend to perceive old age as starting later. In the UK, in 2008 old age was thought to begin at 59, but in 2018 that number was 68. In France it was 63 (2008) and 69 (2018), Spain 62 (2008) and 74 (2018), Poland 64 (2008) and 65 (2018) etc. (Swift et al., 2019). In Serbia, for younger generations it starts even before 60, for more senior people it is well after that. Variations are attributed to respondents' own chronological age, the age group they feel they belong to, gender etc. More educated people see it as starting later (Senic & Josifovic, 2016). Women see old age starting later than men did, also those with better health, higher life satisfaction and having a partner (Ayalon & Dolberg, 2017, p. 60).

In Serbia, demographic aging is well underway. The 65+ population reached 22% in 2022 which is a 6% increase since 2002 (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2022). The share of those under 15 dropped from 16% to 14% bringing with it all the challenges other countries are facing. One of the most relevant aspects of this relates to the economy.

3. The silver economy

The economic perspective of the aging population trend is complex and multifaceted. One of its challenges is the increased pressure on working cohorts of the population to support social spending (Eurostat, 2025). The so-called age dependency ratios compare the relative size of younger and/or older populations with the working age segments (Eurostat, 2025). In 2024, in the EU it was 34% (3 people of working age for every aged 65 or over), increasing in 25 countries compared to the previous year (Eurostat, 2025). In China it stood at 18% in 2020 with an overwhelming projection to reach 66% until 2060 (Textor, 2024).

On the other hand, those older than 50 are often referred to as the silver economy. Interreg Europe (2023) defines it as “economic opportunities arising from public and consumer expenditure related to population ageing and the specific needs of people aged over 50”. They are gaining relevance as a market whose potentials are yet to be fully explored (Carrigan & Szmigin 1999; Williams et al., 2010).

In the EU, the economic worth of this segment was €3.7 trillion in 2023, expected to grow to €5.7 trillion by 2025 (Interreg Europe, 2023). In 2018, the over 50 segments contributed \$8.3 trillion to the US economy (around 40% of GDP). It is projected to triple by 2050 (AARP, 2019). In the US around 70% of disposable income is held by people over 60, in the Asia-Pacific region it will more than double until 2040 (Wallace, 2024). In developed countries they are set to benefit from accumulated wealth, better social protection, and multiple income sources (Rude, 2022).

On the profit-making side, probably earning the most based on the increased longevity trend and rising economic power of seniors are healthcare and cosmetics (Harbeke & Künlen, 2024). In 2023 the economic worth of the global anti-aging products market was \$47 billion with im-

mense potential for growth up to \$80 billion by 2032 (Petruzzi, 2024). Senior consumers do not seem to be without choices, in terms of what they are offered and what they can afford.

Still, this is heavily dependent on the local context. When speaking about the wealth and economic power of the silver economy we must bear in mind the imbalance between countries. Looking from the Serbian perspective, this segment of population is not at all powerful. Quite the opposite. According to the official national statistics, the average pension in Serbia in March 2025 was RSD 50 686 which is around □ 430 (PIO, 2025). It covers about a half of the monthly consumer basket (Stevanovic, 2024). Although in absolute numbers the amounts have risen, almost doubled, still the actual standard of living has not. A decade ago, the average pension covered around 60% of the average salary, in 2023 it was 44%. This is bound to influence the types of representations and messages addressed to them in mass media and advertising.

The main research question asked in this paper is how are seniors represented in television advertising in Serbia? What are the key frameworks or profiles they are shown in, what contexts, roles and what are the key messages addressed to them? Are global representation-al profiles present and-or relevant in the local context of Serbia?

4. Media representations of aging

As per cultivation theory, continuous exposure to media content shapes perceptions of social reality. It homogenizes individual views of the audience (Gerbner et al., 1986). The greater the exposure, the greater the influence on daily life. Studies proved that due to extensive presence on television, beliefs about the level of presence of drug use, crime, and violence, lawyers, the police, and doctors were stronger (O'Guinn & Shrum, 1997). Therefore, the world as we see it, including age identities, is somewhat constructed by the media.

They expose people to versions of “what they might expect as they age”. Our understanding of aging is shaped by representations of what younger and older people are and should be (Harwood, 1997; Taylor & Earl, 2015). There is a strong tendency to represent it as a “problematic biological process” (Vincent et al, 2008, p. 293). In the Western world especially, it is portrayed as general decline, in terms of physical, social, and psychological aspects, often with messages suggesting loss of status and relevancy in society (Kite et al., 1991, p. 20).

A study spanning two centuries of texts (magazines, newspapers, books) found that narratives about aging have become increasingly negative (Ng *et al.*, 2021). While the 1800s emphasized heroism and kinship, the 1900s shifted toward illness, death, and dependence. Physical decline became more prominent, fueling the growth of industries aimed at reversing aging.

The media today are saturated with messages for seniors to actively resist aging, presenting it as both necessary and desirable (Williams et al., 2010). There is a binary opposition between successfully and unsuccessfully ageing bodies putting pressure on people to actively strive to the ideal (Gilleard & Higgs, 2013). The alternative to aging well is represented as almost unacceptable or unnatural, especially for women. It is “something which can be evaded through the consumption of cosmetics” or at least its effects can be hidden (Kenalemang, 2022, p. 2122).

Stereotyping is one of the most prominent representational templates. The older people are, the more complex the stereotypes are (Hummert et al, 1994). The media often empha-

size older adults as frail and dependent, portraying them as senile, unproductive, inactive (Rozanova, 2010), incompetent, fragile, complaining, and socially awkward (Kite et al., 1991). Such portrayals contribute to negative attitudes, shaping perceptions among both younger and older audiences and lowering older adults' self-esteem (Harwood, 1997). On the other side, positive stereotypes highlight longevity and traits like politeness, wisdom, and conflict resolution (Abrams et al., 2016). In addition, and particularly in advertising, media often present "eternally youthful" seniors, showing them as carefree and thriving. This creates unrealistic ideals and fosters false expectations (Loos & Ivan, 2018; Williams et al., 2010; Zhang et al., 2008), idealizing a version of aging that is unattainable for most (Ylänne, 2015, p. 379).

Numerous studies of TV and film programs (Meyer et al., 2021; Robinson et al. 2007) confirm general under-representation of seniors in popular culture. Not only are they not visible enough, but there is also a practice of "misrepresenting them in a prejudiced way this includes older adults being depicted in peripheral or minor roles without positive attributes; non-realistic, exaggerated, or distorted portraits of older people; and over-homogenized characterizations of older adults". This is called visual ageism (Loos & Ivan, 2018, p. 164).

Roles attributed to older people in media, especially TV-video content are mostly secondary (Eisend, 2022). They are determined by age, rarely shown "just to represent '<<people>>'" (Miller et al., 2004, p. 321). Less than 25% of leads/co-leads in popular television are over 50 years of age (Meyer et al., 2021). In top-grossing films and popular TV study spanning from 2010 to 2020, the 50+ group made up under 25% of characters. They were more likely to be villains than heroes in films (59% vs 30%) as well as TV (43.2% vs 22.1%) (Meyer et al., 2021).

The gender disparity is striking. In 1993, for every elderly male villain, there were 13 male heroes of the same age. But for every such heroin, there is one elderly female villain. The proportion of "bad" old females is more than eight times that of "bad" old males (Gerbner, 1993, p. 5). In the US, men over 50 are four out of five in film, three out of four in broadcast television (Meyer et al., 2021). Women tend to "age faster" on television, the share of their roles declines as the age group of the character increases (Gerbner, 1993). For men the aging process is centered around physicality and competence, while for women the main framework is physical attractiveness or rather the loss of it. Senior men are perceived better in traditionally masculine areas like work or finance, within the gender stereotype of agency. Older women fit better in the stereotypes of being collaborative and social (Kornadt et al., 2013).

5. Advertising and aging

Gerbner (1993, p. 1) writes, referring to mass media, that "most of the stories about people... are told by a group of distant conglomerates that have something to sell". A lot of those stories come from advertising. An ad connects emotions to tangible objects "linking possible unattainable things with those that are attainable and thus reassuring us that the former are within reach" (Williamson, 2010, p. 31). What is within reach in terms of aging mostly centers around vitality, longevity, maintaining physical appearance and living a full and active life.

Numerous studies of ads (Swayne & Greco 1987; Roy & Harwood, 1997; Rozanova, 2010; Williams et al., 2010; Prieler, 2012) show the same as in film or TV – a strong underrepresentation of seniors, those over 65 especially. Research from Meyer et al. (2021) showed that on average only 7% of characters in ads in the US were over 60, well below their share in

population. In most developed countries people older than 65 make up between 15% and 28% of the population and are featured in 10% of all ads at most (Eisend, 2022). Underrepresentation is more prominent in older women than men, in non-Caucasians (Eisend, 2022).

In comparison to general media advertising has a more positive approach to representing all age groups, including seniors (Roy & Harwood, 1997; Ylänné et al., 2010). In the period from 1950s to the 1990s 78.2% of all senior characters in U.S. television commercials were depicted within a positive age stereotype and only 12% in a somewhat negative frame (Zhang et al., 2006).

The overall narrative is quite simple. Aging is problematized as a condition to be cured via consumption of anti-ageing products (Kenalemang, 2022). So although it is pathologized, there is a tendency to promote the idealized version of living it. Age is something you need to not show for you to live the best life. This is indicative of the unwatchability of an aging body (Woodward, 1999).

Aging is portrayed as undesirable especially for women. Commercials tend to focus less on the fear of getting older and more on the fear of losing attractiveness (Kenalemang, 2022). The aging female body is treated as something to be “cured” with anti-aging products, often described using terms like “dull”, grey” or “less radiant” evoking illness. Successful aging, for women, means not showing signs of it (Kenalemang, 2022, p. 2123). Empowering slogans like L’Oréal’s “Because You’re Worth It” mask the message that to stay visible and attractive, women must conceal aging (Kenalemang, 2022). The underlying promise is eternal youth (Richards et al., 2012).

Aside from the beauty industry, categories promoting products and services for seniors are food, pharmaceutical products, hygiene, health aids and financial/insurance products and services (Williams et al. 2010; Prieler, 2012). All use several typical representation profiles. Hummert et al. (1994), categorized them as Golden-Ager, Perfect Grandparent, Legacy/Mentor, Coper, Comedic and Celebrity Endorser.

The Perfect Grandparent profile is a kind, loving older person. They are set in the family context, determined by their family roles. These representations build on positive stereotypes like caregiving. Golden Ager on the other hand are representatives of active, adventurous lifestyles, lively, full of energy. It is a positive and optimistic treatment of aging, which should be interpreted with caution. Portraying aging as idealistic, creating the idea that it is easily controllable can be overpromising. When asked about these kinds of ads respondents often claim that they seem unrealistically positive and fake (Williams et al., 2010). Legacy/Mentor profile represents older people in the context of status, experience, wisdom. They are experts, teachers, problem solvers, leaders with a commanding presence having authority, (Meyer et al., 2020). The Copper is a profile set in the context of health issues. The characters are represented in some kind of pain or distress, struggling for relief with the help of advertised products.

Very often seniors are represented in humorous ways, within the Comedic profile. It is important to note that they are not always someone to laugh with but rather laugh at. Humor can be of the mocking, denigratory kind (Ylänné, 2015), depending heavily on the brand’s target group. Younger audiences will more likely be exposed to some kind of negative comedic old age stereotypes (Williams et al., 2010).

Celebrity Endorsers refer to famous older people supporting brands and acting as role models (Williams et al. 2010). The overpromising and idealizing threat exists here as well. The way a celebrity looks in their senior age is often far from average or easily achievable. Therefore, these kinds of representations can create pressure and false expectations both out

of the person him or herself, their body as well as products positioned as almost miraculous. The most prominent profiles in advertising are Golden Agers, followed by the Perfect Grandparent (Williams et al., 2010).

In Serbia, advertising research focused on seniors is lacking. A repeated study of television ads conducted first in 2009 and then in 2013 by Milosavljevic (2013) showed that although stereotypes are still dominating, the negative have given way to positive ones. In the first flight dominant representations included grumpiness, senility, passivity, poverty, and irrelevance. The follow up study showed slightly more varied portrayals as well as less ridicule, more agency, decision making, being active (The author explains it more with rising economic interests, with brands recognizing seniors as relevant consumers, than genuine societal change).

A study from 2015 covered a sample of 154 print ads. Only 22 of them featured one or more seniors (over 65). Out of 280 models, only 33 were older. The underrepresentation identified globally stands in the local context as well (Ognjanov, 2017). Their roles were: family members, wives, husbands, retirees, consumers. Products advertised to them were dietary supplements, financial services, internet, and tailor-made discounts. Dietary supplements dominated with 50% of all ads featuring them. Next were financial services (33%) and retailers (Ognjanov, 2017, p. 185). The latter two are strongly related to the economic context suggested in the previous section. Due to the specific socio-economic context where seniors are often helping their children or grandchildren financially, loans targeting them were one of the most popular banking products at a certain period. Out of the same context, financial restraints, retailers develop special sales and benefits for seniors.

6. Methodology

The overall *research objective* of the paper is to understand how older people are represented in television advertising in Serbia. Research questions are set to enable a more detailed perspective on the topic.

RQ1: How visible are seniors in Serbian television advertising, and to what extent does their representation correspond to their proportion within the national population?

RQ2: How are older adults depicted in Serbian television advertising in terms of roles, activities, and contexts, and which representational profiles dominate these portrayals?

RQ3: How does Serbian advertising compare to international trends in the representation of older adults, and what local specificities differentiate the Serbian context?

The study uses quantitative content analysis of television advertising. The choice of this media was made because, although digital is in expansion, television still holds relevance in Serbia. On average, TV viewing time is five hours and 21 minutes daily. Those aged 18-49 watch it for around three hours and 49 minutes (Nielsen Audience Measurement Srbija, 2023). The age group relevant for this research, over 50, stands at an overwhelming seven hours and 51 minutes per day. With significant generational differences, it is still the most influential media channel.

The research focuses on the year 2023, during which approximately 12 000 unique commercials were aired across Serbian television channels, totaling around 8 million broadcasts.

More than 1 in 700 brands were advertised during this period (Nielsen Audience Measurement Srbija, 2023).

The research is based on a systematic random sampling method, initiated in the fourth week of January 2023. Subsequently, data was collected from the corresponding week of each successive month throughout the year. The sample consisted of 4th week of January, 1st week of February, 2nd week of March, 3rd week of April, 4th week of May, 1st week of June, 2nd week of July, 3rd week of August, 4th week of September, 1st week of October, 2nd week of November, 3rd week of December. In total, there were 12 weeks of commercials aired in prime time (8 PM to midnight), on selected national channels. Channels included were RTS, Pink TV and Prva TV, all with national coverage. In total there were 625 commercials. Less than 1% of ads differed across the channels; the remainder were broadcast on all three, which is consistent with typical media-buying strategies (once a campaign is launched, ads run across all high-share channels).

The process of reduction narrowed it down to ads showing people over 65 years of age. The criteria applied to identify them were visual, such as grey hair, wrinkles, interacting with grandchildren or children who are middle aged, and contextual, meaning words, phrases, descriptions or situations used in the commercial to suggest seniority (e.g. special discount for pensioners, messages referring to grandchildren, medical conditions connected to aging etc.). The final number of ads in the sample is 83.

The unit of analysis is a television commercial. The analytical unit is the visibility of people 65 or older. Coding of commercials was conducted in accordance with a codebook that established the criteria for identifying and categorizing relevant content. Analysis implemented was descriptive statistics, mostly frequencies.

Commercials were analyzed visually and verbally. Although the visuality was primary, the verbal aspect was relevant to better understand all ads which even suggest some kind of message to seniors. It is important to note that although the criteria were set, the actual identification of the age of 65, younger or older, still holds an element of subjectivity. Without having birth data about those models, it is impossible to be completely sure about their age.

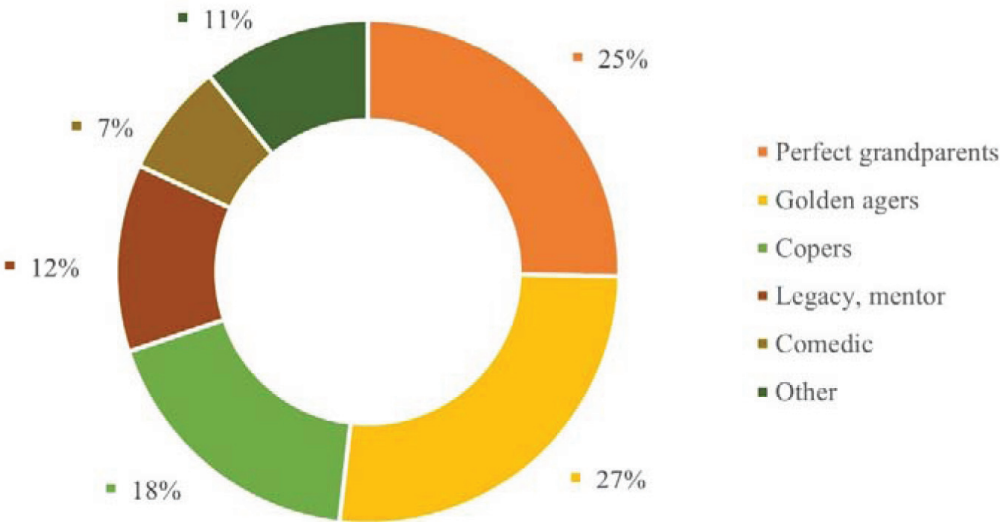
The analytical framework is based on the profiles defined in the introduction: Golden Agers, Perfect Grandparents, Copers, Comedic, Legacy/Mentors, Celebrity Endorsers. Belonging to a profile was determined by a combination of visual, verbal, and contextual cues. Perfect Grandparents were identified in visuals or verbal messages suggesting family relations with grandparents, grown up children, taking care of grandchildren, spending time with family in a multi-generational setting. Golden Agers were recognized in contexts connected to dynamic, energetic, adventurous situations, practicing sports, having fun, alone or in groups etc. Copers were identified by visual cues of health difficulties (e.g., limping, touching forehead). Verbal messages about relief were included only if accompanied by such visuals. Cues for recognizing Legacy/Mentors profile were office space, working at a computer, teaching, managing people or processes etc. and/or messages implying professional engagement. Celebrity Endorsers were coded by recognizing Serbian public figures (actors, musicians, athletes, etc.). Comedic representations focused on visual and verbal cues putting seniors in a position to laugh with or at them.

7. Results and discussion

Out of 625 commercials in the total sample covering 2023, people over 65 were identified in 83 (13.2 %). This aligns with the only available previous local results from Ognjanov (2017) which show underrepresentation. Compared to studies from other countries like Meyer at al. (2021) which report only 7% of characters in ads in the US are over 60, this one shows an improvement.

Still, although the visibility of Serbian seniors seems to be slightly better, it coincides with the unbalance in shares in representation versus shares in population identified on other markets (Rozanova, 2006; Prieler, 2012; Butson, Jeanes & O’Connor, 2023). The share of seniors in ads in Serbia is lower than their actual percentage in the population (22%) which provides an answer to the first research question.

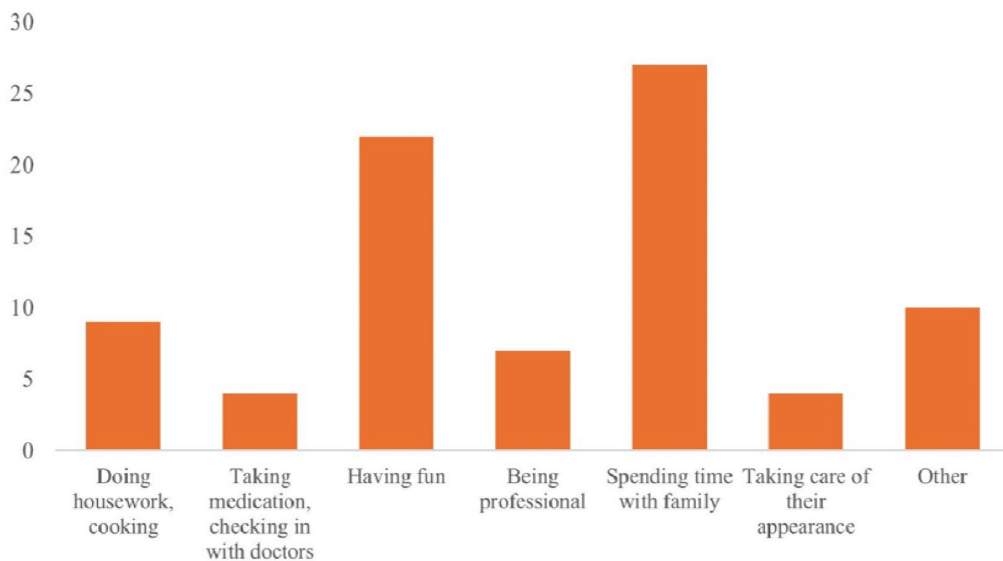
Figure 1. Profiles split



Pursuing the second research question, the following analysis reveals the split between representational profiles as well as different roles, activities and context seniors are shown in.

The most prominent profile in the sample is Golden Agers accounting for 27% of all representations, followed by Perfect Grandparents (25%), Legacy/Mentor (12%), Comedic (7%), Copers (13%) and Other (16%). This corresponds with the split suggested in the theoretical section. However, a closer examination of additional data reveals local specificities that further contextualize these results.

Figure 2. Activities performed in commercials



For *Golden Agers* the main activity is having fun, meaning leisure and enjoyment. It appears in 22 out of 83 commercials. This typically includes dancing, spending time with friends, walking in nature etc. Unlike the suggested global, or especially portrayals in Western countries, where Golden Agers are often shown as adventurous, globetrotting etc. in Serbia the representations of seniors are more modest and grounded in everyday pleasures. So when referring to Golden Agers as the profile covering seniors “living their best life”, it is crucial to recognize the relativity of this concept and its strong grounding in the local socio-economic and cultural norms.

Originating from a quite conservative and traditional country, those around 65 and older are not the ones to engage in extremely dynamic, adventurous lifestyles, so it is not a surprise that commercials rarely show it. Generations born in the 1950s, 1960s in Serbia are neither culturally nor economically shaped with such ideals. They were not socialized to view senior years as a time for exploration or personal reinvention. Their lives have been marked by significant socio-political and economic upheavals, including the disintegration of Yugoslavia, civil war, severe economic crisis in the 1990s, NATO bombing in 1999 and prolonged struggle for upgrading basic living conditions in the decades that followed. All of these have profoundly influenced both their worldviews, value sets and financial realities, resulting in mostly modest lifestyles centered on family, friends, and local community. Consequently, although the Golden Ager profile is the most frequently represented in advertising in Serbia, it differs markedly from the Western conceptualization of the same concept.

Perfect Grandparents profile is primarily characterized by depictions of seniors spending time with family (27 out of 83 ads). In only 4 instances were they represented as taking care of grandchildren; more commonly they are represented in multigenerational settings such as family lunches or birthday celebrations, emphasizing togetherness rather than caregiving. Both men and women are almost equally represented in this context suggesting a balanced gender portrayal within a family unit. This is in line with previous results showing that the

visibility of men and women in advertising is close as well as the tendency for men to be shown more in the family context than in previous decades (Ocokoljic, 2022).

Copers as a profile is featured in 18% or 15 ads. While health is an important category overall (second most frequent), explicit depiction of health issues is comparatively limited. Only four out of 11 ads show being at the doctors, experiencing pain or taking medication. More often, individuals with implied health issues are depicted as spending time with family, enjoying leisure etc. The health dimension is only subtly present in the background. This type of framing emphasizes the value of life without health issues, positioning the products as the means to achieving that ideal. This is one the basic advertising strategies, focusing on the resolution rather than visible manifestation of a problem.

Almost all commercials featuring consultations with medical personnel show older men. They seem to be more of a target in the strict medical sense, tackling more serious issues like high blood pressure or heart disease risk. Health problems women face is centered around bone and joint health.

When it comes to body related issues and gender, women dominate ads focused on physical appearance. Beauty appears as a category only six times, in ads which feature only women. Out of 4 ads showing this activity and six in the overall beauty category, there are no men over 65 addressing the issue of wrinkles, firm skin or radiant complexion. As in younger age groups, physical appearance in later life remains framed predominantly as a women's issue. The distinction is in the share of content targeted at senior women. Of the total 625 ads in the sample, 115 or 18.4% fall under the beauty and cosmetics category. Yet only 5% feature older women, amounting to less than 1% of the total sample. This indicates a marked decline in relevance of women as they age, particularly in appearance-related domains. When represented, they are in a neutral, studio setting without any suggestion of context. The overall visual and verbal message targeted at them coincides with other studies like (Kenalemang, 2022). Specific cosmetic products are sold as a cure for battling signs of aging. This also aligns with local studies where women in ads for beauty products in Serbia were decontextualized (Ocokoljic, 2022).

The *Legacy/Mentor* profiles are mostly connected to people in a professional context. Out of seven such commercials none of the characters are women. All seven feature men, out of which one is a boss in an office, others are doctors or medical advisors. The only advertisement featuring an older woman in a mentor like role shows her in a domestic setting teaching a younger female how to prepare a dish thus reinforcing traditional gender domains of expertise. The man shown as a boss is represented as a strict, grumpy and old-fashioned one. The ad is for a brand of sodas intended for a very young target group which aligns with suggested treatment of seniors in media depending on the audience. Content intended for younger consumers is more likely to approach seniors in a comedic, even ridiculing way. However, given that this was observed in only one instance it would be premature to draw broader conclusions.

Comedic representations of seniors are featured in seven ads, for beer, soda and retailers. Some of the scenes include seniors in a club, dressed as young people, making fun of the mother and father-in-law and scenes from a family gathering where aunts and uncles are represented as funny in terms of appearance. As suggested in the theoretical framework, seniors are sometimes the topic of humor not the ones performing it. However, the type of humor in these ads does not seem denigratory or even mocking in terms of ageism. Rather it is in the area of style, appearance and the usual local traditional family dynamics. Overall, having on-

ly seven examples of these types of representations out of 83, and the total of 625 commercials, make them not very prominent.

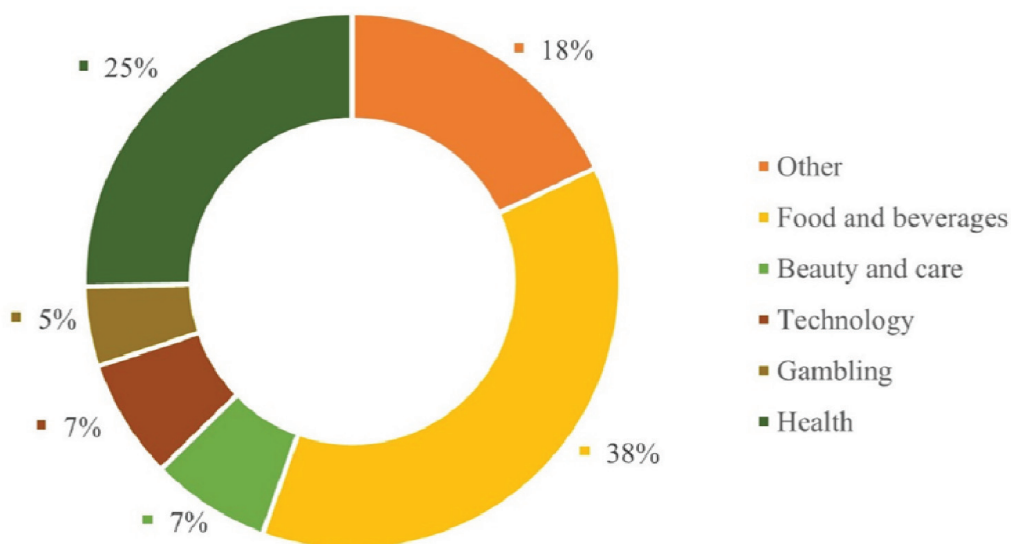
There were six examples of Celebrity Endorsers, four local ones. They promote a variety of products, from medical services to food and gambling brands. Out of the 83 there were nine ads where it was not possible to locate the characters into any predefined profile. They show varied categories (retail, beer, household appliances, carbonated water etc.) and activities (doing housework, cooking etc.).

In conclusion, in regard to the second research question, the most prominent profile in Serbian television advertising is Golden Agers (27%). A deeper look into this profile enables us to answer the third research question. The Serbian version of a Golder ager is very locally grounded, and significantly different from the affluent, globe-trotting figure common in Western advertising. So although global trends in representing seniors in advertising are translated onto the Serbian market, there are local specific which differentiate it.

The distribution of product categories featured in commercials is as follows: food and beverages account for 37.3%, followed by health (25.3%), beauty and care (7.2%), tech and telecommunication (7.2%), gambling (4.8%), automotive (1.2%) and other (16.9 %). The other includes: automotive, household appliances, real estate etc. This aligns with results of previous local studies suggesting a consistent pattern in the dominant industries represented in Serbian advertising.

Compared to recent UK study (ASA, 2025) this confirms the trend of omitting seniors from ads for technology. Both in the UK and in Serbia older people still tend to be taken as incompetent for certain aspects of life. Research done in Australia suggests the same in a different area: leisure and sports where seniors are represented as requiring special attention (Butson et al., 2023).

Figure 3. Ads for senior across categories of products

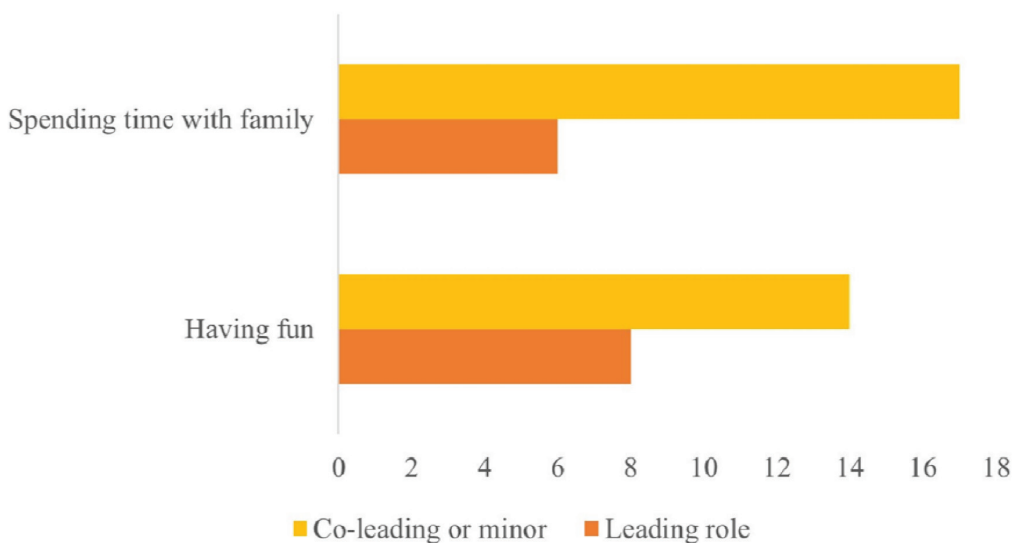


The dominance of food and beverage advertisements reflects the local context. The largest share of monthly household income in Serbia, 36.6%, is allocated to food and beverage, fol-

lowed by housing (16.3%) (Statistical Office of Republic of Serbia, 2025). This contrasts with the EU where in 2020 (Eurostat) around 25% of household expenditure was devoted to housing, water and fuels, while food and beverages accounted for only 15%. In the US, with housing also in the lead, food stood at around 13% (Statista, 2025a). A higher share of food and beverage in the structure of spending is typical of countries with a modest living standard. They are the basics, and for most Serbian seniors a priority. Advertising reflects this. While food and beverage appeared in 19% of the total sample covering all age groups, their share in senior-targeted commercials was notably higher, 37.3%. This suggests that, for this demographic, securing the basics remains a greater priority than for the general population.

Compared to other similar studies like Eisend (2022) which stress that older people are shown as mostly secondary characters, this study shows a difference. Around 47% of ads featured seniors in leading roles. The share, although not dominant, is significant which can be interpreted as potential progress. Across categories, the highest share of leading roles is related to health (15 out of 21 ads). In most others they share these roles with members of other generations.

Figure 4. Types of role in the most prominent activities



Out of 23 ads in the spending time with family segment, seniors are leads in only six. In having fun that share is eight out of 22. So, in the majority of cases, if they are in the lead the ad is most probably intended for them, selling products tailored to their needs (e.g. supplements, anti-aging cosmetics).

This study confirms the results from Miller et al. (2004) who found that commercial content tends to feature seniors mostly when necessary. Their roles are often determined by their age and are rarely included in ads “just to represent <<people>>” (Miller et al., 2004, p. 321).

8. Conclusion

This study set out to explore the representations of older people in television advertising in Serbia, with a focus on identifying dominant representational profiles, roles, contexts and messages addressed to this demographic.

The findings show that seniors remain underrepresented despite trends suggesting their growing relevance as consumers. Although this aspect is progressing slightly, the low visibility of older people in advertising confirms the valuation of youth above all else. This ideal is ultimately unattainable, yet overwhelmingly dominant in media discourse, particularly in commercial communication.

When visible, older adults are typically portrayed through a set of affirming profiles, out of which Golden Ager and Perfect Grandparent are most prominent. As is the case for most advertising, the tendency here is to represent aging more idealized than it actually is.

A key dynamic concerns the tension between global representational patterns and local specificities. Unlike their Western counterparts, Serbian seniors are not often depicted in ads as globe-trotting or financially independent adventurers. Their lifestyles are modest, focused on their immediate surroundings, family, and local community. This reflects local economic and cultural specifics, like lower average pensions, a high proportion of income spent on essentials like food, and a cultural history marked by economic and political instability. So, a Golden Ager in Serbia, although a dominant profile like in other countries, has a more restrained expression.

Women are dominant in commercials for beauty products, cosmetics etc. It is still an area portrayed as exclusively female. Men are more likely to be represented in a professional or a mentorship role. Most prominent industries are food and beverage, health, beauty and cosmetics etc. Older women are underrepresented in professional or authoritative roles. They are mostly present in the domestic family and appearance related contexts. Although there are not many commercials in this area in general, the beauty industry continues to impose youth-centered ideals reinforcing the perception that aging is something to be hidden, reversed, or corrected through consumption. Older women, just like the younger ones, are represented in decontextualized settings which obscure individuality. Older men are more likely to be portrayed in medical or authoritative roles, but even these are few and far between.

The structure of industries or products featured in television advertising proved relevant. Food and beverages account for 37.3%, followed by health (25.3%), beauty and care (7.2%). From advertisers' perspective, the priorities relevant for aging target groups are quite basic: food and medicine. The prominence of health is especially striking given that, by law, only over-the-counter products can be advertised on television, not prescription medication. This structure mirrors actual household spending in Serbia, where over one-third of expenditure goes to food. It is a locally specific pattern compared to Western countries and is indicative of a developing economy with a modest standard of living.

This paper adds to the limited body of literature connecting aging and advertising in Serbia. It is not without limitations, which should be considered when interpreting the findings. The study focuses exclusively on television advertising, which, although still highly relevant for older audiences in Serbia, does not capture representations across digital, social media, outdoor, or print formats. This restricts the generalizability of findings to the broader advertising ecosystem. Also, the research approach differentiates unique commercials versus their frequency. The sample included only unique ads. It did not cover the broadcast frequency of

each. That leaves space for some commercials to be potentially more influential due to more intense airing and higher reach. The process of coding, although set within the appropriate criteria, is open to a degree of subjectivity since age estimation was based on visual and contextual cues (e.g., grey hair, wrinkles, family roles). Without verifiable age data, misclassification of characters over 65 was possible.

These limitations open several directions for future research. A first step would be to extend the analysis to additional media (digital, print, outdoor, etc.). Another would be to focus specifically on digital media, currently the most powerful channel, and to compare those findings with television. This would offer a more comprehensive, cross-media perspective. Valuable insights could also be gained from a repeated study, which would make it possible to track changes over time and assess whether advertising practices are evolving. This would enable us to identify how the parameters are changing and whether or not the advertising industry is evolving. This study does not cover the audience reception angle, which is also a very potent direction for further exploration.

As the demographic shift continues and the aging of the world accelerates, there is a growing imperative to improve our understanding of and practice around the representations of seniors across all media, advertising included.

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