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## **Grandparenting relations in advertising's 'familial fictions'**

### *Abstract*

Since social displays of family life in advertising contribute to the doing and imagining of family, advertising representations of intergenerational relationships merit research attention. Focusing on the under-examined area of family interactions involving grandparents, this content and thematic analysis of 82 North American and European TV/video advertisements highlights how advertising both reproduces and challenges ideals of happy, harmonious families. Consistent with prior research in Western cultures, these ads privilege White, middle-class, heterosexual ways of doing family. Surprisingly, given critiques of advertising idealization, ads depicting intergenerational tension outnumbered those featuring exclusively harmonious relations. Tensions were linked to violations of generational norms, particularly by grandparents, and to conflicting norms confronting different generations. Although gender roles were sometimes blurred in both harmony and tension ads, they were not generally contested by other family members.

Keywords: advertising, family, grandparents, social displays, gender, norms, tensions.

### **Introduction**

An ad for financial services company Principal (US, 2017) shows a still-youthful older couple sadly packing up their large family home, revisiting sites of precious memories before driving away. Arriving at their new apartment in a busy street, they appear uncertain about the move. As they unpack, two young children run joyfully into the apartment. Their parents follow, each with a baby in their arms. Following family hugs, the grandfather shows the grandchildren the doorpost he saved with their height measurements over the years. The mother turns to the grandmother, her voice breaking with emotion, and says 'Thanks, Mom'.

This is a story, then, of grandparents sacrificing their home and freedom to move closer to their daughter's family: they are ready, as the ad says, to 'be where you're needed most'. Despite advertising's aspirational, idealized tendencies (Leiss et al., 2018), this example demonstrates that it can also reference tensions, generational and gender norms surrounding family life, whilst privileging White, middle-class, heterosexual ways of being a family. The Principal ad dramatizes

the conflict between self-actualization and selflessness experienced by many grandparents (Moore & Rosenthal, 2017). The grandfather saving something of sentimental value alludes to the softening of traditional masculine discourse (Mann et al., 2016), while the suggestion that the move was initiated by mother-grandmother conversations around childcare reinforces kin-keeping as a gendered practice (Marhánková & Štípková, 2015).

Advertising representations of family life, especially those involving grandparents, are under-researched (Borgerson et al., 2010; Jackson, 2018), even though grandparents are increasingly involved in family life (Timonen, 2019). Family is not just ‘done’ by its members: it is ‘a well-founded illusion’ (Bourdieu, 1996) shaped by practices, displays and imagination (Morgan, 1996; Finch, 2007; Smart, 2007) and fueled by myths and representations of family that circulate in media discourses (Gillis, 1994; Morgan, 2011). Advertising, a privileged discourse through and about objects (Leiss et al., 2018), merits particular attention. As well as promoting goods and services, it offers social displays which communicate normative expectations, yet are framed as ‘natural’ (Goffman, 1976).

Focusing on advertising’s ‘familial fictions’ (Jackson, 2018), this study seeks to examine social displays of grandparenting relations in advertising: how different generations appear to accept, reinforce or challenge gender and generational norms in navigating these relationships. Drawing on 82 North American and European TV/video ads featuring grandparents and/or grandchildren, and Goffman’s (1976) theorizing of social displays, it examines depictions of intergenerational harmony and tension, and the role of generational and gender norms within these. The paper makes three key contributions. First, focusing on the under-researched area of grandparenting relationships, it highlights advertising’s contribution to the doing and imagining of family. Specifically, it shows how advertising challenges as well as reproduces discourses of happy, harmonious intergenerational relationships, whilst privileging White, middle-class, heterosexual ways of doing family. Second, it identifies how advertising presents intergenerational tensions as arising mainly from violated or conflicting *generational norms*; gender roles were sometimes blurred, in both harmony and tension ads, but were not generally contested, even in tension ads. Finally, it considers why these patterns of representation might exist, suggesting how they advance the goals and reflect the experiences of those in the advertising industry.

The following sections review prior literature on advertising and family representations, and grandparenting relationships in family life, before outlining the current study, presenting key findings, and considering their implications.

### **Advertising and ‘familial fictions’**

For Bourdieu (1996), family is a fiction realized through the institutional labour of fostering *philia*, which ‘transforms the obligation to love into a loving disposition...a “family feeling” that generates devotion, generosity and solidarity’ (p.22). This labour is performed through everyday practices, including the doing, displaying, and imagining of family (Morgan, 1996; Finch 2007; Smart, 2007). These practices are themselves informed by cultural blueprints, such as the happy, well-functioning family whose members competently enact their gendered roles (Goffman, 1976; Gillis, 1994; Davis et al., 2019). Despite the diversity of contemporary families, traditional cultural blueprints retain their power as ideals and reference points (James & Curtis, 2010), requiring researchers to examine media discourses of family life (Morgan, 2011).

Advertising representations of family life merit particular attention. Advertising derives distinctive ideological power from recycling cultural models in an incessant ‘discourse through and about objects’, connecting images of persons, products and well-being (Leiss et al., 2018, p.3). As Davidson and Ribak (2021) note, Goffman (1976) adds further insight into the significance of advertising’s representations of family life through his account of socially situated displays - expressive, ritualized yet often informal behaviours whereby social actors communicate social identity, mood, intent, expectations and relations to others. Although these displays are socially patterned, they tend to be understood as natural. For Goffman, then, advertising draws on, represents and hyper-ritualizes social displays of gender, age and parent-child relations bound up with normative identities and roles. Thus, advertising’s social displays offer men and women – and family members of different generations - cues about ‘natural’ roles and behaviour that are influential precisely because they are considered unremarkable.

Wielding this ideological power when depicting family relations involves a delicate balance. Given its role in stimulating desire for goods and services, advertising’s cultural blueprints of family life are likely to reflect its aspirational, idealizing tendencies (Berger, 1972; Sheehan, 2014). At the

same time, advertisers need to strike a responsive chord, presenting content that resonates with audience members' knowledge and associations (Schwartz, 2017). Furthermore, seeking to break through commercial clutter and evoke strong emotional responses, advertising often deploys heightened drama or 'edgy' humour, pushing the boundaries of social and cultural norms or exploiting taboo themes (McGraw & Warren 2010; Sabri, 2012). Thus, we may expect advertising not only to hyper-ritualize and idealize social displays of intergenerational family life, but also to leverage tensions that are entangled in family power relations, expectations and obligations (Finch & Mason, 1993). Surprisingly few studies have examined advertising representations of family dynamics (Borgerson et al., 2010), making advertising's 'familial fictions' a rich yet under-examined resource for researchers examining how family life is lived and constructed (Jackson, 2018).

Advertising portrayals of grandparents in particular remain under-explored, with most studies examining this as one of several depictions of older people (Miller et al, 2004; Chen, 2015; Vulpe, 2017). Defining the 'perfect grandparent' as loving, family-oriented, kind, generous, emotional, happy and trustworthy, Miller et al. (2004) found this stereotype accounted for approximately one third of portrayals of older people in American TV advertising. It became less prevalent from the 1950s, however, as the 'adventurous golden ager' gained prominence, reflecting new societal discourses around positive ageing that relied less on family ties. Overall, little is known about advertising's social displays of grandparents interacting with other family members or how these relate to social structures and normative assumptions.

### **Grandparenting, generational and gender norms in family relations**

As older generations live longer, healthier lives, and as more mothers work outside the home, grandparents are increasingly involved in their grandchildren's lives (Timonen, 2019). Clearly, grandparental involvement depends on factors including age, health and proximity, and it may change following major life events like bereavement or new family formations (Timonen, 2019). Nonetheless, many grandparents support parents by providing regular childcare, emotional or financial assistance, while acting as nurturers/supporters, kin-keepers/value transmitters, friends/playmates, teachers-mentors and magic makers for their grandchildren (Moore & Rosenthal, 2017).

Performing these varied roles requires the navigation of multiple, often competing norms (Marhánková, 2019). In keeping with the ‘perfect grandparent’ stereotype (Miller et al., 2004), grandparents are generally expected to find this role – and opportunities to indulge their grandchildren - a source of pleasure, wellbeing and self-esteem (Moore & Rosenthal, 2017; Roberts & Pettigrew, 2010). Ideals around intensive parenting have seeped into expectations of grandparents (Harman et al., 2022), and in societies with inadequate state provision of affordable childcare, grandparents may feel obliged to retire or work part-time to help (Timonen, 2019).

Some studies highlight two overarching, often conflicting grandparental norms: ‘being there’ to support their families, yet ‘not interfering’ (May et al., 2012). Grandparents are also exposed to discourses around ‘active’, ‘successful’ ageing, independence, and self-determination, which may reduce their desire to ‘wait in the wings’ in case they are needed. Cultural scripts around active ageing can also increase the normative burden of grandparenting: as well as being loving and present, grandparents are expected to ‘bring the child something new, create experiences and further the child’s development’ (Marhánková, 2019, p.1678). Thus, a path may need to be navigated between grandparental self-sacrifice, self-actualization, and selfishness.

To date, scholarly research has focused on how grandparents are expected to navigate this role, rather than normative assumptions surrounding parents’ or grandchildren’s interactions with grandparents. Nonetheless, it seems that grandchildren are expected to give grandparents love, time, and respect; help them if needed; connect grandparents to the future; and share stories and experiences (Kennedy, 1990). Extant literature also implies that the middle generation should not seek excessive levels of grandparent support or abuse their power over grandparental access to grandchildren (Timonen, 2019).

Norms in family life are embedded within structured social relations, and applied differently to groups possessing different rights, privileges, and resources (Connidis & McMullin 2002). This raises questions about how grandparenting relations intersect with gender, race, class, sexuality and disability, for example. Many studies highlight how grandparenting relations are ‘influenced by gendered conceptions of care’ (Marhánková & Štípková, 2015, p.932). For example, the ‘matrilinear advantage’ makes maternal grandparents more likely to be involved in intergenerational support (Timonen, 2019). Until recently few studies have focused on grandfathers, reflecting the broader cultural conflation of grandparent and grandmother roles (Buchanan, 2018).

This is underpinned by normative assumptions about women as experts in practical childcare and responsible for the emotional, relational work of kin-keeping, with grandfathers expected to focus on entertaining grandchildren and passing on knowledge, skills or interests (Marhánková & Štípková, 2015). There is, however, growing evidence of gender boundaries blurring within grandparenting roles. Active ageing norms encourage grandmothers to broaden the activities undertaken with grandchildren, while grandfathers describe close emotional bonds and involvement with grandchildren (Buchanan, 2018; Marhánková, 2019) and perform their role in ways which soften discourses and practices of hegemonic masculinity (Mann et al., 2016).

Overall, then, advertising's social displays contribute to cultural blueprints for the doing of intergenerational relationships, yet little is known about how grandparenting relations are portrayed in advertising. This study seeks to fill this gap. Furthermore, it aims to explore how generational and gender norms are addressed in advertising's social displays of grandparental interactions: how different generations appear to accept, reinforce or challenge these norms in navigating grandparental relationships. It also asks why advertising might foreground particular types of intergenerational social display.

## **Methodology**

An analysis was undertaken of 82 North American and European TV/video ads dating from 2000-2020. Incorporating sight, sound, and movement, advertising in these formats allows grandparenting relationships to be explored as they unfold within particular scenarios, in interaction with goods and services. Although the dramatic growth of digital and social media has eroded traditional, linear TV viewing since 2000, it has also made TV/video advertising content more accessible across multiple digital platforms (Whelan, 2018).

Between Spring 2019 and Winter 2020, Google searches were conducted using English, French, German and Danish terms for 'grandparent', 'grandmother', 'grandfather', 'grandchild', 'grandson', 'granddaughter' along with 'commercial' or 'advertising'. TV/video ads were included if they featured grandparents and/or grandchildren, appeared from 2000 onwards, and originated in North America or Europe. Clearly, the resulting corpus may differ from those obtained via other means, such as subscription-based advertising databases. Although concerns have been raised about Google's privileging of the most popular items (Diaz, 2008), this was actually a benefit here, as it helped identify the ads most likely to be seen. The 82 ads in this study compare favourably with 33

or fewer grandparenting-focused ads in prior content analyses (Miller et al, 2004; Chen et al., 2015; Vulpe, 2017).

Consistent with Vulpe (2017), this study drew on content analysis methods but foregrounded an interpretive approach. The ads were first watched to identify categories of interest for the content analysis: product categories, country of origin, and year of airing; generations/family members represented; family member characteristics and interactions; and the presence or absence of intergenerational tension. The first two authors piloted the coding frame with ten ads coded jointly. Codes were then refined, and coding was undertaken independently. Overall inter-coder reliability was 91.96 %, with discrepancies resolved by discussion.

The next phase involved a thematic analysis, rooted in social constructionism (Braun & Clarke, 2016) and arising from a close reading of the ads (Crockett, 2008; Davidson & Ribak, 2021). The first two authors immersed themselves independently in the advertising corpus, watching each ad multiple times and making detailed notes about storylines, relationships and interactions. Independent and joint analysis of data were informed by frequent reference back to the ads themselves and further reading for analytical leverage. Initial coding focused on instances of harmonious and tense intergenerational relationships. Within the tension ads, violated and conflicting norms were identified as key themes, and analysis subsequently focused on how generational and gender norms were addressed in harmony and tension ads. Attention was also paid to how intergenerational relations intersected with class and race. Recognizing the importance of reflexivity as a sensitizing tool in interpretive research, analysis was also informed by discussion of the authors' personal experiences as grandchildren and parents.

The corpus size and the geographical spread of the ads preclude generalisations on the one hand, and detailed exploration or comparisons of specific cultural contexts for 'doing' family (Morgan 1994, 2013) on the other. While some distinctive patterns of representation emerged (e.g. the few Black or Asian families tended to be found in American ads), it seemed that across the countries included, 'despite all the differences in detail...there is striking similarity in the way family cultures are practiced' (Gillis, 1994, xix).

For clarity, the findings below refer to the third generation as 'grandparents', the middle generation as 'parents'; and the youngest generation as 'grandchildren'.



## **Findings**

This section begins with an overview of the advertising corpus and the families portrayed, followed by an examination of cases featuring intergenerational harmony and tension.

### ***The advertising corpus***

Most of the ads are recent: only eight appeared between 2000 and 2010 and almost two-thirds in or after 2016. Most came from North America (57%), with the remainder largely accounted for by France (10%), Denmark (10%), Germany (6%) and the UK (6%).

The range of goods and services advertised suggests no clear grandparent ghetto such as healthcare products that reinforce the ‘sick elderly’ stereotype (Vulpe, 2017). Just as Crockett (2008) found that few ads representing blackness targeted a Black audience, few of the ads featuring grandparents seemed to address them directly as the target audience: rather, their presence generally served to communicate something about the brand or a wider audience. Grandparents were most often depicted in ads for food and beverages (17%) followed by telecommunications (13%) and financial services (11%). These categories lend themselves well to ‘familial fictions’ (Jackson, 2018), with brands promoted in scenarios where families share meals or keep in touch across households, or where grandparents could share accumulated wealth with younger generations.

### ***The families depicted***

Unsurprisingly, given this study’s focus, at least one grandparent was depicted in 80 ads. The other two showed grandchildren addressing grandparents who were not depicted directly, as in the Orange ad (France, 2020) where grandchildren made a video to comfort their grandparents during Covid-imposed separation. Consistent with the popular conflation of grandparenting with grandmothers (Buchanan, 2018) the latter featured in more ads than grandfathers (74% versus 61%). The difference was not as marked as might be expected, perhaps reflecting grandfathers’ increasing involvement in family life (Mann et al., 2016). Among parents the gender balance was almost even, and grandsons featured in more ads than granddaughters.

The most common intergenerational configuration was grandparent-grandchild (54%), followed by grandparent-parent-grandchild (37%).

**Table 1: Generations and genders featured\***

Grandmother	74%
Grandfather	61%
Mother	32%
Father	33%
Grandson	63%
Granddaughter	55%
Grandchild, gender unclear	4%

\* percentages do not add up to 100% as multiple family members featured in most ads

**Table 2: Generational configurations**

Grandparent(s) only	6%
Grandparent(s) and parent(s)	1%
Grandparent(s) and grandchild(ren)	54%
Grandparent(s), parent(s) and grandchild(ren)	37%
Grandchild(ren) only	2%
Total	100%

Ads often included more than one grandchild with varied ages setting the scene for different family dynamics. Thus, the presence of a baby, toddler or young child facilitated depictions of ‘wondrous innocence’ in grandparent-grandchild relationships (Cross 2004). Where grandchildren had moved beyond the cute and innocent stage to pre-teen or teenage years, this created more possibilities for conflict. The presence of young adult grandchildren allowed more mature relationships to be depicted.

**Table 3: Grandchild age and stage\***

Baby, toddler, young child	38%
Preteen/teenager	48%
Young adult	24%

\*percentages do not add up to 100%: some ads featured multiple grandchildren or none.

Advertising generally fails to reflect the diversity of the world it represents (Geena Davis Institute on Gender and Media, 2020). Unsurprisingly, then, 83% of ads focused on White families, no ads presented a parent or grandchild with disabilities, and all couples, across every generation, were depicted as heterosexual. A detailed analysis of social class is beyond the scope of this study, but the lives portrayed appear consistent with the ‘foreshortened’ class spectrum found in US magazine advertising (Marchand, 1985; Paulson & O’Guinn, 2012). Most ads suggested middle-class family life, replete with spacious, well-maintained homes, well-groomed, generally healthy bodies, and apparent ease in accessing financial services, technology, cars, holidays and leisure activities. This is unsurprising: advertising generally presents aspirational lifestyles (Leiss et al., 2018), and the industry is populated primarily by those from White, middle-class or privileged backgrounds, contributing to the reproduction of social divisions and hierarchies (Cronin, 2004). Eight in ten ads featured at least one grandparent who appeared active, independent and in good health. Scenarios featuring poor grandparental health included hearing loss (Telecom, France, 2013), dementia (Interflora, Denmark, 2019) stiff joints (Cadbury, UK, 2020) or no longer being able to live independently (Cheerios, US, 2015).

Examining blackness representations in US TV advertising, Crockett (2008) argues that their primary strategic purpose is to demonstrate how the brand “caters for equality”: racial inequality is not depicted, and the market welcomes all who can pay. In this study, three ads depicting “custodial grandparenting” allude obliquely to inequality, possibly reflecting assumptions about how race intersects with normative expectations of grandparents. Grandparents may become “substitute parents” if grandchildren have suffered multiple adverse childhood experiences such as bereavement, abuse or neglect (Hunt, 2018). All three ads depicting grandparents stepping into the parental role came from the US, where this is more common among ethnic minority families, especially those experiencing poverty (Hicks Patrick et al., 2016). The two ads featuring a lone grandmother - one African-American (Amazon Kindle, 2012) and the other Filipina (Disney, 2020) - provided no backstory to this, and their narratives did not revolve around this particular family arrangement. In contrast, the Principal ad (2019), featuring a White family, shows a grandchild being looked after by both grandparents. This ad goes to great lengths to emphasize that the situation is temporary and provide a ‘legitimate excuse’ (Finch & Mason, 1993) for parental absence: the father’s new job requires relocation, so staying with her grandparents for a few months allows the granddaughter to complete high school. These ads suggest, then, that (lone) custodial

grandparenting is unremarkable for a Black or Filipino family but requires explanation and qualification if a White family is involved.

### ***Intergenerational philia***

Despite advertising's reputation for idealization (Leiss et al, 2018), only 36 of the 82 ads offered social displays of exclusively harmonious intergenerational relationships. In these ads, family practices (including, of course, the consumption of advertised goods and services) fostered bonds of devotion, generosity and solidarity (Bourdieu, 1996). Most of these ads showed grandparents alone with young grandchildren, who were depicted as happy and safe (Cook, 2011; Davidson & Ribak, 2019). Drawing on advertising tropes of 'wondrous innocence' (Cross, 2004) and 'perfect grandparents' (Miller et al., 2004), and societal norms of active ageing (Marhánková 2019), they presented displays of affection, playfulness and grandparental indulgence. The Humana Medicare ad (US, 2010), for example, depicts various grandparents taking young grandchildren on action-packed days out, having fun together, hugging, and holding hands. The grandparental norm of 'being there' (May et al, 2012) was also modelled, but not through mundane childcare; instead, grandparents and grandchildren spent special times together, or grandparents travelled to be present for milestones in grandchildren's lives (GE, USA, 2018).

Some ads featuring preteen or teenage grandchildren focused on fun and activity (Walt Disney World, USA, 2015), but tended to emphasize generativity (Erikson, 1950), as when the Black grandmother in the Amazon Kindle ad (USA, 2012) buys her grandson a Kindle to nurture his curiosity. Several ads show the special bond enduring, with young adult grandchildren enjoying time with grandparents, as when a smartly-dressed young man proudly takes his glamorous grandmother dancing (Zalando, UK, 2019).

In cases featuring three generations, parents facilitated intergenerational contact by including grandparents in family activities (Subaru, USA, 2018), modelling empathy with elderly grandparents (Talkmore, Norway, 2017) or using technology to keep grandparents connected with grandchildren (Illy, 2015, USA). One three-generation ad (Continente, Portugal, 2016) showed grandparents dramatically violating the norm of not interfering (May et al, 2012): parents listen politely as grandparents lecture them on instilling discipline in their children, yet grandparents spoil their grandchildren outrageously when alone with them. Here, the humorous exaggeration and displays of hypocrisy are used to highlight another generational norm, namely grandparents'

entitlement to indulge (Roberts & Pettigrew, 2010): as the tagline notes “The best of being a grandparent is not having to be a parent”.

Although advertising often offers aspirational imagery (Berger, 1972; Leiss et al., 2018), scenes of intergenerational *philia* did not always depict idealized situations. Some featured challenging aspects of life that can infuse family interactions, even if they did not directly cause intergenerational tension: a grandfather’s joint pain leaves him struggling to lift his granddaughter, for example (Aloha, USA, 2018), and a young adult grandson helps his grandmother care for his grandfather who has dementia (Interflora, Denmark, 2019). Change facilitated engaging, emotive stories around brands, as when parents - and sometimes grandchildren – showed care for grandparents no longer able to live independently (Talkmore, Norway, 2017; Cheerios, USA, 2015). Most poignantly, the Volkswagen ad (US, 2017) shows three generations on a road trip, sharing their grief and memories following the grandfather’s death, and scattering his ashes. Such social displays suggest - and model – how grandchildren can contribute to intergenerational support and solidarity in difficult times.

Consistent with recent research (Mann et al, 2016; Marhánková 2019), social displays in some harmonious ads featured blurred gender roles, with emotionally engaged grandfathers and grandmothers engaging in various activities outside the home (Humana, USA, 2010). In two ads, gender roles were blurred or softened in the middle generation. Thus the father in the Talkmore (Norway, 2018) models empathy as he and his son help the elderly grandmother pack up her home and memories. The Subaru ad (USA, 2018) not only challenges the stereotype of the absent Black father (Cooper et al, 2021); it also positions the father as the kin-keeper, making the effort to include his mother in family trips, even as driving a large family car reinforces his masculinity. Generally, however, harmony ads tended to reinforce traditional gender roles within families. For example, the McDonald’s ad (USA, 2013) shows a young granddaughter copying her grandmother’s grooming routine, while a Grand Mere ad (France, 2018) shows a young adult granddaughter, unlucky in love, being consoled by her grandmother over coffee. This hyper-ritualization of grooming routines and emotional support between generations of women is in marked contrast to the Bell Telephone ad (Canada, 2009), which situates grandfather-grandson bonding within the discourse of heroic masculinity (Mann et al., 2016): a young man travels to France where his grandfather fought in World War II and calls him to express newfound appreciation of his military service.

### *Intergenerational tensions*

More than half of the ads depicted or implied a degree of intergenerational tension, sometimes presenting scenarios where viewers might anticipate negative reactions from other family members. Circumstances, such as a grandparent's hearing loss, could cause frustration (Summit Hearing Solutions, USA, 2013) but tensions were more often associated with generational norms being violated, and/or different generations struggling with conflicting norms. As discussed below, gender norms were rarely implicated in situations of tension.

### *Norm violations*

Although social displays of tension could arise from multiple family members violating role expectations, grandparents tended to be the ones depicted as doing so, and in more varied ways than other generations.

The cardinal rule of grandparents not interfering (May et al., 2012) was breached in various ads. Most strikingly, the grandfather in the Apple ad (USA, 2019) chides his two young granddaughters on various occasions, angrily telling them to 'settle down' even when their parents are present. There is, however, a legitimate excuse (Finch & Mason, 1993) since it emerges that he is grieving the death of their grandmother. In other cases, grandparents' violation of this norm is the basis for advertising humour and exaggeration. For example a grandfather oversteps parental boundaries by telling a grandchild where babies come from (Oscar Mayer, USA, 2013), or grandparents impose an extreme mobile phone ban on parents and grandchildren (Commonsense Media, USA, 2017). Grandparents also interfered by violating grandchildren's personal space; the granddaughter in the Dom Bank ad (Poland, 2013) is horrified when her grandmother rummages in her belongings and finds her vibrator. Breaches of the 'being there' norm were less evident, though the mother in the Skylight frames ad (USA, 2019) complains that the grandparents 'live so far away'. Several ads toyed with 'being there' financially, for example when grandmothers upset young adult grandsons by denying or ignoring requests to fund their overblown ambitions (Mediatis, France, 2017; Tuborg, Denmark, 2012).

Norms of grandparental kindness and child- or family-centredness were also violated: a grandfather refuses to share his fried chicken with his grandson (KFC, US, 2011) or disturbs his sleeping

grandchild by watching sport on TV (HP, USA, 2016). Similarly, grandmothers commandeer a grandson's games console (Playstation 3, USA, 2015) or refuse to perform love by cooking for grandchildren from scratch (Curtis et al., 2019), passing off fast food as their own (McDonalds, USA, 2013, 2017). Treading on the darker side of family favouritism (Godefroit-Winkel et al., 2019), a grandmother switches photos when her young adult grandsons visit separately, manipulating them into doing more chores by telling each- grandson that he is her favourite (Photowrap, US, 2011).

An additional but important grandparental norm – or taboo - appears to revolve around grandparents as sexual beings; it seems that a culture of silence (Lorenz-Meyer, 2001) should prevail in this area. Several ads depict grandchild and/or parental shock or disgust at the possibility of grandparents having an active sex life, discussing erectile dysfunction or displaying an intimate piercing at the dinner table (Downey Wrinkleguard, USA, 2020; SN Sex Show, US, 2016; JBC, Belgium, 2016). While it could be argued that these are simply exaggerated social displays of grandparental indiscretion, a Heinz ad (UK, 2002) presents ageing (female) bodies as distasteful. This ad shows a boy only willing to eat his elderly grandmother's unappetizing food with ketchup. When she demands a kiss, a close-up highlights her wrinkled, puckered lips, accompanied by squelchy sound effects; the bottle of ketchup appears again, underlining the grandson's revulsion at her elderly lips and desire for physical intimacy.

Violations of grandchild norms tended to be on the milder end of the continuum. In some cases minor transgressions were taken in grandparents' stride, as when a grandson is frustrated by the time his grandfather takes to reach an ice-cream van (Hjem-Is, Denmark, 2017), grandchildren complain on social media about grandparents' wifi-free homes (Xfinity, US, 2016) or a granddaughter is insensitive to her disruption of grandparental space and routines (Principal, USA, 2019). In other cases, a grandson orders his frail grandmother around (US Pediatric Orthopedic Association, 2013), or is after her money (Mediatis, France, 2017; Tuborg, Denmark, 2012).

Parents were rarely shown violating generational norms, although they occasionally mocked, denigrated or undermined grandparents (Geico, USA, 2018; State Farm, USA, 2012; CommonSense Media, USA, 2017). Both Principal ads (USA, 2017, 2019) hinted that parental requests for grandparents to be there for them, supporting them with childcare, were asking too

much of them. Most striking, however, were the few cases where parents appeared too busy to visit grandfathers living alone at Christmastime (Edeka, Germany, 2015; Allegro, Poland, 2016).

Across these examples of generational norm violation, ads still generally reinforced traditional gender norms, such as the female kin-keeping role (Principal, USA, 2017, 2019; Vodafone, Portugal, 2016). Exceptions tended to be played for humour, including grandmothers pretending to have made food from scratch (McDonald's, USA, 2013, 2017), or a grandfather babysitting solo (HP, USA, 2017). In contrast, the angry, interfering grandfather in the Apple ad (USA, 2019) models the traditional suppression and displacement of male grief (Walter, 1999), but the ad shows his granddaughters understanding this and helping him express and share his loss.

### *Conflicting norms*

In some cases, ads depicted family members dealing with conflicting norms and roles, and the challenges and mixed emotions arising from these. Occasionally this was used for comic effect. Thus, the McDonald's (USA, 2017) grandmother who rejects the normative expectation that she cooks from scratch for her grandchildren is fiercely committed to the countervailing norm of active ageing and self-determination (May et al., 2012).

Other ads tell emotional stories of family life, depicting ambivalence arising from conflicting norms associated with different generations. Both Principal ads (USA, 2017, 2019) highlight the tension between norms of self-sacrifice and self-actualization (Moore & Rosenthal, 2017) when parents ask them to make major adjustments to their lives to help with childcare. As discussed in the introduction, the 2017 ad highlights the emotional toll on grandparents moving house to 'be where you're needed most'. The 2019 ad begins with recently retired man researching the purchase of his dream car before his son unexpectedly asks him and his wife if their teenage granddaughter could live with them temporarily. After an awkward moment of hesitation, signaling tension between a sense of obligation and the sacrifices it would entail, it is the grandmother who performs the kin-keeping, emotionally sensitive role, saying 'Of course she can'. The ad highlights the losses and gains involved as the grandparents adjust to sharing their lives and space with their granddaughter. The grandfather moves from mild disgruntlement to deeper bonds of affection, even to the extent of putting on a moisturizing facemask with her. While this activity may be seen as softening his traditional masculine identity (Mann et al., 2016), it appears to come at the expense of the grandmother: rather than enjoying this feminine bonding ritual herself, she hovers in the



background, tidying up. Ultimately, in line with the selfless ‘perfect grandparent’ stereotype and suggesting (perhaps for dramatic effect) that this middle-class family faces some financial constraints, the grandfather sacrifices his own dreams. Surprising his granddaughter with her first car, he has ‘stepped in’ to the absent father’s role, becoming both hero and provider to his granddaughter (Mann et al. 2016). Again, the grandmother is sidelined: this, it seems, is the grandfather’s money, choice, and gift. The social displays in both Principal ads, then, ultimately conform to traditional gender roles, and although they show conflicting generational norms, self-sacrifice triumphs over self-actualization. Indeed, they suggest that self-sacrifice *is* self-actualizing: the grandparent/parent identity dominates and is rewarded by the fulsome gratitude of parents or grandchildren.

In other cases, social displays concern conflicting norms among younger generations, but also invite empathy with the grandparents’ feelings and situations. Thus, an ad for Edeka (Germany, 2015) dramatizes parents’ experience of being caught between filial duty and responsibilities to career or other family members. The ad opens with a sad, elderly man repeatedly eating Christmas dinner alone, and replaying an answering machine message: his daughter apologizes that yet again, she and her family will not be visiting, and his young granddaughter wishes him a Merry Christmas. The ad then shows his daughter - at home, looking after her children - and his two sons - one a busy doctor, one a senior executive in Asia - distraught as they read his death notice and make the grief-stricken journey home for the funeral. Arriving at the house, they are shocked to find the table set for a celebration and their father alive. Their distress turns to joy and he asks, ‘How else could I have brought you all together?’. His young granddaughter runs to hug him and the ad ends with a celebratory Christmas dinner. This happy ending glosses over tensions that might be expected: it could be very difficult to forgive the grandfather’s deception and emotional manipulation, and the upheaval he caused. The extremity of his action is itself a rebuke to his adult children for neglecting him, implicitly challenging their use of busy lives elsewhere as a ‘legitimate excuse’ (Finch & Mason, 1993) for not seeing him. The rationale he offers for his own actions also suggests a family culture of silence (Lorenz-Meyer, 2001) around feelings of loneliness or neglect; he implies that he acted not out of despair, but from the altruistic desire to bring his adult children’s families together. It is also notable that despite showing a grandfather claiming a kin-keeping role, the ad reinforces traditional gender norms: while the grandfather’s two sons are shown succeeding in professional careers, his daughter is busy raising her own family, and she - not her brothers - feels obliged to apologize for not visiting him at Christmas.

A Disney ad (US, 2020) shows the grandmother-granddaughter relationship changing over time (Godefroit-Winkel et al., 2019), not least as the granddaughter experiences tension in her cultural identity and generational alignments. This animated ad begins in the Philippines, in a street decorated with Christmas star lanterns where a young girl is given a soft Disney toy on her father's return from a trip. Decades later, she is in America, raising her young granddaughter alone in less affluent surroundings than most depicted in this corpus of ads. The grandmother continues the cultural traditions of her childhood by making Christmas lanterns, with the cherished childhood toy still by her side. Over the years, the granddaughter absorbs her lantern-making skills and love for the toy, and the two generations bond over this feminine, culture-laden crafting ritual. Gradually, however, the granddaughter becomes less interested, until one year she just plays on her phone and goes out to see friends instead. There is no overt confrontation, however: the granddaughter kisses her grandmother goodbye and feels her sorrow when looking back at her through the window. The granddaughter seems torn not just between a close loving relationship with a family elder and a desire for fun and independence; she also faces a conflict between her role as a dutiful granddaughter, keeping her grandmother's memories and cultural heritage alive, and her identity as an American teenager engaged with modern technology and her peers. Left alone, the grandmother abandons the lantern-making, throwing the toy down as she goes to bed, leaving the house in darkness and the toy lying on the floor with its ear detached. The next morning, however, the grandmother walks downstairs to a roomful of lanterns, a toy stitched back together, and a granddaughter waiting to hug her. Evoking generativity (Erikson, 1950), the final scenes signal that the granddaughter has a new, deeper appreciation of her grandmother and her heritage, and will treasure the skills, traditions and things her grandmother is passing on to her.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

Advertising contributes to the doing and imagining of family through its representations of intergenerational subject positions and relations. This study extends knowledge in this area by documenting the generational and gender configurations of ads depicting grandparental relations. Drawing on Goffman's (1976) theorizing of social displays, and a content and thematic analysis of advertising, this study makes two key theoretical contributions concerning *how* grandparenting relations are represented in advertising and how these may shape the doing and imagining of family. It also raises the question of *why* these particular social displays arise.

First, this study highlights how advertising reproduces but also challenges discourses of harmonious intergenerational family relations involving grandparents. Consistent with advertising's idealizing, aspirational tendencies (Leiss et al., 2018), there were many hyper-stylized social displays of 'natural' intergenerational harmony or *philia* (Bourdieu, 1996), such as 'perfect grandparents' enjoying time alone with affectionate, appreciative grandchildren. These findings resonate with prior research identifying the 'wondrous innocence' of young children (Cross, 2004), and the grandparent role as a positive identity in later life, along with normative expectations that grandparents 'be there' for their family, enhancing their grandchildren's lives (May et al., 2012; Moore & Rosenthal, 2017). Where harmonious ads featured three generations, the parental role was portrayed primarily as facilitating grandparents' involvement in grandchildren's lives. Although there was some blurring or softening of gender roles, social displays of intergenerational *philia* tended to reinforce traditional roles, especially in grandfather-grandson and grandmother-granddaughter interactions.

One notable finding was that while intergenerational harmony may be seen as an idealized *representation* of family life, it was not always presented in idealized *situations*, suggesting a more complex relationship between advertising's 'familial fictions' (Jackson, 2018) and lived experience than critics of advertising's idealized, aspirational imagery often allow (Sheehan, 2014). Thus, custodial grandparenting, disability, loss of independence and bereavement were incorporated into displays of intergenerational *philia*. Some of these more challenging situations provided opportunities for social displays of intergenerational solidarity, with grandchildren as well as parents showing care and concern for grandparents at times of vulnerability. This adds another advertising narrative – the empathetic grandchild – to the role-reversed adult-child relations previously identified by Davidson and Ribak (2021).

More than half the ads depicted or implied some tension between generations, touching on the darker side of grandparenting relationships. The second key theoretical contribution of this study lies in its finding that social displays of intergenerational tension arose primarily from violated or conflicting generational norms. Grandparents were most likely to be shown violating generational norms, and in more ways, than younger family members: grandparents sometimes interfered, overstepping parental boundaries, were not 'there' for family in person or financially, or were not as kind or child-oriented as expected. In addition to breaches of these well-documented grandparental norms, advertising presented other transgressions such as playing favourites, invading

grandchildren's personal space, and not hiding their sexual lives from younger generations. Overall, breaches of grandparental norms tended to be 'benign violations' (McGraw & Warren, 2010) or exaggerated for humorous effect; indeed, humour reinforced the idea that such things are just not done and while family members may be surprised, shocked or disgusted by grandparental actions, there was little sense of significant harm.

Although this corpus of ads contained examples of grandparents violating norms that have received relatively little attention in family studies, it also referred to normative expectations for younger family members interacting with grandparents. There were some displays of grandchildren breaching norms of love and respect (Kennedy, 1990), typically in trivial, fleeting ways, although a few touched on exploitation of vulnerable family members. Displays of parental disrespect for grandparents were generally portrayed humorously, but a few ads alluded to parents either asking for too much support for grandparents or neglecting them.

In addition to norm violations, the ads offered displays of conflicting norms in relation to grandparenting relationships. Some depicted grandparents caught between self-sacrifice and self-actualization when parents requested more childcare support (Moore & Rosenthal, 2017). Others focused on conflicts experienced by parents or grandchildren struggling to reconcile their obligations to grandparents with other normative expectations. In these cases, ads emphasized the emotional strain on grandparents as well as the struggles of parents or grandchildren. Difficult situations were inevitably resolved, with normative expectations around family trumping other concerns. Across both harmony and tension ads, there were some displays of blurred or softened gender roles among grandparents and parents. Even in cases depicting intergenerational tension, however, gender norms were rarely presented as a source of tension.

By alluding, even in subtle or humorous ways, to the darker side of everyday grandparenting relations, advertising may strike a responsive chord (Schwartz, 2017) with audiences living more complicated and less harmonious family lives, reassuring them that their experiences are not unique. In other ways, however, advertising may fail to resonate with audiences. The familial fictions depicted in the ads analysed here unfold in a predominantly White and exclusively heterosexual world, where only the older generation experiences disability, and where traditional gender roles may blur or soften a little but are not fundamentally challenged.

Beyond the nature and influence of these social displays, it is also important to consider *why* they exist in these forms. Advertising's commercial imperative and aspirational ethos, and the industry's largely White, middle-class workforce, go some way towards explaining the predominantly White, middle-class milieu in which the 'familial fictions' (Jackson, 2018; Cronin, 2004) examined here unfold; after all, advertisers draw on social displays already familiar to them (Goffman, 1976).

The commercial imperative may also explain other aspects of the intergenerational relations identified here. As discussed earlier, although grandparents featured in most of the ads, they were rarely addressed as the target audience. This suggests that their portrayal resonated with wider – and younger – audiences, allowing for tactical or strategic exploitation of the grandparent figure in the ads. From this vantage point, grandparents violating norms can be seen as a tactical narrative device, intended to help the brand break through advertising clutter and audience indifference by using surprise or edgy humour (Sabri, 2012). Brands can be superficially or tangentially connected to this advertising narrative, benefiting primarily from attention and association. In other cases, where intergenerational harmony was depicted under difficult conditions, or conflicting norms caused pain or tension, a more strategic narrative approach can be discerned: audiences are invited to immerse themselves in an emotional narrative, with the brand often woven into the story as helper or hero. The depiction of family members comforting each other, not least through advertised goods and services, can be seen as exploiting powerful emotions for commercial ends.

The social displays of grandparenting relations identified in this study may not only be due to industry strategies or tactics, however. Advertising agencies employ and value younger generations, with much of their workforce under 30 (Brodmerkel & Barker, 2019). This suggests that advertising's picture of intergenerational family relations is painted largely by those lacking lived experience of older generations' concerns or experiences – indeed, by those likely to identify primarily with the grandchild's or parent's perspective. If grandparents are the Other, it makes it easier for them to be the butt of jokes in ads featuring norm violation, or to be the generation depicted as breaching generational norms. At the same time, we may expect that at least some agency staff bring empathy for older people, personal observations of family tensions, or experiences of closeness with older family members, to their telling of intergenerational stories in advertising. These perspectives may foster portrayals of more nuanced and varied experiences, and deeper emotions, in advertising's familial fictions.

Prior research offers valuable insights into how advertising representations of gender are shaped by the values and practices of advertising professionals (Zayer & Coleman, 2015). This suggests that an exploration of how advertising practitioners understand and use family in advertising development could be fruitful in understanding which generations are included or excluded from particular campaigns, and how those who are included are portrayed. Future research could also examine how audiences make sense of grandparenting relationships in advertising's familial fictions: reader-response studies involving different generations of family members, in different socio-cultural positions, could offer further insights into how advertising contributes to the doing and imagining of family.

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