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**Storytelling as a Communication Strategy.
The Representation of Older Adults in Clio Award-Winning
Advertising Narratives**

PHD THESIS
- SUMMARY -

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of accelerated population aging represents a major challenge for contemporary society. This process is often accompanied by stereotypes, prejudices, and age-based discrimination, which have negative effects on society as a whole. At the same time, in the context of a market saturated with brands and messages, advertising must constantly reinvent itself. Storytelling thus becomes an essential communication strategy, offering a competitive advantage through its ability to influence and educate consumers with relevant and memorable stories. This research aims to investigate the role and elements of storytelling as an advertising communication strategy and how elderly people are represented in award-winning advertisements at the Clio Awards festival, one of the most prestigious events in the advertising industry. The methodology employed involved conducting a series of semi-structured interviews with experts in the fields of theater and film, communication and marketing, and psychology, alongside a content analysis of 71 advertisements that won gold, silver, or bronze awards between 2014 and 2024 at the Clio Awards festival, featuring elderly protagonists. The results indicate that message retention is based on its relevance, language, emotion, novelty, impact, the receiver's abilities, the sender-receiver relationship, and the communication channel. Effective messages must be meaningful, address the receiver's needs, and use engaging language characterized by clarity, metaphors, and rhythm. Regarding the representation of elderly individuals, the analysis highlighted an overrepresentation of men in advertisements compared to women. Although a significant gender imbalance and the persistence of certain age-related visual stereotypes remain, most advertisements promote a dignified, inclusive, and dynamic image of seniors. The integration of storytelling as a narrative strategy in advertising communication contributes to creating a more empathetic, memorable, and persuasive message, demonstrating the potential of storytelling to redefine perceptions of old age. This research offers valuable contributions both academically and practically, providing recommendations for the development of more effective and inclusive communication strategies that avoid stereotyping and promote a more realistic representation of elderly individuals.

SUMMARY

The phenomenon of accelerated population aging, closely linked to declining birth rates, is one of the most pressing socio-demographic challenges of our time. This alarming situation is unfolding globally and demands immediate attention. Unfortunately, aging is often accompanied by stereotypes, prejudice, and age-based discrimination, which affect society as a

whole. Addressing age-related stereotypes is a complex issue that requires balancing societal goals, the economic interests of companies, existing legal regulations, and the influence of mass media and advertising. Extensive analysis is needed to determine whether advertising generates negative stereotypes or merely reflects the existing perceptions within society.

Alongside the issue of population aging, in the context of an overcrowded market saturated with brands and messages, the advertising industry is compelled to constantly reinvent itself. In this landscape, storytelling as a communication strategy, using narrative in advertising, becomes a competitive advantage capable of influencing consumers. A story serves to convey messages and values in a creative way, facilitate the understanding of complex concepts, spark emotions, capture attention, and inspire. Moreover, it can highlight social issues, characters, or conflicts, preserve the memory of events, and help build trust and relationships with the audience. Stories hold significant power; they can transmit ideas and principles, as well as challenge stereotypes and prejudices. Through their emotional and social impact, they can promote awareness and active engagement, particularly in a society where stereotypes are widespread, from traditional media to social networks.

By combining the socio-economic context of population aging with the growing need to adapt advertising content for an increasingly large senior audience, as well as the proven effectiveness of storytelling, this research aims to investigate the role and key elements of stories as a communication strategy in advertising, and how older adults, aged 60–65 and above, are represented in award-winning commercials at the Clio Awards, one of the most prestigious events in the advertising industry.

The *research questions* guiding this study are as follows:

RQ1: What are the main elements of a story considered essential for effective communication, according to media and communication experts?

RQ2: How are older adults represented in Clio Award-winning advertisements, and what role do they play in the construction of the advertising narrative?

RQ3: How has the representation of older adults in Clio Award-winning advertisements evolved over the past decade?

To address these research questions, two methods were employed: *semi-structured interviews* and *content analysis*. The semi-structured interviews were used to answer the first research question. The sample consisted of 11 experts from the fields of theatre and film, communication and marketing, and psychology. This sample reflects an interdisciplinary approach deemed necessary to capture the complexity of storytelling as a communication process. The selection of these fields is justified by their essential contribution to the

development and application of narrative techniques across diverse contexts—from the artistic stage to strategic communication campaigns.

Content analysis was the research method used to address the second and third research questions. A total of 71 advertisements awarded Gold, Silver, or Bronze at the Clio Awards between 2014 and 2024 were analyzed, all of which featured older adults as protagonists. Advertising festivals offer recognition for campaigns that stand out through creativity and impact, with the Clio Awards being a prominent international benchmark of excellence in the field. The selection of award-winning advertisements from this festival is justified by its prestige and its rigorous evaluation criteria, which assess innovation, effectiveness, and execution quality, as judged by industry experts.

Although the academic literature shows sustained, and in some cases growing interest in the inclusion of certain groups in advertising (e.g., women, ethnic minorities, sexual minorities), the visibility of older adults in advertising remains an underexplored topic. The persistence of stereotypes, the predominance of youth in creative industries, and criteria such as physical attractiveness may partially explain the absence of seniors in advertising. Nevertheless, shifts in societal values, the economic potential of older consumers, and current demographic challenges highlight the need to reconsider this absence and underscore the importance of paying greater attention to how older adults are portrayed in advertising communication.

In terms of *relevance*, this research examines the relationship between population aging, advertising communication, and the effectiveness of storytelling, within a global context where the 60+ age group is steadily increasing. From a scientific perspective, the findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of storytelling and provide valuable insights for optimizing communication strategies. The study addresses a significant gap in the academic literature regarding how older adults are integrated into narrative advertising discourse and how they are represented in campaigns considered benchmarks of creative excellence. At the same time, it responds to a practical industry need: to better understand which narrative elements contribute to effective communication with this audience segment, in an era where audience diversity demands increasingly refined strategies. The practical relevance of the study lies in its potential to guide professionals in advertising, communication, and marketing in crafting more effective and inclusive narrative messages, tailored to contemporary socio-demographic realities. Additionally, the conclusions may help reduce age-related stereotypes in advertising and promote a more realistic and positive representation of older adults in the media landscape.

The *theoretical framework* of this research is built on two main pillars: storytelling as an advertising strategy and the representation of older adults in advertising. On the one hand, the study explores the concept of storytelling, emphasizing its narrative functions in advertising, the strategic elements that define an effective story, and the emotional impact of narrative on consumers. On the other hand, it analyzes how older adults are portrayed in advertising communication, with a particular focus on the stereotypes associated with this age group and the implications of such representations in shaping public perception.

Regarding the *findings*, the research addresses the first research question through a semi-structured interview focused on identifying the essential elements of storytelling that contribute to effective communication. The analysis explores the definition of a story, the role of the storyteller, the factors influencing message memorability, the impact of the communication channel, and the evolution of storytelling in advertising, all from the perspective of media and communication experts. Effective communication is based on the relationship between the storyteller, the message, and the communication channel, which together guide and sustain the process. The sender and the channel play a crucial role in ensuring that the message reaches the receiver and creates an impact. Without a recipient to interpret the message, communication remains incomplete. Storytelling as a communication method offers several advantages, including the creation of a familiar framework for understanding new information, simplifying learning processes, and fostering human connection through emotional engagement.

The storyteller's credibility directly enhances the credibility of their message. While the context and medium of delivery play a crucial role in shaping the message's impact, ultimately, the storyteller's reputation often carries more weight than the message itself. Establishing a strong connection between the sender and the receiver requires more than simply choosing the right communication channel. Emotion, the storyteller's qualities, the audience's willingness to engage, and the storyteller's ability to capture attention all play essential roles. The audience's interest in the message or its novelty alone is not enough; the storyteller's charisma is also crucial.

A more sophisticated and innovative communication channel can amplify the storyteller's strengths, showcasing their ability to select, adapt, and align both message and medium to the target audience. Elements such as charisma, key words, emotion, and relational dynamics support communication and shape how the audience perceives the storyteller. However, an ill-suited communication channel can weaken these factors, reducing the

message's effectiveness and diminishing its ability to leave a lasting impression or influence thought and behavior.

In conclusion, message retention depends on multiple interconnected factors, including its relevance, language, emotional appeal, novelty, impact, the receiver's abilities, the sender-receiver relationship, and the communication channel. Effective messages must be meaningful, address the audience's needs, and use engaging language, marked by clarity, metaphors, and rhythm. Messages that are original, relevant, and humorous tend to be the most memorable.

Regarding the last two research questions, the answers emerged through a content analysis of advertisements awarded at the Clio Awards between 2014 and 2024. Most of the analyzed commercials employed a narrative structure, building emotionally and persuasively charged stories around a central message. This approach enhanced the coherence of the advertising message, facilitated its understanding and memorability, and increased its impact on the audience. Storytelling, as a communication strategy, proved to be a defining element in the way award-winning advertisements were constructed.

In terms of the representation of older adults, the analysis revealed an overrepresentation of men in advertisements compared to women. Older women were absent from certain product categories such as DIY (do-it-yourself), insurance, and public transportation, suggesting the persistence of gender-based stereotypes. These findings align with previous research indicating that women in general, and older women in particular, appear less frequently in advertising. This imbalance reflects a narrow perspective on women's roles in society and highlights a lack of alignment between advertising messages and contemporary demographic realities.

The analysis of Clio Award-winning advertisements reveals a general trend of positive valorization of older adults, both through their placement in central, active roles and through the attribution of traits such as wisdom, vitality, and social engagement. Although a significant gender imbalance and the persistence of certain age-related visual stereotypes still exist, most of the ads promote a dignified, inclusive, and dynamic image of seniors. The integration of storytelling as a narrative strategy in advertising communication contributes to the creation of more empathetic, memorable, and persuasive messages, demonstrating the potential of storytelling to reshape perceptions of aging. These findings highlight both the need for a more balanced and diverse representation of older adults and the opportunity to better leverage this audience segment in contemporary communication strategies.

Like any scientific endeavor, this research is subject to certain *limitations*, both in its qualitative component, the semi-structured interviews, and in its quantitative component, the content analysis of advertisements. Semi-structured interviews present inherent limitations,

such as a small sample size, which may restrict the diversity of perspectives, and the use of electronic communication tools, which can affect the depth of responses. Additionally, the interview guide could have been better tailored to the research topic, and the interpretation of responses may be influenced by the researcher's subjectivity. Regarding the content analysis, one of the main limitations lies in the selective nature of the sample. The advertisements analyzed were exclusively drawn from the Clio Awards festival. As such, the research reflects dominant trends within an elite segment of the industry, without being fully generalizable to the broader global advertising landscape. Furthermore, content analysis inherently involves a degree of subjective interpretation, particularly when examining narrative, visual, and symbolic dimensions. Even with a rigorous coding scheme, the identification of character traits, tone, and deeper meanings may vary depending on the researcher's perspective.