

Kansas State University  
Center on Aging

Research Report

Women's Responses to Current Fashion Models:  
A Study of Middle-Aged Female Consumers

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Report prepared by Joy M. Kozar, Ph.D., Department of Apparel, Textiles, and Interior Design at Kansas State University. Research supported by the Center on Aging, Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, and the College of Human Ecology, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS.

Contact: Joy M. Kozar ([jkozar@ksu.edu](mailto:jkozar@ksu.edu)).

## Introduction

By the year 2030, it is anticipated that the 65 and older population in the U.S. will almost double (Administration on Aging, 2003), becoming the most influential consumer group in the marketplace (Moschis et al., 1997). Within the U.S., the middle-aged and older adult market controls a majority of the wealth (Leinweber, 2001), possessing more than half of the country's discretionary income (Moschis, 1994). In the future, due to the relative size and wealth of the Baby Boom cohort, older consumers will increasingly attain more influence and purchasing power (Bradley & Longino, 2001). Recognizing how the mature market reacts to different promotional and marketing tactics will continue to become more significant over the next several decades as retailers strive to build and enhance customer loyalty.

Despite the growth of the aging population in the U.S., older adults are rarely or infrequently depicted in mainstream advertising (Carrigan & Szmigin, 1999; Greco, 1989; Robinson et al., 2003; Silvers, 1997). According to Moschis et al. (1997), it has been standard practice in the past to virtually ignore older consumers. Older women are especially excluded from the mainstream media (de Luce, 2001; Ursic, Ursic, & Ursic, 1986), and when depicted, are often portrayed in a manner laden with negative social stereotypes (Cruikshank, 2003).

Younger models are used frequently to promote products developed to counteract the signs of aging (de Luce, 2001), even though these advertisements typically are directed toward older women. Apparel and cosmetic industries are especially scorned by consumer advocate groups and researchers for portraying models in an unrealistic manner (i.e., thin, youthful, highly attractive) (de Luce, 2001). In a previous study, advertising agency executives indicated that older individuals should primarily be used in advertisements for health products, financial services, insurance, and travel and vacations whereas younger adults should be depicted in ads for fashion and cosmetic products (Greco, 1989).

Because women are likely to be the major consumers of apparel and cosmetic products in the mature market segment, knowledge of how middle-aged and older women respond to models perceived to be more similar in age will be useful in targeting advertisements more effectively to this market segment. The purpose of this project is to examine if middle-aged female consumers prefer apparel advertising models more closely resembling their age. It has been found previously that women aged 60-80 have more favorable ratings of models more closely resembling their age. Participants also indicated being more likely to purchase clothing worn by older models and indicated a preference for retailers who use older models in their advertisements (Kozar & Damhorst, in press). In order to more fully understand the media perceptions and apparel purchasing behavior of women as they age, additional research using a sample of women in their 30s, 40s, and 50s is needed. This project will assist in recognizing key differences and similarities among middle-aged and older female consumers.

Because people compare themselves with others who appear to have personal attributes similar to their own (Festinger, 1954), participants' perceived similarity with fashion models is also assessed. Evaluating respondents' perceived similarity to media images is worthwhile, as previous researchers have suggested that similarity leads to liking of or preference for others (Mathes et al., 1985). Previously, older women aged 60-80 who were found to perceive more similarity to fashion models had more positive beliefs about the model's appearance and attractiveness, indicated a greater willingness to purchase the model's clothing, and perceived the model's clothing to be more fashionable (Kozar & Damhorst, in press). Many researchers have noted the opportunities and challenges in segmenting older adult consumers. Expanding upon data collected previously, this research project will further contribute to an understanding of effective marketing tactics appealing to adult women middle-aged and older.

## Objectives

The objectives of this project include the following:

1. Examine the differences in participants' ratings of models perceived to be middle-aged and older on qualities of appearance, attractiveness, and fashionability.
2. Determine participants' perceived similarity to models middle-aged and older.

## Investigation Procedures

The sample for this study included women in their 30s, 40s, and 50s recruited through local women's social, professional, and philanthropic organizations. This method of recruitment has proven successful in the past when sampling older women aged 60-80. Full-color photographs of fashion models appearing to be middle-aged or older were used as stimuli to determine differences in participants' ratings of older vs. younger looking models. The stimulus models selected for data collection are based on responses from a sample of pretest participants ( $N = 10$ ) and include those with the highest mean scores on attractiveness and fashionability and perceived to be at least 30 years of age or older.

In order to explore the responses of middle-aged female consumers toward fashion models perceived to be within the same age range, a questionnaire measuring participants' beliefs about the stimulus models, perceived fashionability of the model's clothing, perceived similarity with the models, and purchase intentions was designed for this study. Items measuring demographic information, such as age, ethnicity, highest education level, annual income, and occupational status were also included in the questionnaire.

Participants were instructed to indicate the perceived age of the models in the photographs. In 10-year increments, ranging from 20-29 up to 80-89, respondents were asked to select the age group to which they estimate each model to belong in. This measure is used as a check to ensure that participants perceive an age difference among the various stimulus models.

### ***Objective 1***

To examine the differences in participants' ratings of models perceived to be middle-aged and older on qualities of appearance, attractiveness, and fashionability, scales previously developed and tested by Petrosius and Crocker (1989) and Clayton, Lennon, and Larkin (1987) were used. As part of the study, participants were asked to rate each stimuli on five different items using a 7-point semantic differential scale: *Boring/Interesting*, *Unappealing/Appealing*, *Unimpressive/Impressive*, *Unattractive/Attractive*, and *Not Eye-Catching/Eye-Catching*. Clayton et al. (1987) used a series of items to measure perceived fashionability of a garment. These items were adapted to rate the stimulus models' clothing on four adjectives: *fashionable*, *current*, *attractive*, and *up-to-date*. A 5-point ordered set of options ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*) was used.

### ***Objective 2***

In determining participants' perceived similarity with models middle-aged and older, respondents were instructed to indicate how similar they felt to the models using a 5-point ordered set of options ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*). Assessments of perceived similarity of the self to models was based on characteristics such as *overall lifestyle*, *dress*, *appearance*, *attractiveness* and *body shape* (Appiah, 2001; Posavac & Posavac, 2002; Whittler, 1989). Respondents were also asked to indicate their interest in buying the clothing worn by the models in the photographs. Questions pertaining to participants' purchase intentions included three bipolar adjective choices: *Unlikely/Very Likely*, *Improbable/Very Probable*, and *Impossible/Very Possible* (Kim, 1995).

### **Preliminary Findings**

A total of 182 women ranging between the ages of 30 and 59 participated in the study. The mean chronological age of participants was 46. The majority of the sample (88%) was European American, with the remaining 12% belonging to African American, Hispanic American, Asian American, or Native American ethnic groups. Fifty-seven percent of the sample had graduated from college or had received some form of post-secondary education or job training. The mean annual income of the sample ranged from \$50,000-\$74,999. Sixty-eight percent of the sample reported their occupational status as working full-time, paid. An additional 14% of the sample reported working part-time, paid.

A two-way analysis of variance was conducted to assess the effectiveness of the age treatments applied to each model. As a result of the analysis, it was found that participants perceived a significant age difference between the younger and older versions for all four stimulus models. Participants perceived the younger age versions of the models to be in their 30s or 40s, while the older versions of the models were perceived to be in their 50s or 60s.

Univariate ANOVA tests were used to assess the significance for the age treatment effects on participants' beliefs about the models, purchase intentions, perceived similarity, and fashionability of the model's clothing. The analyses revealed age treatments to be significantly related to participants' beliefs about the models ( $F = 10.32, p < .01$ ) and their purchase intentions ( $F = 10.98, p < .01$ ). The mean scores for participants' beliefs about the models showed that participants rated the older models significantly higher than the younger models on the

characteristics related to appearance and attractiveness. This finding suggests that participants perceived the older models to be more interesting, appealing, impressive, and attractive than the younger models. The older models also had a significantly greater impact on participants' purchase intentions than did the younger versions of the models; a worthwhile finding as the clothing seen on both versions of each model was unchanged.

Simple linear regression analyses revealed a significant positive relationship between perceived similarity and participants' beliefs about the models ( $F = 40.88, p < .0001$ ). Participants who perceived more similarity with the models had more favorable beliefs about the models' appearance and attractiveness as compared to participants with less perceived similarity to the models.

Perceived similarity was also found to be a significant predictor of purchase intentions and perceived fashionability of the model's clothing. As a result of the analyses, participants with higher perceived similarity to the models indicated being more likely to purchase clothing worn by the models than did participants with less perceived similarity ( $F = 42.52, p < .0001$ ) to the models. Participants who perceived more similarity to the models also rated the model's clothing as more fashionable than did participants who perceived less similarity between themselves and the models ( $F = 11.48, p < .01$ ).

## Discussion

The preliminary findings of this study indicate that marketers should consider the age of the model in creating effective advertising schemes targeted toward the middle-aged female population. Clearly, perceived similarity to the model is a factor that must also be recognized. To increase understanding of the middle-aged and older market segment, further research is needed to explore the attributes or characteristics influencing women's perceptions of similarity to media images.

Over the next several decades, as the older population continues to expand, knowledge of older adults' responses and reactions to various promotional and marketing tactics will become increasingly more valuable (Moschis *et al.*, 1997). Information on the attitudes of Baby Boomers and the mature market toward the depiction of adults similar in age in the media is useful to businesses wanting to capture a larger segment of the older population. By employing marketing strategies that appeal to older consumers, a great deal of success can be achieved, as middle-aged and older consumers continue to have a considerable amount of purchasing power in the marketplace.

## Distribution and Use of Received Funding

Funding received from the Kansas State University Center on Aging was used to support the primary researcher for a two-week period during the summer of 2007. In preparation for data collection to begin by fall of 2007, all materials including participant consent forms and questionnaires were finalized. Supporting materials to obtain IRB approval were also completed and submitted. Various women's social, philanthropic, and professional organizations were contacted during the summer to recruit study participants.

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