

## **SOCIOEMOTIONAL SELECTIVITY THEORY:**

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR ADVERTISING TO OLDER CONSUMERS**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

Conventional advice when targeting older adults was to use factual, rational appeals over emotional appeals due to age differences in information processing. Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (SST) posits that when people perceive time as limited, they pursue emotionally-orientated rather than knowledge-orientated goals. Advertising experiments using SST suggest conventional advice may have been misleading, and advocate using emotional appeals. This study tests the theory in a specific advertising context among adults (n=2550) aged 19 to 90 years. Contrary to expectations and prior SST research, older adults demonstrated clear preferences for rational over emotional appeals, suggesting conventional advice was correct all along.

## MANAGEMENT SLANT

- Older adults are becoming an increasingly important target market.
- Socioemotional selectivity theory (SST) suggests that contrary to conventional wisdom, emotional execution is better for advertising to older adults.
- Challenging the applicability of SST in all advertising contexts, the current study finds older adults demonstrate clear preferences for rational over emotional appeals.
- These preferences are different for younger consumers, so what works when advertising to younger people will not necessarily work for older consumers.

Acknowledged age differences in memory and information processing (Salthouse, 2012) lead to differences in the way older and younger consumers make product-related decisions (Yoon, Cole, and Lee, 2009). Yet the majority of media budgets are spent on advertising designed for the under 50s (Nielsen, 2012), with numerous businesses being slow to target older adults (Giegerich, 2012). Many practitioners still struggle to find effective advertising appeals to reach older consumers (Moschis and Mathur, 2006); despite data suggesting that older adults are increasingly important customers for many businesses (Watt, 2015). This importance will continue to escalate as the world's population continues to age at unprecedented rates (UN, 2015).

Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (SST), a gerontology theory (Carstensen, 1992), has been applied in several advertising studies with the general consensus that advertisers should use emotional over informational execution strategies when targeting older adults (Drolet, Williams, and Lau-Gesk, 2007; Fung and Cartensen, 2003; Williams and Drolet, 2005; van der

Goot, van Reijmersdal and Kleemans, 2016). Only one of these (van der Goot *et al.*, 2016) uses real brands outside a laboratory setting. Study context is important because discrepancies between older adults' performance in laboratories versus real world are well documented (Salthouse, 2012). Van der Goot *et al.*'s (2016) study is also novel as it is the only one to use television commercials. The remaining previous investigations all use print ads: thus no previous research has used print ads to study SST outside the laboratory.

The current research extends knowledge pertaining to advertising to older adults by being the first to use a real and well-known brand in a non-lab setting. The paper begins with a brief review of SST in previous empirical advertising research before detailing the current study and the results which contest findings from previous SST work. The paper concludes with a discussion of implications for advertising research and practice.

### **AGE DIFFERENCES IN MEMORY, INFORMATION PROCESSING, AND AD PREFERENCES**

Evidence from cognitive psychology and cognitive and affective neuroscience demonstrates that older adults differ from their younger counterparts in terms of information processing strategies (Gutchess, 2010; Halfmann, Hedgcock, Kable, and Denburg, 2015), leading to age differences in advertising processing and preferences (Beard, 2015; Milliman and Erffmeyer, 1990). Perhaps because younger adults demonstrate superior memory performance (Phillips and Stanton, 2004) while older adults can suffer from information overload and advertising clutter (Johnson and Cobb-Walgren, 1994), conventional wisdom suggested utilizing structured, easier-to-process, and rational informational execution strategies when advertising to older consumers (Cole and Houston, 1987; Davis and French, 1989; Gorn,

Goldberg, Chattopadhyay and Litvack, 1991), on the basis that “older adults are more likely to prefer informational over emotional advertising messages”(Moschis, 1994: p. 177).

### **Socioemotional Selectivity Theory**

In contrast to conventional wisdom, SST posits the use of emotional appeals for older audiences (Drolet *et al.*, 2007; Fung and Cartensen, 2003; van der Goot *et al.*, 2016; Williams and Drolet, 2005). According to SST, under conditions where people perceive time to be limited, they are more likely to pursue goals that are emotionally-orientated rather than knowledge-orientated. SST takes a life-span developmental approach and hypothesizes that observed age-related changes may not be caused by ageing per se, but by “a complex network of interactions representing the person's past, present, and future percepts” (Carstensen, 1995: p. 152). The theory holds that these changes in the salience of different goals occur throughout the life-cycle. Emotion regulation, a salient goal in infancy, is also salient in older age. Also, because experience means older adults have already stored a wealth of information, information acquisition becomes less salient than emotion regulation. SST views chronological age as a proxy for experience (Carstensen, 1995), and an important facet of the theory is time perception. If a person perceives their time left as limited, emotion regulation takes preference over knowledge acquisition. The results of SST experiments show that under perceptions of expansive time, knowledge-related goals take precedence; in conditions where the belief is that time is restricted, emotional goals are prioritized (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, and Charles 1999).

Several studies have applied SST to advertising, all finding some support for the theory. One experiment (Fung and Cartensen, 2003) found older adults prefer and remember more information from emotional appeals compared to knowledge-related appeals. However, when time perspective was manipulated (scenario where respondents imagined a new medical advance that increased their lifespan by 20 years), older people decreased their preference for the emotional appeal to the same levels of preference as younger respondents; suggesting it is time perspective, rather than age per se, which accounts for these differences in appeal preferences. A later study (Williams and Drolet, 2005) used ad copy that was more focused on emotional versus rational ad appeals as opposed to the previously used emotion-focus and knowledge-focus appeals. In a group with no time perception controls, older adults demonstrated higher levels of both preference and recall for the emotional ads, while this pattern was true of the rational ads for younger adults. When these experiments manipulated time perspective (ad slogans changed from 'because life is long' to 'because life is short') no age differences emerged. Rather, the short time perceptions group demonstrated better liking and higher recall of the emotional ad, while the long time perceptions group scored higher for the rational ad.

Since these early pioneering studies, it has emerged that younger consumers prefer affective ads if the product is hedonic but prefer rational styles for utilitarian products (Drolet *et al.*, 2007). In contrast, the same study found that irrespective of product category, older consumers demonstrate more favorable attitudes towards advertisements employing affective as opposed to rational execution. Similarly, when time perspective is manipulated in ad copy to be either expansive ('Life is long. Tomorrow is endless!) or limited ('Life is short. Who knows what will happen tomorrow?'), consumers whose time view is limited

evaluate hedonic product attributes more positively than those whose time view is expansive (Wei, Donthu, and Bernhardt, 2013). In a study focusing on promotion (maximizing positive outcomes) versus prevention (avoidance of negative outcomes), older adults had more favorable reactions to prevention over promotion-focused appeals in general. Time horizon again moderated responses; with respondents (of both age groups) preferring prevention to promotion when time is limited. Older adults expressed better liking for the promotion focus when time was perception was expansive (Micu and Chowdhury, 2010). The nature of the appeal also appears to matter. Older adults have more positive attitudes emotional (as opposed to non-emotional) copy (Duncan *et al.*, 2012). The implications of this burgeoning body of work are very clear: when advertising to older consumers, irrespective of product or service, use a positively-framed emotional appeal in advertising. This advice is clearly different to conventional wisdom which advocates rational appeals.

Previous SST studies have proven invaluable, not least in spotlighting the need for more focus on age-related differences in advertising. SST is not, however, without its critics (see Grühn, Scheibe and Baltes, 2007, for a review). Importantly, expected age differences in recall have failed to emerge in all advertising studies (McKay-Nesbitt, Manchanda, Smith, and Huhmann, 2011; van der Goot *et al.*, 2016). Accordingly, several unanswered questions need further investigation. First, most previous studies comprise laboratory-type settings. Though the reasons are unknown, such artificial testing conditions tend to exaggerate the inferiority of older adults to younger adults on basic cognitive tasks that are not so apparent in real-world situations (Salthouse, 2012). Consequently, do SST studies that take place outside a laboratory reveal the same results? Second, most studies manipulate time

perspective either in the advertising copy (Williams and Drolet, 2005) or by presenting imagined scenarios (Fung and Cartensen, 2003). Such manipulations may not be desirable or indeed possible in all advertising situations. Hence, it is worthwhile to study ad situations without manipulation of time perceptions, instead using cognitive age as a proxy for time orientation. After all, cognitive age provides a useful insight into how a person defines themselves in relation to their own life-course (Guptill, 1969). Therefore, cognitive age should provide a time perspective in SST studies that is superior to imagined scenarios or manipulation of time perspectives through ad copy. Finally, research has not yet differentiated between advertising contexts: whether the ad promotes generic brand values, associates the brand with positive feelings, or is designed to prompt a specific purchase decision ('call to action' ads). These are very different types of ads and may not elicit the same reactions or show the same differences between older and younger consumers. The current study avoids a laboratory setting. It also avoids manipulating time via artificial means, and instead uses cognitive age as a measure of time perceptions. Finally, the study tests SST using a real and well-known brand in a natural yet specific (product-related 'call to action' press-based adverts) setting. Based on prior SST research, the following hypotheses emerge:

H1: Older adults will prefer emotional to rational appeals.

H2: Where there is a perception of limited time, the preference for emotional appeals will be greater.

H3: Older adults will demonstrate higher recall for emotional over rational appeals.

## **METHOD**

### **Stimuli**

Practitioners test copy and different appeals for established brands, which may reveal different effects to the fictitious brands used in laboratory experiments (McKay-Nesbitt *et al.*, 2011). Consequently, the current study uses Homebase, a real brand. Homebase is one of the UK and Ireland's leading home enhancement retailer selling over 50,000 products for the home and garden to over 65 million customers per year. Well regarded with high recognition and awareness, Homebase considers its target market to be the home and garden enhancer among above average socio-demographic groups with above average income (Benjamin, 2012). Homebase also has an older customer profile than its nearest competitors with an average age of 47 years (Intel, 2015).

The study manipulates the advertising headlines and copy for 3 different product categories: living-room furniture, lighting and mirrors, and gardening. Each ad for each product category has one emotional and one rational appeal (Appendix 1). Visuals are identical in each version. Visuals are important because when stimuli comprise solely text, age differences in favor of younger adults remembering more features emerge; older adults remember information better with pictures (John and Cole, 1986). Some previous SST studies appear to use solely text-based stimuli (Drolet *et al.*, 2007; Williams and Drolet, 2005). The visuals do not contain people as age differences emerge in facial expression recognition (Suzuki, Hoshino, Shigemasu, and Kawamura, 2007). Pre-testing of the stimuli comprised feedback among marketing academics, marketing professionals, and the staff of an advertising agency.



## **Procedure and Sample**

A random sample of 261,000 Nectar Card holders received an invitation to an online survey, with an incentive to win Nectar points. Nectar is the largest UK loyalty card scheme, comprising major retail partners. Nectar Canvass market research panel provides members of the scheme with the opportunity to participate in surveys for “legitimate scientifically based market research purposes” (Nectar Canvas, 2012). The survey was online for 48 hours. An online instrument ensured respondents were free to complete the survey in their own time and in any place in which they were comfortable. Exaggerated age differences in memory often emerge when testing conditions are not naturalistic, if speed is an issue, or if time of day is not optimal (Yoon, 1997).

Instructions to respondents included reassurance that there was no right or wrong answer; their natural response to the ads was required. Respondents were then exposed to one version of each ad (the order was random and rotated across the sample) and asked to describe what they had seen (free recall of as much information as possible). Because of age-related differences in encoding strategies, recall rather than recognition is preferred when assessing accurate recording of information (Phillips and Stanton, 2004). Once this information was captured, all respondents were shown each pair of ads side by side and were asked to choose which version they preferred. Forced choice was favored to measures of attitude towards the ad in order to avoid a situation where no preferences emerge, which has been an issue in some previous studies (Fung and Cartensen, 2003; McKay-Nesbitt *et al.*, 2011).

## **Measures**

Because aging does not occur in the same way for all individuals, chronological age is a poor indicator of consumer behavior (Sudbury-Riley, Kohlbacher and Hofmeister, 2015). Cognitive age (Barak and Schiffman, 1981) was therefore included as it provides an indication of where a person places themselves in relation to their own lifespan, therefore adding an indication of time perspective to the study. Despite an earlier suggestion that cognitive age may help to further improve understanding of SST (Jahn, Gaus, and Kiessling, 2012), only one previous study has incorporated it (Wei *et al.*, 2013), using it solely as a moderating variable alongside time manipulations through ad copy. Cognitive age also impacts attitudes toward different media, brands, and various forms of marketing communications (Moschis and Mathur, 2006; Van Auken, Barry and Anderson, 1993). A shortened version of the Informational and Transformational Ad Content scale (Puto and Wells, 1984) was included as a manipulation check.

## **RESULTS**

After two days, 2550 respondents had completed the survey and it was closed. Although unusual for an academic study, this procedure is normal for a commercial survey from which a client awaits data. With survey response rates falling drastically (Pew, 2012), commercial surveys using the Nectar panel typically expect a 0.3-0.5% response rate in the first few days (the Big Window.com, 2015). The demographic profile of respondents reveals no differences from that typical for the Nectar panel; hence there is no suggestion of any bias. The sample comprised 89.1% of consumers who fall into one of Homebase's target segments. The

sample size of 2550 compares favorably to previous SST-advertising studies where the average sample size is 216.

Respondents ages ranged from 19-90 years ( $M_{\text{age}} = 54.6$  years,  $SD = 16.07$ ). Ambiguity surrounds the age at which a person becomes an 'older' consumer; studies use ages as low as 35 (Dubow, 1995) or as high as 65 (Day, Davis, Dove and French, 1988). Recently gerontologists (English Longitudinal Study of Ageing), non-profit organizations (AARP), academics (Sudbury-Riley *et al.*, 2015), and practitioners (SilverSurfers.net) have used age 50 as their inclusion point. Consequently, age 50 is the cut point for comparison between younger and older adults here.

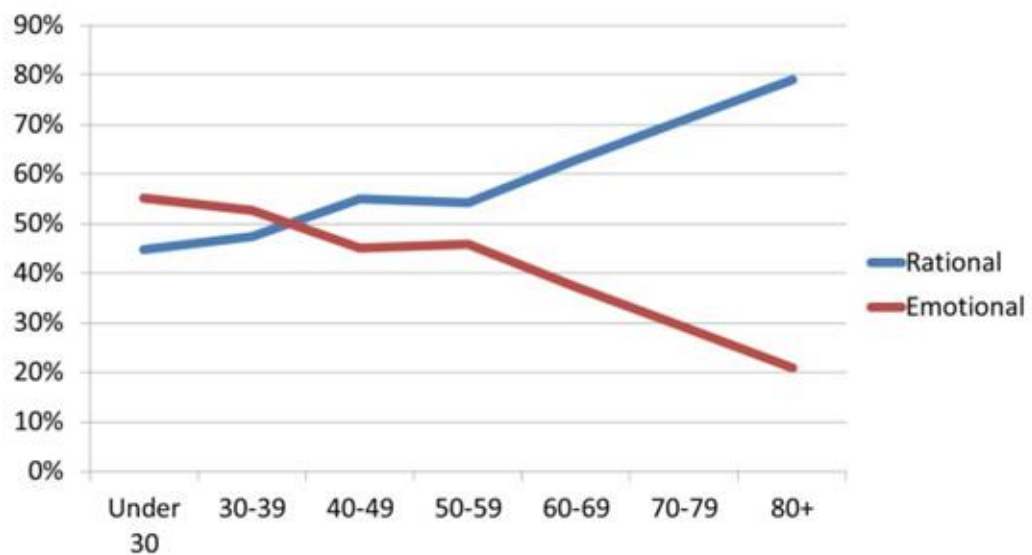
Manipulation checks revealed the rational appeals were perceived as more factual and logical than the emotional appeals (furniture  $M_{\text{rational}} = 4.35$ ,  $M_{\text{emotional}} = 4.16$ ,  $t(2549) = 6.297$ ,  $p < .001$ ; lighting  $M_{\text{rational}} = 4.26$ ,  $M_{\text{emotional}} = 4.05$ ,  $t(2549) = 6.737$ ,  $p < .001$ ; gardening  $M_{\text{rational}} = 4.47$ ,  $M_{\text{emotional}} = 4.23$ ,  $t(2549) = 8.038$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

### **Advertising Preferences**

Almost the same number of under-50s preferred the rational ad (49.7%) compared to the emotional ad (50.3%). In contrast, and contrary to expectations, 63% of over 50s preferred the rational ad. A Chi-square test for independence (with Yates Continuity Correction) indicated this association with age to be significant,  $\chi^2(1, n = 2550) = 41.8$ ,  $p < .001$ . Closer inspection of these age differences by age decade (Figure 3) suggests that there is a consistent preference for the emotional over the rational appeal up to the early 40s, when

this changes and a clear preference for rational over emotional emerges. This preference becomes greater with advancing age. There were no significant differences between users and non-users of the brand.

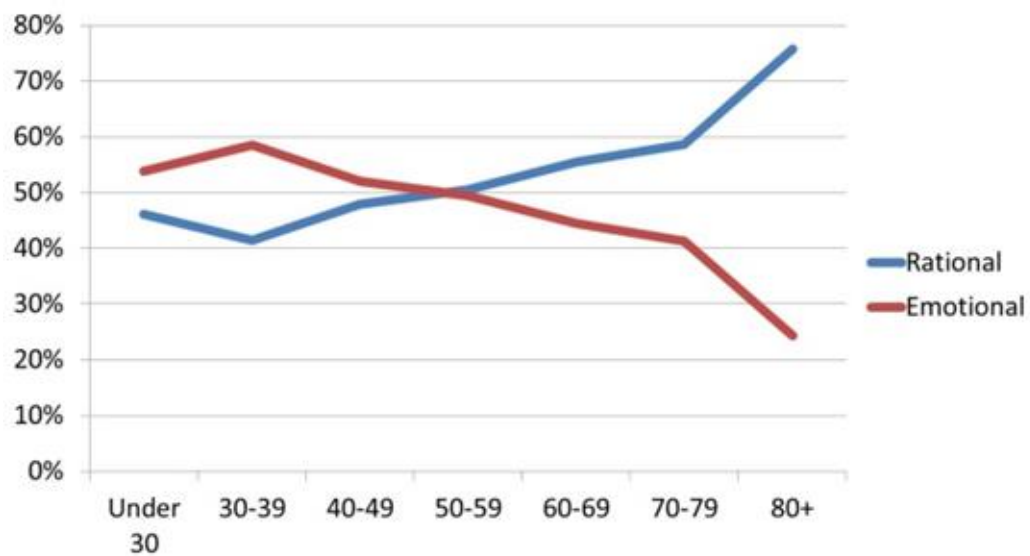
**FIGURE 3**  
**Furniture Ad Preferences by Age Decade**



While not quite as clear cut for the lighting ads, nevertheless among older consumers a greater number prefer the rational appeal (56%) over the emotional appeal (44%). In contrast, almost the complete opposite is true of the younger consumers, 55% of whom preferred the emotional appeal over the rational one (45%). A Chi-square test revealed this association with age to be significant  $\chi^2(1, n = 2550) = 27.6, p < .001$ . A similar pattern

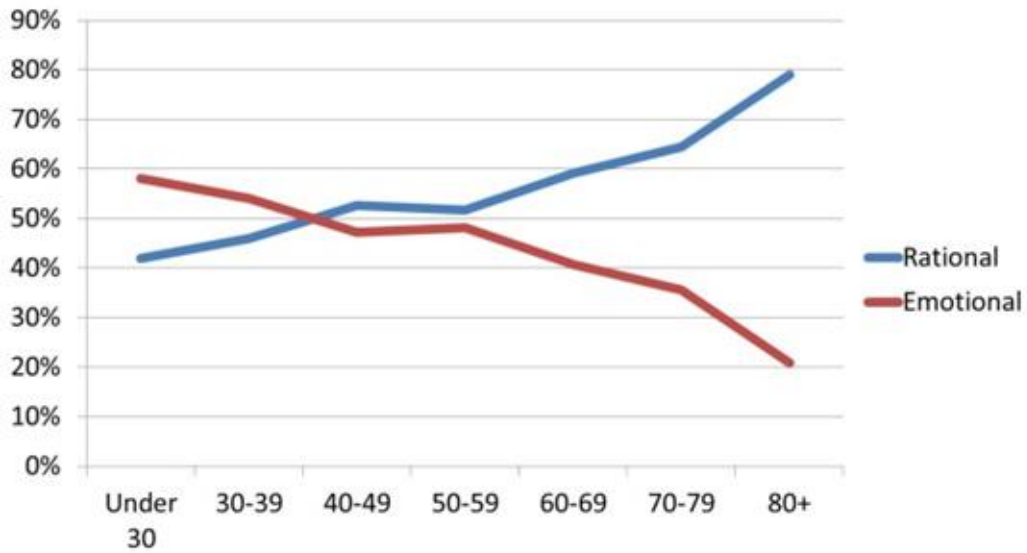
emerges in that preferences for the rational over the emotional appeal is more pronounced with advancing age, with this preference occurring among those in their 50s (Figure 4).

**FIGURE 4**  
**Lighting Ad Preferences by Age Decade**



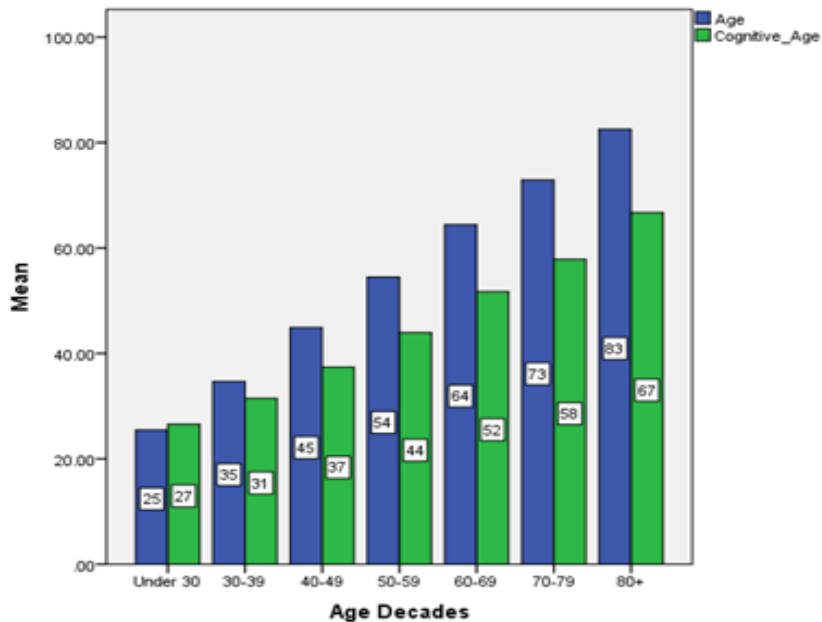
The now-familiar pattern emerged with the gardening ad, too. Over half of the younger sample preferred the emotional (53%) over the rational appeal (47%) while the opposite is true with older adults preferring the rational (60%) to the emotional (40%). This change again appears to take place among people in their 40s (figure 5). These results are clearly contrary to expectations, leading to a rejection of H1.

**FIGURE 5**  
**Gardening Ad Preferences by Age Decade**



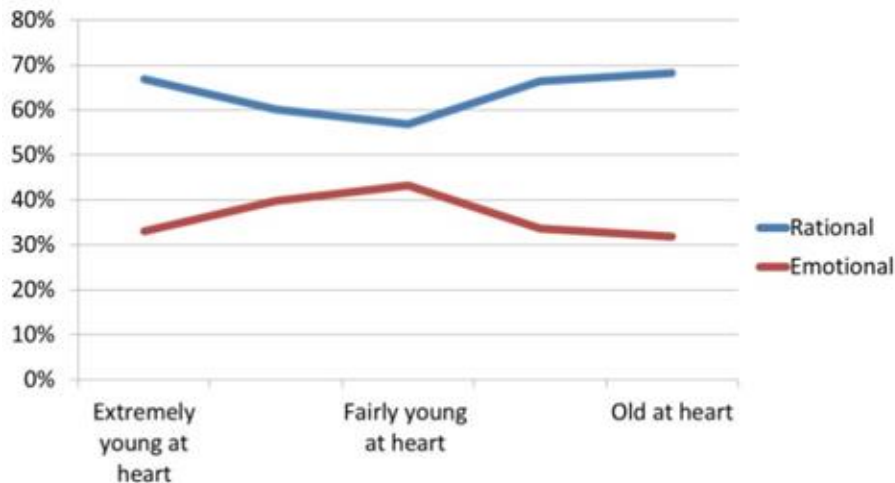
Next, a paired-samples t-test revealed cognitive age ( $M_{\text{Cognitive}} = 45.0$ ) to be significantly younger than chronological age ( $M_{\text{Chronological}} = 54.6$ )  $t(2549) = 59.3, p < .001$ . The youngest respondents (under 30) feel older than their actual age by an average of 2 years, while those in their 30s begin to feel a little younger than their actual age (3 years). These differences between chronological and cognitive age steadily increase with each age decade (Figure 6).

**FIGURE 6**  
**Chronological and Cognitive Age (years)**



If, as SST suggests, people with a short time perspective (in other words, an old self-perceived age) prefer emotional execution then this preference should certainly emerge amongst those who feel much older than their actual age. However, examination of ad preferences of older respondents (aged 50+) by degree of youthfulness (Figure 7) reveals that even for those who feel much older than their actual age, the clear preference is still for the rational appeal. Consequently, H2 is rejected. Conversely, a different pattern emerges when the focus is cognitive age (figure 7) in comparison to chronological age (figure 3), suggesting cognitive age is worthy of inclusion in SST studies.

**FIGURE 7**  
**Furniture Ad Preferences: Adults age 50+ by Youthfulness**



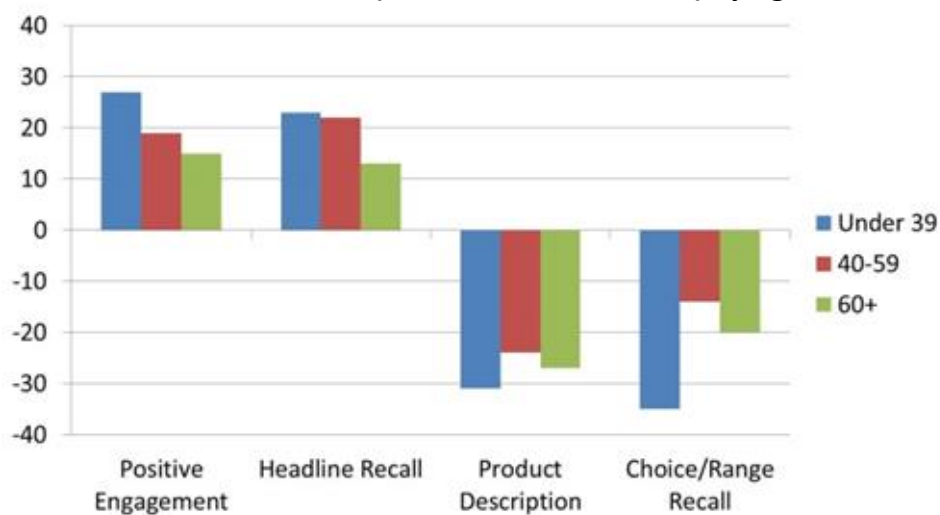
**Recall**

Unsurprisingly, recall in terms of positive engagement (emotional descriptors such as restful, charming, elegant, and homely) was higher for the emotional ad, while recall of rational aspects such as basic product descriptions and the range and number of items to choose from was higher for the rational ads. Interestingly, irrespective of preferences or age, the headline recall was greater for the emotional version of each ad, with the exception of the oldest group (60+) for the gardening ad, who demonstrated slightly greater recall of the rational garden headline. Thus, there is some support for H3 in that all adults, irrespective of age, do recall more of the headlines from emotional appeals than rational appeals, though this is not consistent for all types of product. Computation of net recall (the difference between the amounts of remembered information from the emotional appeal,

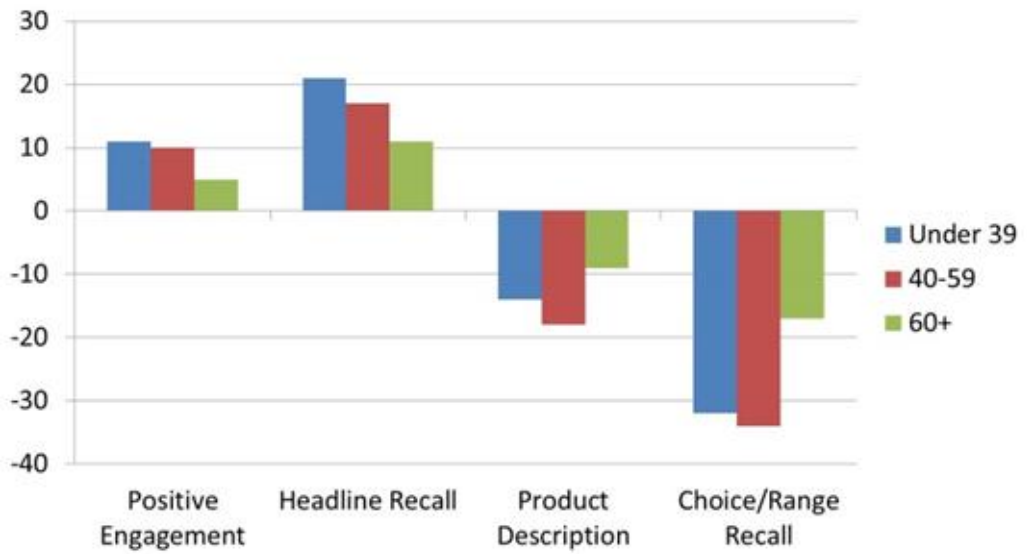


less the amount of remembered information from the rational appeal) allows comparison of different aspects of the ad recalled, by age group. For each product ad (see figures 8-10), the net recall for emotional over rational decreases as age increases. In other words, what is important is not that older adults remembered less (though that is true), but that the difference between what they could recall from the emotional versus the rational is less than the differences found among younger groups. Additionally, the amount of recall overall was greater for the rational ads than it was for the emotional ads. Therefore, there is no clear support for the contention that older adults will have greater recall for emotional appeals, leading to a rejection of H3.

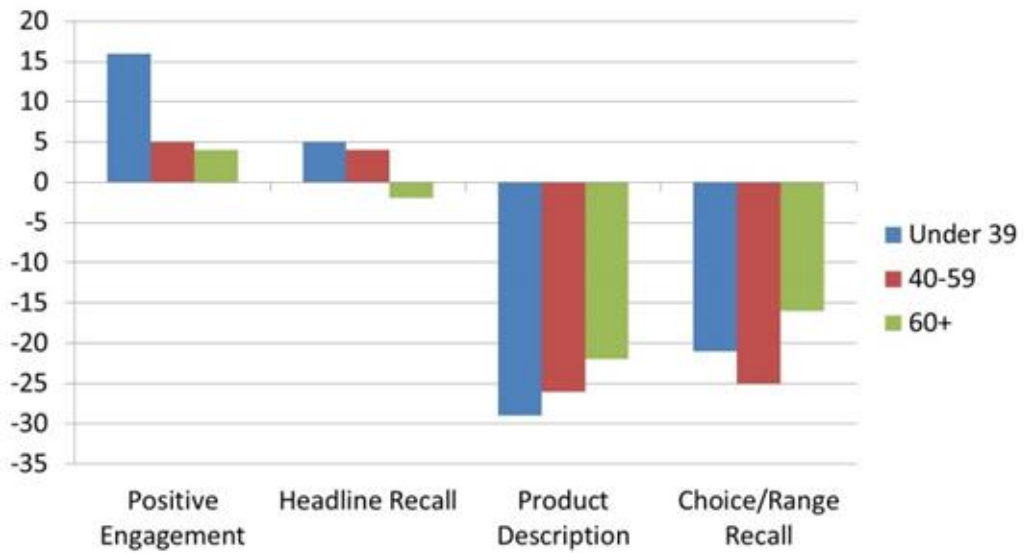
**FIGURE 8**  
**Furniture Ad Net Recall (emotional – rational ad) by Age**



**FIGURE 9**  
**Lighting Ad Net Recall (emotional – rational ad) by Age**



**FIGURE 10**  
**Garden Ad Net Recall (emotional – rational ad) by Age**



## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The extant research into SST in advertising challenges conventional wisdom and advocates advertisers should use emotional appeals when targeting older consumers. The inquiry presented here contests the simplicity of that advice and suggests that in a real world setting using a real and well-known brand, and within a clearly defined advertising context (specifically press advertising that calls the consumer to act), reality is far less clear-cut than previous SST experiments suggest. Of course, direct comparisons between studies are always problematic, and there a number of possibilities as to why these very different results occurred. Dissimilar brands, varied methodologies, diverse samples, and different research questions mean there are no SST-advertising studies that compare directly to the current one, and any or all of these disparities may have contributed to the distinct findings. With only one exception (van der Goot *et al.*, 2016) all previous studies use fictitious brands and were conducted in laboratory-type places which can impact the performance of older adults, though the reasons for this lab-life discrepancy are not well understood (Salthouse, 2012). Many have used low involvement grocery products (McKay-Nesbitt *et al.*, 2011; Micu and Chowdhry, 2010), while the products used here are clearly higher involvement purchases. Certainly ad message involvement mediates the relationship between narrative versus factual ad copy (Polyorat, Alden and Kim, 2007). While beyond the scope of the current study, a fruitful avenue for future research may be to consider ad and product involvement levels on rational versus emotional ad copy appeals. The current technique used pictures, in a similar vein to some previous research (Fung and Cartensen, 2003; McKay-Nesbitt *et al.*, 2011) though other studies appear to use solely text-based stimuli (Drolet *et al.*, 2007; Williams and Drolet, 2005). Some research measures attitudes towards

the ad (Drolet *et al.*, 2007; McKay-Nesbitt *et al.*, 2011; Micu and Chowdhury, 2010; Williams and Drolett, 2005) or evaluates product attributes (Wei *et al.*, 2013) but only Fung and Cartensen's (2003) second study appears to have asked respondents to choose between two appeals in the same way as the current study. Moreover, all SST investigations (including the current one) focus on recall and preferences. An alternative view of advertising is that its purpose is to publicize the brand to maintain its salience and familiarity and acceptability levels, refreshing memory, and occasionally enhancing acceptance of the brand in a consumer's consideration set (Ehrenberg, Barnard, Kennedy and Bloom, 2002). Scrutiny of the ad copy (appendix 1) reveals that these ads certainly fit under the umbrella of brand publicity for a well-known brand with high recognition and awareness levels (Benjamin, 2012), which is in contrast to most alternative SST studies which use fictitious brands. Clearly, these factors may have impacted preferences. Finally, SST does not manifest in exactly the same way across cultures (Fung, 2013). This is the only known UK research, making cultural differences a possible contributory factor. After all, SST is a theory based on social issues (Carstensen, 1992).

In terms of advertising preferences, contrary to SST, the study finds older adults demonstrate clear preferences for rational over emotional appeals. These preferences are different for younger consumers, lending support for the contention that what works for younger target markets will not necessarily work for older consumers. Results also challenge the usefulness of SST across all advertising contexts to older adults, and suggest that SST does not hold the key to successful advertising to these important consumers, at least when the ad is asking them to make a purchase decision.

Despite the unequivocal results overall, it is noteworthy that substantial numbers of older adults did show a preference for the emotional ad. Across the three product categories, an average of four in every ten older adults preferred the emotional ad. Clearly, there are substantial differences within the older group. Advertising research has long recognized distinct segments of older consumers (Davis and French, 1989; Day *et al.*, 1988), and there are psychographic segmentation models of older adults available (Moschis, 1993; Sudbury and Simcock, 2009). While the incorporation of many psychographic variables was beyond the scope of this study, future research should consider examining different appeal preferences across different segments.

An important consideration of SST is time perspective (Carstensen, 1995). Most previous studies manipulate time perspectives and find that when time perceptions are short, older adults demonstrate a preference for emotional appeals, and when time perceptions are expansive they prefer rational appeals (Wei *et al.*, 2013; Micu and Chowdhury, 2010; Williams and Drolet, 2005). In other studies, chronological age has acted as a proxy for time perspective (van der Goot *et al.*, 2016). However, gerontologists have long been aware of the limitations of chronological age and a body of research acknowledges self-perceived age may be a far better indicator of how a person conceptualizes themselves in relation to rest of society (Baum and Boxley, 1983) and importantly it provides an indication of how a person positions themselves in their own life cycle (Guptill, 1969). In other words, self-perceived age is a proxy for time perspective within one's own life. The early developmental stages of SST focused on the fact that it is "place in the life cycle [that] influences the salience and effectiveness of specific functions" (Carstensen, 1992: p. 331). Thus, the inclusion of self-perceived age in the current study is a particular strength. Indeed, this is the

first empirical study to test the proposition that that people with an older self-perceived age – who therefore perceives a more limited time perspective to those who feel much younger than their chronological age – would prefer emotional over rational appeals. Contrary to SST, those older adults with old self-perceived ages did not prefer emotional over rational ads. This result further challenges the usefulness of SST in all advertising contexts. That said, when comparing ad preferences, different patterns emerged between cognitive and chronological age groups. The one previous SST study to incorporate cognitive age (Wei *et al.*, 2013) used it solely as a moderating variable. This is the first study to use cognitive age as an indication of time perspective, despite its acknowledged ability to provide insight into an individual's definition of their current place in their life-course (Guptill, 1969). The results here add weight to the suggestion that it is useful to include cognitive age when considering ad appeals among older audiences (Jahn *et al.*, 2012).

The finding that older respondents demonstrate slightly greater recall of rational over emotional appeals lends support to some previous research (McKay-Nesbitt *et al.*, 2011), though most existing research finds a tendency for older adults to demonstrate greater recall for emotional over rational ads (Fung and Cartensen, 2003; Williams and Drolet, 2005). Nevertheless, it is important to note that for emotional appeals, irrespective of age, all adults were able to engage positively and emotionally with the advertisements. Thus, impression formation qualities of emotional advertising work for older adults, too, though contrary to previous research the study finds that it works more strongly for younger adults than for older adults. However, when the message is clear and rational, all adults are able to recall the main product details and recall information based on the product range and choice available to a greater extent from the rational as opposed to the emotional

execution. Some consumers enjoy thinking, a tendency known as a need for cognition (Cacioppo, Petty, Feinstein and Jarvis, 1996). Need for cognition is conceptually different from cognitive ability, and can account for significant variance in information processing (Cacioppo *et al.*, 1996). Consideration of this trait in future SST research is potentially fruitful. A second avenue to consider is fluid intelligence (needed to perform unfamiliar or novel tasks, often requiring flexibility, and not based on specific knowledge or previous learning) versus crystallized intelligence (long-standing knowledge and skills). There are well-documented age differences between fluid and crystallized intelligence (Sorce, 1995). Because the current study utilizes a well-known brand, it is possible that older consumers have applied their long-standing knowledge of the brand to question the emotionally-laden ads in a way they may perhaps not have done had the brand been novel. Certainly this too is a potentially fruitful future avenue to explore.

Some previous SST studies utilize different products and brands as the focus of their experiments (Williams and Drolet, 2005), others use a single brand and manipulate the copy (Micu and Chowdhury, 2010; Wei *et al.*, 2013). The current study is the first of its kind to use a single brand with different product categories. Thus, while the conclusions drawn from a single study should always come with a consideration of the limitations and a caveat that these findings need replication, the study nevertheless adds weight to the contention that at least for Homebase, irrespective of the product category, in general rational advertising execution is preferred. Yet, even among the different product categories there were different levels of preference expressed among older adults: greater numbers of older adults preferred the rational appeal for furniture compared to lighting and mirrors. Clearly, the same consumers are not always consistent in their preferences for rational over

emotional for all product categories, even within the same brand. Conversely, it may be that among many older consumers there is a perception that Homebase is a rational brand. In contrast, other companies that offer home improvement products may have more emotional perceptions related to them.

### **Limitations and Further Directions for Future Research**

The study is not without its limitations. Latest figures show that in the first quarter of 2015, 87% of 55-64 year olds and 71% of 65-74 year olds in the UK had used the Internet. In contrast, only one-third of those over 75 had been online (ONS, 2015). Consequently, the use of an online methodology has excluded a significant number of older people who are not yet Internet savvy. Second, the study uses only one brand and did not measure prior brand attitudes or perceptions of the products being advertised, either or both of which may have impacted results. Third, the study is limited to print advertisements, presented to respondents as stand-alone ads rather than embedded in magazines. Future research should consider TV and radio ads and test different execution formats in different media. Using alternative methodologies would also deepen understanding of age-related ad appeal preferences. Qualitative research has the potential to uncover valuable insights into the reasons why older consumers express preference for one appeal over another, while neuromarketing techniques could capture differences in sensorimotor, cognitive, and affective response to different appeals.



## **Implications for Advertising to Older Consumers**

From recent SST studies the message that emotional ads are preferable when targeting older adults has been gaining momentum. The current study has hopefully slowed down this impetus by providing advertisers with contrasting evidence. The practical implications of this study are very clear: an understanding of the advertising context is crucial. If the objective is to communicate emotional brand values, advertisers should perhaps use an emotional appeal when targeting older adults. However, if the overall campaign objective is to drive home a specific and practical product-related message and encourage specific consumer action (for example, visit a store), or even publicize a well-known brand (Ehrenberg *et al.*, 2002) then perhaps a rational appeal should be used. While this makes perfect sense intuitively, it challenges SST that advises emotional appeals.

That is not to say that the treatment of older and younger consumers should be identical. Indeed, all of the results presented here lend support for the need to carefully consider age differences in information processing and preferences when designing advertising. Far too often older adults are missing from advertising research – even when the target is older adults themselves (McCaughan, 2014). Given the increasing importance of older consumers more companies are likely to focus on them in the future (Watt, 2015). If older consumers comprise even a part of the target market, advertisers must include older people in pretests and take note of age-related differences. Clearly age - both chronological and cognitive - does matter. Perhaps then, the only solid advice for advertisers is that there is no substitute for pre and post testing of advertising executions for individual brands, individual product lines, individual campaigns, and to consider distinct segments within the target market. Undoubtedly, one size does not fit all.

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## Appendix 1



<b>Rational: Living Room</b>	
<b>Headline</b>	Living room furniture at Homebase
<b>Sub-headline</b>	The latest designs with fantastic prices
<b>Body copy</b>	With a sofa range that offers a choice of up to 9 styles, in 29 fabrics, and 3 leathers, we have something to suit everyone's taste and budget. Choose from our selection of tables, cabinets and sideboards, all of which are created from real wood veneer and solid oak. Plus, over 500 soft furnishings to pick from.
<b>Emotional: Living Room</b>	
<b>Headline</b>	Whatever your heart desires
<b>Sub-headline</b>	Create a den of sophisticated snugness
<b>Body copy</b>	Combine the perfect mixture of class and comfort, and be ready to enjoy this room on any occasion. With a variety of soft furnishings and on trend pieces, you can create a room that is both a refuge to relax in and where you will enjoy entertaining



<b>Rational: Lights &amp; Mirrors Ad</b>	
<b>Headline</b>	Lighting and mirrors at Homebase
<b>Sub-headline</b>	A huge range to suit every style
<b>Body copy</b>	With over 700 lighting options to choose from, ranging from lamps to light fixtures, we have a selection that will match everyone's style and budget. A collection of 200 different mirrors will also offer the finishing touches to any room.
<b>Emotional: Lights &amp; Mirrors Ad</b>	
<b>Headline</b>	Lighting and mirrors to reflect your every mood
<b>Sub-headline</b>	Illuminate your home with a welcoming glow
<b>Body copy</b>	With classic lamps, retro pieces and stylish spotlights, there is an option for everyone to add a bit of sparkle in their lives. Choose from an array of mirrors that will add the finishing touches to any room. Brighten your dark corners, and fall in love with your home all over again.



<b>Rational: Garden</b>	
<b>Headline</b>	Plants and pots at Homebase
<b>Sub-headline</b>	A top quality range to fill your garden
<b>Body copy</b>	A garden range with over 300 different flower species, 400 plants, and 50 trees, we have everything you need for your garden. Along with over 70 plant pots, ranging from terracotta to brass, and a selection of 30 garden ornaments.
<b>Emotional: Garden</b>	
<b>Headline</b>	The garden of your dreams
<b>Sub-headline</b>	Helping you create your outdoor Heaven
<b>Body copy</b>	From trees and shrubs to plants and pots, with Homebase you can find everything you need to make the perfect English garden. Watch it bloom through Spring and Summer, or enjoy Midsummer heat on the deck of your dreams. Craft an outdoor heaven to lose yourself in.