10

Advertising old men: Swedish old men reflect on 'seeing themselves'

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Adverts tell a story and comprise images that old men encounter in their everyday lives, and which provide popular scripts on ageing masculinity. This chapter focuses on old men's own understandings of advertising and their depictions of old men. Focus group interviews with Swedish old men, aged between 65 and 92, were conducted, with commercial adverts featuring old men used as visual prompts to invite discussions on masculinity and ageing. The advertising shown reflects both negative and overtly ageist images, and images of the so-called successfully ageing old man; adverts appealing to identification and aspiration, adverts inciting laughter and appreciation, and adverts creating a sense of resistance or rejection. Different readings of the shown adverts emerged, which point to the polysemic nature of media texts. The chapter discusses prominent themes from the transcribed and coded focus group interviews, on embodied ageing, ageing in different stages of life, masculinity and societal changes in terms of gender equality and the role and status of old men.

advertising

focus groups

gender equality

masculinity

old men

Sweden

Introduction

Two elderly men sit on a bench. They are dressed in beige, wearing a cardigan, waistcoat and a cap. One is leaning on his walking stick. The men are absentmindedly observing the goings-on around them, their gaze vacant, one is chewing gum. The connotation is of locals in a warm country. Footsteps approach. She swaggers. Walks full of confidence. She is a young woman; her dress is short, a halter cut, leaving her shoulders bare, hair tied up in an effortless knot. She seems to be on holiday, judging from the environment. On seeing the men, she stops short, leans over the man chewing gum, straddles his lap and demonstratively kisses him. He is left gaping open-mouthed, and in a later sequence has a befuddled look; the man beside him looks astonished, though not alarmed. We see her smiling contently, as she walks on, chewing gum.

A voice-over pronounces: *Some people are willing to do anything to quit smoking. Nicorette chewing gum.* The camera is back on the two men, where the kissed man vacantly searches for the gum in his mouth, while the other sneakily reaches over and takes the packet of nicotine chewing gum from his pocket.

This advert tells a story, using the short timeframe of commercials of approximately 30–45 seconds to set the stage for a young, assured woman, certain of her ability to get what she wants, using the old man to get the gum, to quit smoking.

Could this commercial have featured two older women, and a young man giving one of them a long sexual kiss? Try substituting the characters with others of different age categories, gender, skin colour – and it is soon evident that the advertising agency would have realised it would be sexist or racist, and impossible to air. But the 'post-feminist' message of women able to get what they want is used to circumvent the blatant ageism of comparing kissing an old man to a readiness to do anything.

In this chapter, building on interviews in focus groups with old men, commercial adverts featuring old men are used as visual prompts to explore men, masculinity and ageing. The analysis focuses on adverts that depict old men, and how old men themselves talk about these. We ask what reflections on being men and old are invoked by the adverts; whether the interviewed men feel hailed by the images and their appeal to consumption; and how these responses can in turn be understood as old men's ways of identifying with, negotiating and resisting different cultural scripts on old age, ageing, men and masculinities.

Studies of old men and masculinities that explicitly discuss men as gendered and aged still constitute a relatively marginal area of scholarship. Studies of representations of masculinities are well established (Wernick, 1987; Craig, 1992; Edwards, 2004), and indeed in recent years there have been further signs of growing interest in such representations (Röber, 2020). However, that body of research has typically not dealt with images of old(er) men and masculinities in mass media and advertising to any notable extent.

Discussions of gender in gerontology have predominantly focused on women, while most studies of men and masculinities have focused on youth and midlife (Thompson, 1994, 2019; Spector-Mersel, 2006; Sandberg, 2007, 2011). This has sometimes led to assertions of old men as invisible or marginalised, both academically and socially (Fleming, 1999; Fennell and Davidson, 2003; Thompson, 2019). However, claims of this relative 'invisibility' of old men also warrant more nuanced analysis.

Although invisibility may reflect exclusion and marginalisation, it may also point to relative privilege, where men's normative position goes unnoticed. The invisibility of old men is thus complex. Old men are invisible and marginalised by ageism and by being positioned further away from hegemonic forms of masculinity, especially as defined by activity, work and whether being-abled or not. Still, old age and masculinity may continue to be a source of power and privilege, not least through

the accumulation of capital and resources. Invisibility can, then, be understood as a reflection of a dominant unmarked gendered position (Hearn, 1995; Sandberg, 2007; Hearn and Sandberg, 2009).

Spector-Mersel (2006) has argued that the relatively few established cultural scripts on becoming an old man have been rather limited and one-dimensional, but arguably are now in the process of becoming more diverse and elaborated. In contrast to many other cultural representations in films or literature that are consumed by particular groups of men, advertising may be understood as images that old men encounter in their everyday lives, and which provide popular scripts on ageing, masculinity and desirable or undesirable old men. Advertising is an arena where old men and old masculinities are both visible and invisible. Adverts as cultural scripts are actively interpreted, negotiated, resisted and challenged by old men themselves (Richardson and Wearing, 2014). For this reason, this chapter focuses primarily on old men's own understandings of advertising and depictions of old men therein.

Representations of gender and old age in advertising

In much mainstream commercial advertising, whether directed at women, men or both, 'youth' is presented or invoked as positive. It is also mainly young adults who are represented in advertising, as well as in other media (Ylänne et al, 2009; Ylänne, 2015; Edström, 2018). Compared to the proportion in the population of the age category represented, there is a clear pattern of gender and age discrimination in

media representations. While old women are especially under-represented and invisible in all media, old men are also often excluded from the mass media, with some notable exceptions, for example around reporting on certain 'world leaders'. There is furthermore a gendered pattern in terms of which topics men and women are represented in relation to. For example, men are made visible as experts and associated with so-called hard topics such as mainstream politics, whereas women are made visible as representatives of ordinary people and in relation to topics such as relationships, fashion, home and lifestyle (Richardson and Wearing, 2014; Edström, 2018).

One may, thus, in the words of Tuchman (1978), speak of a *symbolic annihilation*, the omission, trivialisation and condemnation of old people in media representations overall and adverts in general. If women are made invisible earlier in the lifecourse, with markers of ageing already when in their 50s and 60s, men's ageing is invisible in the sense that there are fewer cultural scripts about men and ageing.

Depending on the kind of media outlet, the target audience and the purpose of the advert, images of old age can be used to connote longevity, endurance or long-durability (including of products), as well as to promote health aids (Williams et al, 2010; Ylänne, 2012; Ylänne, 2015). But more often, old people are reduced to subsidiary figures or portrayed in reductive ways as grumpy, outdated, figures of fun

or ignorant of IT (Ylänne, 2015). Many adverts are for consumer products such as cosmetics and fashion, which further enforces the skewed age representation (Lövgren, 2009).

Images of old men in advertising seem complex, however. In his analysis of old men in mass media and advertising from the early 1990s, Thompson (1994) argued that old men were primarily portrayed as passive, plump grandfathers, lacking virility and positioned away from hegemonic spheres of work. A decade later, Calasanti and King (2005) claimed that new images were emerging, with old men as successful third agers who were continuously 'playing hard', engaging in activities such as sport and travel, and 'staying hard', by displaying continued virility and sexual function. In a similar vein, Hurd Clarke et al (2014), in their analysis of old men in men's magazines, showed that they were primarily depicted as 'experienced and powerful' and 'happy and healthy'.

The advertising shown to the men in our study reflects both negative and overtly ageist images, such as the passive undesirable old men in the *Nicorette* commercial quoted at the beginning of this chapter, and images of the so-called successfully ageing old man. We also discuss what Röber (2020) terms the 'laughable old man' – old men in absurd humorous narratives. The laughable old man is not unambiguously positioned in terms of negative/positive or decline/success. These images could be seen as both paving the way for visibility and greater variability in

representations of old men and ageing masculinity, while at the same time positioning the old man as ridiculous (see Ylänne, 2015; Röber, 2020).

Research project on ageing masculinities

The material discussed in this chapter emerged from a study within a wider research project, 'MASCAGE: Gendering age – representations of ageing masculinities in contemporary European literature and film'.[1] The aim of this project is to analyse representations of ageing and masculinities, using cultural representations in fictional material and popular culture. The research also examines how old men themselves understand and perceive representations of age and ageing, men and masculinities. Accordingly, focus group interviews have been carried out with men in different European contexts, inviting them to discuss being in this phase of life, as well as how they themselves understand such representations. Different media examples, as well as works of fiction, have been used as a point of departure to initiate and invite reflections on being an old(er) man in contemporary society.

The focus groups we discuss here were conducted in Sweden. Sweden is a relatively egalitarian society, by class and gender, compared to, say, the US or UK, with a long history of a welfare state, from 'cradle to grave'. On the other hand, the welfare society has been subject to major neoliberal changes in recent years, along with some increases in inequality, significant immigration and societal changes across

generations. Age, class, ethnicity, gender and generational relations all need to be contextualised accordingly.

Participants in the study

This chapter draws on the Swedish part of the project and interviews with three focus groups, during which a corpus of adverts featuring old men that were aired/shown in Sweden was shown and discussed. The focus group interviews lasted around two hours and were conducted jointly by researchers Lövgren and Sandberg. The participants – with three to five men in each group – first met with one of the researchers for an ethics briefing and to provide informed consent, as well as for an individual biographical background interview. Thereafter during a focus group meeting, the men discussed being in their current phase of life and reflected on ageing and masculinity. They were shown different adverts, both print and videos, that featured old men, and were invited to share their thoughts on these.

Recruitment for the three focus groups varied. One was recruited through a Swedish municipal library on the outskirts of a middle-sized Swedish city. Another focus group was recruited through an activity centre for retirees in suburban Stockholm. The third group consisted of five men, recruited using a snowball method, by having one interviewee invite the others. This group convened online due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. All in all, 12 men participated in the focus groups discussed here.

The men were between the ages of 65 and 92, with the majority being over 75. There were great differences in the meaning that old age had for the men, depending on their chronological age, their sense of generational belonging and – judging from what the informants themselves emphasised – their embodied ageing and health. The men generally assessed their health as fair, stating that some ailments were a natural part of growing old. Several of the interviewees came from a working-class background, and started out in working-class manual jobs, later having had careers as foremen or works managers, or running their own business. Several had a university degree and had worked in well-paid positions. Whatever their earlier background, they could now reasonably be described as middle-class.

The men described heterosexual relationships in the past and present, with most of the men living with a female partner. Several were divorced and had remarried, and several had children and grandchildren. Some of the participants in their 60s and early 70s had living parents. All the men were White with a Swedish ethnic background. Overall, the participants were very socially active.

Focus group interviews

Interviews are in themselves sites of identity construction in which desirable selves are presented and managed, including gendered and aged selves. This was reflected in the background interviews where most men spoke extensively of careers and work trajectories, whereas relationships and family had to be probed for by the researchers.

These self-presentations testify to how masculinities are often bonded with performances and achievements, and thereby also with the loss of identity some men experience when retiring and are no longer able to identify with a profession (Pietilä et al, 2020).

Focus groups are a method of data collection for studying 'the co-construction of realities between people, the dynamic negotiation of meaning in context' (Wilkinson, 1998, p 112). While most existing studies on old men and masculinities have been based on individual interviews, the focus groups were useful in understanding how men discussed their experiences and negotiated masculinity and age in a group context. This allowed contrasting interpretations of the adverts to emerge, allowing for a diversity of responses.

Several of the men knew each other beforehand, which allowed for more spontaneous and relaxed conversations, often characterised by joking and a humorous tone. This suggests their attempts to get along, particularly in cases where the men did not know each other beforehand, in tandem with the fact that two of the commercials employ humour as a narrative strategy. But it could also reflect how the focus groups were sites for homosociality where the men constructed masculinity in group interactions (see Allen, 2005).

Cognitive and bodily ageing is of importance when discussing media representations and responses thereof. In particular, we learned that the very tempo of

the multimodal commercials excluded some of the men. For example, for those with hearing impairments, the narration in the adverts was too rapid for them to process. Also, media literacy and belonging, in terms of different media generations, seemed to impact on the reception to, knowledge of and familiarity with the genre and format of the advertising.

Selection of adverts

One significant theme of the MASCAGE project has been the exploration of ageist gender stereotypes, including men's perceptions thereof. This builds on previous research on stereotypes used when portraying old people – both negative and positive ones, such as the 'golden ager', the 'perfect grandparent' or the 'grumpy old man' (Hummert et al, 1994; Williams et al, 2010). As advertising can be a significant social sphere for the production and reinforcement of ageist and gendered stereotypes, the overall project chose to include advertising that reflected various stereotypes of old men in order to prompt discussion. This included both negative stereotypes, as in the commercial described at the beginning of the chapter, and what might arguably be more positive stereotypes, such as that of the successfully ageing old man (Calasanti and King, 2005). Such an example is the holiday company *TUI*'s print adverts, showing a group of people, both men and women, gathered on a beach, in some images surrounding a surfboard. Their body posture, as well as signs of ageing, such as white hair and a greying beard, connote belonging to an older age category. The

grouping in the photographs suggests couples travelling together. Of importance is also what is absent from the images: people in other age categories, such as children. This implies adults in the so-called third age.

The third visual prompt was a commercial from a long-running award-winning docu-soap series of adverts, where several characters working at a Swedish chain of grocery stores are followed. The storyline is often humorous, commenting on current issues. The commercial works through strengthening the brand of the grocery chain, portraying the characters as fun, and seeking to form a relationship between the brand and the consumer. In the commercial, Stig, the boss, is concerned about his wrinkles, asking a male colleague for advice on "an ointment" to help. Jokingly the younger man holds the hand scanner to his face, saying "if this shows results, then we can talk about wrinkles". Both men react with astonishment when the scanner shows the price for sun-dried tomatoes.

Analysis of interviews

All interviews were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then read through several times and coded in accordance with the guidelines advocated in Braun and Clarke (2006) and Rennstam and Wästerfors (2015). This entails a first general, broad, inclusive coding, where both patterns and recurrences, as well as nuances and deviations, are considered, together with coding on wording, choice of expressions and narrative form. This open coding was followed by a second coding. Codes were

discussed and compared between the researchers who conducted the focus group interviews. This chapter is built on a selection of these latter codes. The interviewees have been anonymised and the quotations in this chapter are presented with pseudonyms. All quotes have been translated from Swedish.

Masculinity/ies and old age

In this section we focus on the informants' talk that centred on the theme of masculinity and ageing.

"Old people pretending to be young": resisting images of youthful old men

While the TUI advertising could be interpreted as a positive image of old men and men's ageing, emphasising a healthy, active and socially engaged later life, the focus group participants in most cases clearly expressed not feeling hailed by the images. A 90-year-old Frank, for example, expressed how it made him feel "really old" and that it "was a really long time since he was like that": the images rather underlined what he was no longer able to do. These sentiments were reiterated by several of the men, in particular the oldest of the participants.

Sixty-six-year-old Peter was one interviewee who explicitly spoke of the campaign as excluding old people:

> 'So they [the producer of the advert] claim that age isn't a factor for adventure. Seventy is the new 50 like we spoke of before. That's what they visualise here. But what they won't take into account is that I would never be able to get on a surfboard, right? My ailments won't allow me. So we're excluded, some of us, right?'

In this quotation Peter refers back to conversations earlier in the interview, where the participants discussed new third-age scripts on ageing available to their generation. But Peter also challenges the images of healthy active older people in the advert as incongruent with his ageing embodiment. This experience resonated with several other interviewees. In particular, those in their late 70s and older associated, to a great extent, growing old with the ageing of one's body, such as reduced mobility and nimbleness, pain, impaired hearing or eyesight and in some cases more serious illnesses. These were experiences they found largely absent in commercials but also generally in cultural representations and fiction. The men were critical of what they thought of as an exclusion.

That the advert for the travel agency did not concur with their own reflection on their embodiment and as such did not appeal to them also meant they rejected it as "meaningless" and something they would simply ignore. As expressed by Lars, aged 75: "If I'd seen that in the metro, I wouldn't even be looking, I wouldn't have noticed that it contained old people, I would have thought that it was 20-year-olds, 'cause I

wouldn't even look at that shit." Lars' opinion that he would not even see these people as old, reflected a theme in the focus groups overall; there were recurring discussions of whether the men and women featuring in the adverts were, in fact, old. Although grey hair and a greying beard suggested being old, body shape, slimness, posture and props such as a surfboard indicated youth, according to the interviewees. But the people featuring in the TUI advert were also discussed as masquerading as young "old people pretending to be young … he is dressed like a teenager". While feminist cultural gerontologists have discussed how old women not acting their age and not dressing age-appropriately are being labelled as grotesque or failed in terms of gender performance (Twigg, 2013; Lövgren, 2016), this is rarely discussed when it comes to old men. However, that the men in the TUI advertising were described as pretending to be young could be understood as a form of resistance to the imagery of youthful ageing as pathetic and undesirable. This was also reflected in the words of 80-year-old Edvard who said: "They're trying to reflect through their dress and looks that 'We're young, we are healthy and well'", and then pointed to his head and added: "But there is nothing in here." Edvard could be understood as resisting the youthful ageing man as a cultural script, positioning himself and his old peers as smarter and more authentic than the men in the image, distancing himself and his peers from the media images.

Not all men resisted the portrayals of the old men in the TUI commercial, however. Several of the men in the focus group who were under 75 understood the images as positive and expressed identification with the images: "But if they styled us a bit, and gave us some trendy clothes … We'd all fit in that image too." They expressed feeling included by the campaign as they themselves were travelling in retirement, although they claimed to have more interest in other forms of travel than going to the beach. They could see themselves in the photos, as people who enjoyed the freedom after retirement to travel with friends and who had both the financial resources and the time to do so. As such, they themselves identified as the "gold in grey", so-called third agers, appealed to in commercial contexts.

The discussions that emerged around the TUI commercial suggest that new scripts on ageing masculinity, which emphasise health, activity and a lack of disabilities, are not necessarily experienced as positive by old men. Although the participants were in many ways following dominant cultural scripts of positive ageing by being socially active, they did not feel hailed by the advertising since it made embodied ageing invisible, something which they experienced as central to growing old. The men's resistance to the images could also be understood as a way of resisting not only the ideals of youthful ageing but also the ideals of youthful masculinities, characterised by strength, stamina, health and vigour. As 81-year-old Nisse laughingly said: "These are work-out fanatics – far from who I am." While the men

sometimes expressed their resistance using scornful words, the commercial was also negotiated through humour and laughter. This is, for example, seen in a witty conversation between Peter and Roger.

> Peter: 'I seriously doubt I would fit into that image [laughs] …'
>
> Roger: 'You could always hide behind the surfboard.'
>
> [group laughter]
>
> Peter: 'I think I would be visible still.' [laughs]

In terms of the visibility and invisibility of old men, the focus group discussions suggest that although the adverts may contribute to a new visibility of old men in the media, they may still contribute to a sense of invisibility among old men themselves, since embodied ageing is overlooked.

Negotiations of gender and ageing appearance

Overall, most of the participants expressed a dislike for the adverts and commercials, but the commercial for a chain of grocery stores was noted by several as the kind of commercial they appreciated and would enjoy watching: "One stays in the room instead of sneaking out for a cigarette or coffee." The commercial featuring Stig, the manager of a supermarket, who is concerned about his wrinkles, was one that brought both laughter and appreciation. In the focus group with the youngest old – aged 65 to 72 – it spurred a lively discussion on the use of skin cream, which revealed negotiations of cultural scripts of ageing and the gendered appearance of old men.

Peter started sharing his interpretation of the commercial saying that the humour partly lay in the reversed roles and the absurdity of an old man being concerned with his looks, since it is generally women who, in his opinion, are more anxious about their ageing appearance and therefore use anti-ageing creams. Per-Erik, aged 65, responded and pointed to how expectations about old men have changed in their lifetime. Signs of ageing are increasingly understood as a concern also for men:

> 'It's totally different from ten years ago. And if you go even further back it was even more unusual that a man used any kind of skin cream. But now it's soon 50/50 I suspect. Not that there is anything wrong with it, that's not what I mean, but it's become that men's ageing is somehow more talked about than it was before. Earlier I think that [being] an old man was associated with authority.'

The others in the group concurred, and Peter added that the old saying used to be that "men age with dignity". Nils in turn said: "Men are like red wine of the better vintage, they mature with age." These quotations point to the identification of a shift in the cultural scripts of the old man where he, according to the interviewees, previously gained status from his age. Looks have become increasingly significant for men as they age and in the shaping of contemporary masculinity. Notably, by interjecting,

"Not that there is anything wrong with it" when discussing an increasing focus on appearances among old men, Per-Erik positioned himself as in favour of these changing cultural scripts, and as open-minded.

The reasons for the changes in attitude towards bodily appearance work were discussed as having to do with advertising: "Perhaps because we [men] have been persuaded by all these commercials." But the changes were mainly linked to changing cultural scripts on masculinity and towards increasing gender equality among men and women. To exemplify the change, Per-Erik compared old men today to his father and said that for him it was "mostly about working", while men today think more about the signs of ageing.

Changing masculinities and changing gendered practices among men are clearly presented as positive and signs of progress. Rather than considering an old man's concern with his looks as something unmanly or ridiculous, the interviewees linked it with a wider gender equality discourse and progressive changes in masculinity. It is significant also that men's increasing concern for their appearance is described with the term "brave", often connoted with men and masculinity. A similar feeling was raised in another focus group where the men discussed household chores, claiming the gendered contract had changed and that it was no longer frowned upon if men and women shared the load – whereas earlier, one would have risked being seen

as 'henpecked'. Instead, the men came across as rather proud when saying they in fact did most of the work around the home.

These articulations must be understood and analysed in relation to the Swedish context where alignment with gender equality discourses may be considered central to shaping one's self as a desirable/good man, and perhaps even a contextually specific hegemonic masculinity (Gottzén and Jonsson, 2012; Hearn et al, 2012). These kinds of arguments in turn become a form of identity work, which enable the old men to position themselves, not as backward old men, but as a new generation of old men who are different from previous generations.

However, although the men in this focus group showed their support for new and more gender equal forms of masculinity, which included a greater focus on appearance, there were some disagreements on the actual use of facial creams among men their age.

> Peter: 'Well, still I don't think men in our generation use skin care products, I don't have a cream that I put on. But among younger generations … But I don't think among us, I don't know if any of you use any moisturisers or things like that …'
>
> Nils: 'Well, I do.'
>
> Per-Erik: 'Me too, occasionally.'

The men who used skin care products talked of it mainly in terms of comfort and feeling, not in terms of looks, suggesting that discussing one's ageing appearance was

not uncomplicated, and that there were subtle limits to the kind of interest one may show in skin care. The discussion seemed to suggest that there are several cultural scripts on gender and ageing appearance at work in old men's lives, where it is both unthinkable and possible for an old man to use, and admit using, skin care products.

The character Stig in one of the commercials is a clear example of the laughable old man character, as discussed by Ylänne (2015) and Röber (2020), a figure that could potentially function to subvert social norms, while reinstating the old man as a source of ridicule. The very fact that old men's appearance and concern with wrinkles can be joked about in a commercial could be interpreted as a sign of the topic not being sensitive, in contrast to adverts targeting women where ageing skin and looks are represented as a serious topic requiring both disciplining work and products (Lövgren, 2009; see also Chapter 7). The fact that this topic is joked about in the data may also provide possibilities for contestation and negotiations of cultural scripts.

"A young woman molesting a man who looks so old …": resisting and negotiating images of the sexually undesirable old man

In the focus group discussions, there was not one but many different interpretations of the adverts shown, which point to the polysemic nature of media texts. This was most visible in the discussions of the Nicorette commercial presented at the beginning of this chapter. This was understood as both ageist and inappropriate, and, by some, as

funny. Moreover, in one of the focus groups, it stimulated quite a discussion on the double standards around sexuality depending on age and gender.

Erland, Ivar and Östen took turns to express their dislike and repudiation of the Nicorette advert, and how it presented what they understood as an assault on an old man, with the age-inappropriate sexual encounter between a younger woman and an old man.

Erland: 'It's vulgar.'

Ivar: [chuckles]

Erland: 'I would be shocked.'

Ivar: 'Yes … extremely odd.' [laughter]

Östen: 'A young woman molesting a man who looks so old …'

Ivar: 'An 80-year-old chap.'

Östen: '… and frail looking too. Yes, it is somewhat aggressive.'

Erland: 'It should have been a young guy. A young guy should have been sitting there, that would have been more normal.'

The rejection of the commercial is not explicitly done based on its ageism, yet the words used in the dialogue presented here clearly suggest that the men understood the commercial as negative and an offensive portrayal of an old man (see Robinson and Popovich, 2003). The discussion pointed to how the participants reacted to the kiss of the man as derogatory, but also to gendered aspects of appropriate age differences in sexual encounters. Peter, in another focus group, was explicitly critical towards the message and how it degraded the old man: " So what she wanted was the chewing

gum, not you. So it's kind of funny, but still it's sort of degrading ageing also."

Whereas Peter pointed out the ageist use of humour to conceal the humiliating dimension of the event, some interviewees did not pick up on the ageism in the commercial. Instead, they considered it only as funny and positive (although a not very credible) commercial: "there is no suffering in this image" and that receiving a kiss must have been "pleasant for the old man too". Perhaps the different interpretations about whether the man was assaulted or received an enjoyable kiss depend on whether the focus of the viewers was on age or masculinity. Whereas some saw an asymmetrical relationship in terms of age, others saw a heterosexual encounter – a man receiving a kiss by a woman. Since constructions of masculinity are closely intertwined with sexuality, and men are assumed to always desire sexual contact, this may allow for the latter reading (Sandberg, 2011). The cultural script at play here seems to be that an old man can never be a victim of sexual assault, since he is always willing.

However, a humorous discussion emerged in one group on sexual harassment and double standards regarding gender and sexuality. It started with Karl stating that the episode in the advert could be seen as a case of sexual harassment.

Karl: 'Well. I'm thinking in terms of #MeToo, if one should report her [the woman in the commercial] [everyone laughs]. If this was a guy doing what she's doing, he'd been in real trouble. But now he surely approved.'

The men seemed to negotiate the double standards where an old man's sexual approaches are viewed negatively as either offensive or ridiculous, in contrast with those of younger women. The figure of 'the dirty old man', inappropriately sexual for his age, seems to linger here as a stereotype that the old man must relate to and resist (Sandberg, 2011). The resistance to the double standards and the negative associations of old men's sexualities led to subsequent discussions of #MeToo, why there had been no calls from men on sexual harassment, and that they had not witnessed sexual harassment against women in their working life. In contrast to the earlier discussion, where men actively sided with gender equality discourses and positioned themselves as a new and more gender equal generation, the discussions on #MeToo rather called this movement into question, with the men disassociating themselves from feminist claims. That the discussion and challenge of #MeToo followed the watching of the Nicorette commercial could be interpreted as a form of resistance to the negative portrayal of the old man and a wider negative depiction of men's sexualities.

Conclusion

Although old people are very frequently absent in the media and old men rarely figure in advertising, in contrast to younger men, there is some variability in how old men are depicted, both in negative terms as passive, sexually undesirable and ridiculous, and more positively as healthy, happy third agers. In this chapter, we have explored how old men themselves respond to advertising that displays different stereotypes of

old men. Using advertising in focus group discussions is a creative method to prompt, discuss and elucidate, in this case, old men's understandings, and cultural scripts of age and ageing.

The method employed in this study provides a platform to discuss various commonplace ways in which age, ageing and old men are represented, eliciting different forms of data, compared with, say, one-to-one interviews or extended social surveys. This method is visual, oral and social, involving debate and negotiation between participants. There were discussions of different interpretations of the adverts, and the relaying of other experiences pertaining to ageing, sharing thoughts and reflections – often with a tentative and exploratory attitude. Several said they had not previously reflected on being male, and even less on ageing. The interviews thus provided an opportunity to explore different aspects of this, together with others, and with two interested researchers, providing a means of access to cultural scripts of ageing, old men and masculinities that are not always self-evident.

The relative lack of representations of being an old man means an absence of representations in relation to or against which old men, and others, can reflect themselves. Some interpretations by the men involved resisting the limited images that do exist, along with what the images and narratives convey, in that they did not capture how they experience their own situation. This mirrors the research literature on men doing masculinity by resistance, by *not* being something, rather than

embracing something willingly and positively (Wetherell and Edley, 1999). Such rather less than positive narratives may also be steps towards new, incipient or emerging ways (see Inhorn, 2012) of being old men and doing ageing masculinities.

The absence of depictions through which to mirror oneself, compare with, renounce, dissociate from or recognise oneself in, means a loss of a potentially powerful cultural resource. Media and fictional depictions can be understood as a metaphorical cultural larder or pantry with narratives and discourses that contribute to understanding oneself and one's life situation, but also those of others. What is it like to age? What is it like to be in one's 80s? What is old age like? And for a man? The men testified to feeling at a loss here. There were few, if any, narratives that *centred* on old men – other than as a person to be made fun of. This absence can also entail being more alone, and perhaps lonely, with a lack of cultural resources for understanding and reflecting on oneself. The oldest men struggled with talking about being old, which was at times described as quite awful. Talking about the negative aspects of ageing and being afraid of coming across as negative or bitter seemed taboo to communicate. Perhaps the men also felt there was an indifference and lack of concern from those around them.

Another way of understanding the absence of depictions of ageing as a man can be to see this as a certain freedom – freedom of movement and liberty of action. Men's ageing is not co-constructed with fertility and reproduction, unlike for women,

assigned to an older age category already in their 50s, with menopause as a transitional marker. Signs of ageing are not made hypervisible, or even as problematic or stigmatising for men. Importantly, the cultural interpretations of putative ageing signs, in the focus groups, were made from a point of status and privilege. Men are the unmarked, privileged gender. Men's ageing is invisible in mediated representations, both freeing men from being disregarded as belonging to an old age category, but also depriving old men from a resource in doing age.

Note

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[1] The primary objective of this project is to analyse social constructions of ageing masculinities and/through their cultural representations in contemporary European literatures and cinemas (see https://www.mascage.eu).