Representations of older adults in television advertisements

Monica M. Lee [a],[*], Brian Carpenter [a],[1], Lawrence S. Meyers [b],[2]

[a] Washington University in St. Louis, Department of Psychology, Campus Box 1125, One Brookings Drive, St. Louis, MO, 63130, United States
[b] California State University, Sacramento, Department of Psychology, 6000 J Street, Sacramento, CA, 95819, United States

Abstract

The purpose of the present study was to examine a comprehensive set of television advertisements, across networks and times of day, to determine how older adults are portrayed. Older adults appeared in 15% of advertisements, and in those ads, older women were underrepresented relative to men, and older adults appeared less frequently on youth-oriented networks and during the evening. Older adults tended to play incidental roles in the advertisements and to promote a circumscribed, stereotyped set of products and services. Moreover, their characters portrayed overwhelmingly positive attributes and traits. Results from the current study suggest ways in which portrayals in television advertisements might shape attitudes that viewers have about older adults and aging.
© 2006 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Representations of older adults in television advertisements

Among all forms of media, television is perhaps the most pervasive. In the average U.S. household, the television is on for approximately 7 h every day, 8 h in households with children under age 18 (Nielson Media Research, 2000). In part because of its ubiquity, television plays an important role in shaping viewers' attitudes. Images on television become readily accessible icons and archetypes (Shrum & O'Guinn, 1993), and portrayals on television influence how people think about a variety of social groups, including older adults.

In the case of older adults, while people form opinions about them through personal experience in families, friendships, and casual contacts, exposure to characterizations on television also can influence attitudes regarding older adults (e.g., Davis & Davis, 1985; Hummert, 1990). For example, Passuth and Cook (1985) found that higher rates of television viewing were associated with negative attitudes about older adults. Other studies have suggested that portrayals of older adults on television may not accurately reflect contemporary aging. For instance, older adults appear to be underrepresented on television relative to their growing representation in society. Signorelli and Bacue (1999) examined primetime programming and found that only 3% of the characters in major and supporting roles were elderly,

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 314 935 6173; fax: +1 314 935 7588.
   E-mail addresses: mmlee@artsci.wustl.edu (M.M. Lee), bcarpenter@wustl.edu (B. Carpenter), larrym@saclink.csus.edu (L.S. Meyers).
[1] Tel.: +1 314 935 6173; fax: +1 314 935 7588.
[2] Tel.: +1 916 278 6365; fax: +1 916 278 6820.

in contrast to their 21% presence in the population at the time (U. S. Census Bureau, 1999). An added gender effect was revealed by Atkins, Jenkins, and Perkins (1990–91), who reviewed advertisements aired on three networks and found that only 11% featured actors who appeared over age 50, and 71% of those actors were men, suggesting that older women, in particular, are less visible in television ads.

The ways in which older adults are used on television suggest another source of bias. In the study of advertisements by Atkins et al. (1990–91), the products most often represented by older adults were foods (42%) and health and hygiene products (25%). Older adults were excluded from ads for "glamorous" merchandise such as automobiles, cosmetics, and leisure products. Although recent research has identified a trend toward more positive age stereotyping in advertisements, older adults are still cast as central characters in less than 5% of ads (Miller, Leyell, & Mazachek, 2004).

With the help of previous studies, researchers have begun to understand how older adults and the experience of aging might be misrepresented on television. In the current study we set out to build upon this previous research in three ways. First, we employed a comprehensive sampling strategy to capture a more fully representative set of advertisements to which typical viewers might be exposed. Second, we sampled across multiple television networks, each with their own demographic focus, enabling us to examine the kinds of images offered to different age groups. Third, we used recent advertisements in an attempt to replicate the work by Atkins et al. (1990–91). With these enhancements, we were able to pursue a more fine-grained analysis of how older adults are portrayed.

Our specific aims were to determine the percentage of advertisements that featured older adults, along with the gender and ethnicity appearance patterns therein. In the process, we set out to document the frequency of advertisements featuring older adults on each of the five major networks during various time periods. Finally, we wanted to characterize how older adults are represented in advertisements by documenting the roles they play, the products/services they promote, and the traits most frequently displayed by older characters.

2. Method

2.1. Sample

Five networks (NBC, ABC, CBS, FOX, and WB) were videotaped on five consecutive days (Monday through Friday) between the hours of 8:00 am and 11:00 pm each day. Each network was videotaped on a rotating schedule so that one network was videotaped for 1 h, followed by another network the next hour, and so forth. The order in which the networks were recorded was randomly selected. With this method we obtained a sample of advertisements from each network at different periods throughout each day. The advertisements were videotaped in Sacramento, California from February 10 to February 14, 2003. Only advertisements for products and services were analyzed. Advertisements for television programs, films, and local events, such as concerts and political affairs, were not analyzed. A total of 1977 advertisements were videotaped and reviewed.

2.2. Procedure

The first step in the coding process was to identify advertisements in which older adults appeared. Actors who appeared over age 55 were considered "older" in the current study. Some investigators have used age 50 to identify older adults (Atkins et al., 1990–91; Signorelli & Bacue, 1999), others have used age 60 (Hummert, Garstka, Shaner, & Strahm, 1994; Miller et al., 2004). We used age 55 to remain consistent with the classification of older adults by Nielson Media Research (2000).

Once advertisements with older adults were identified, we coded apparent sex (*male* or *female*), ethnicity (*Caucasian*, *African-American*, or *other*), and status of the older adult actors (*spokesperson*, *supporting actor*, or *extra*). In order for an actor to be considered a *spokesperson*, one of the two following criteria were required: (a) the actor was the most prominent individual in the advertisement speaking about the product or service, or (b) a narrator spoke throughout the advertisement and the actor was the most prominent visual representative of the product or service. To be coded as a *supporting actor*, an actor must not have met the criteria for spokesperson and met at least one of the following three criteria: (a) the actor had a minimal speaking role, but supported the spokesperson in representing the product or service; (b) the actor did not speak at all, but the absence of the actor would have diminished the effect of the advertisement; or (c) the actor was present for more than 3 s at one time or was present more than once in the

advertisement. To be coded as an *extra*, an actor must not have met the criteria for either spokesperson or supporting actor, and met at least one of the two following criteria: (a) the actor was shown for 2 s or less at one time and did not appear again in the advertisement, and (b) the actor was in the background and could have been replaced by virtually any person without affecting the promotion of the service or product.

The next step was to code other characteristics of the advertisements. The following information was recorded for each advertisement: (a) time slot: *morning* (8:00 am to 12:00 pm), *afternoon* (12:00 pm to 6:00 pm), or *evening* (6:00 pm to 11:00 pm); (b) network on which the advertisement aired: *NBC, ABC, CBS, FOX,* or *WB*; and (c) type of product/service being advertised: *beverages, apparel/fashion, cars/vehicles, computers/electronic/technical, domestic products/services, food products/services and dining, games/toys/fun, health/beauty, medical/medication, money/finance/legal, office supplies/services, non-profit/pro-bono, sports/sporting gear, telecom/dotcom, travel/hotels,* or *other/miscellaneous*.

Five undergraduate research assistants coded the actors and advertisements in these first steps of coding. Raters were trained with practice advertisements until 100% agreement was achieved on all coding categories. Data from each rater were examined throughout the course of the coding process to ensure reliability. If, at any time, agreement among raters dropped below 95%, raters met collectively to determine the nature of disagreement and to ensure that variables were clearly defined. In the end, 96% agreement was achieved across all variables for all advertisements.

The final step in the coding process was to determine how elderly spokespeople were portrayed in the advertisements. Using the stereotype and trait structure identified by Hummert and colleagues (1994), each elderly spokesperson was coded with one of seven stereotype labels (*Perfect Grandparent, Golden Ager, John Wayne Conservative, Severely Impaired, Shrew/Curmudgeon, Despondent,* or *Recluse*). Raters also coded each actor with specific traits. Examples of traits used to characterize each stereotype include: *Perfect Grandparent* (family-oriented, loving, supportive), *Golden Ager* (alert, healthy, sociable), *John Wayne Conservative* (emotional, nostalgic, retired), *Despondent* (afraid, hopeless, neglected), *Recluse* (naïve, quiet, timid), *Severely Impaired* (inarticulate, incoherent, incompetent), and *Shrew-Curmudgeon* (bitter, ill-tempered, stubborn). To determine stereotypes and traits, raters considered aspects of each actor's representation, including physical appearance, activity in which the actor was taking part, apparent psychological state, relationships with other actors in the advertisement, and verbal content within each advertisement.

Three different undergraduate research assistants coded the actors in this final step of the coding process. Ninety-five percent agreement was achieved across all stereotypes and traits attributed to each actor. Only ratings that were agreed upon by the three raters were used for analyses. In advertisements that contained more than one elderly spokesperson and the stereotypes attributed to each actor were identical, ratings for only one actor were included to avoid inflation of stereotype counts. A total of 108 unique characters were coded.

Descriptive and chi-square statistics were calculated to examine gender and ethnic distribution in advertisements featuring older adults, distribution of advertisements featuring older adults across the five networks and the three time slots, representation of older adults across advertisements for various types of products/services, and characterization of older spokespersons using stereotypes and traits.

3. Results

Older adults appeared in 15% (286) of the 1977 advertisements taped across the five days. Of these, Caucasian older adults appeared in 86% of advertisements, African-Americans appeared in 13%, and older adults of all other ethnic backgrounds in 12%. Older men appeared in more advertisements than older women (82% vs. 38%). The distribution of acting roles between men and women was comparable: older men were cast as spokespeople in 41% of ads, and women were cast as spokespeople in 39% of ads.

The distribution of advertisements featuring older adults across the five networks and the three time slots is presented in Fig. 1. The frequency with which older adults appeared in advertisements differed across networks and time of day, χ^2 (8, $n=1077$)=17.49, $p<.05$. Advertisements featuring older adults appeared more often on NBC (20%), ABC (26%), and CBS (24%) than FOX (17%) or WB (13%). Advertisements featuring older adults also appeared more often in the afternoon (48%) than in the morning (21%) or evening (32%).

Fig. 2 shows how often older adults appeared in advertisements for different products and services. Of those advertisements featuring at least one older adult, older adults most often appeared in ads for food products (24%), medications/medical services (16%), health/beauty (11%), and cars/vehicles (11%). They were infrequently present in advertisements for games/toys/fun (1%), beverages (2%), computers/electronics (3%), and vacation/travel (3%), and
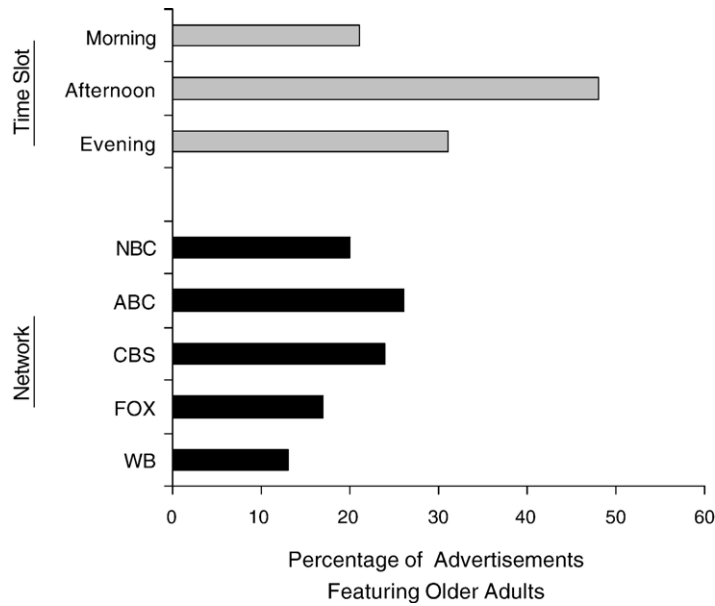
Fig. 1. Advertisements featuring older adults ($n=286$) on each network and in each time slot.

they did not appear at all in advertisements for office supplies/services, sports/sporting gear, and non-profits. When cast as spokespeople, older adults most often promoted medications/medical services (9%), food products (7%), cars/vehicles (7%), and financial/legal services (5%) in that role. Even though older adults appeared in advertisements for products in other categories, they were infrequently used as spokespeople (i.e., <1%).

Of 108 elderly spokespeople coded for stereotype, 91% were identified as *Golden Ager*, 6% as *Perfect Grandparent*, 2% as *Severely Impaired*, 1% as *Shrew/Curmudgeon*, 0% as *John Wayne Conservative*, 0% as *Recluse*,
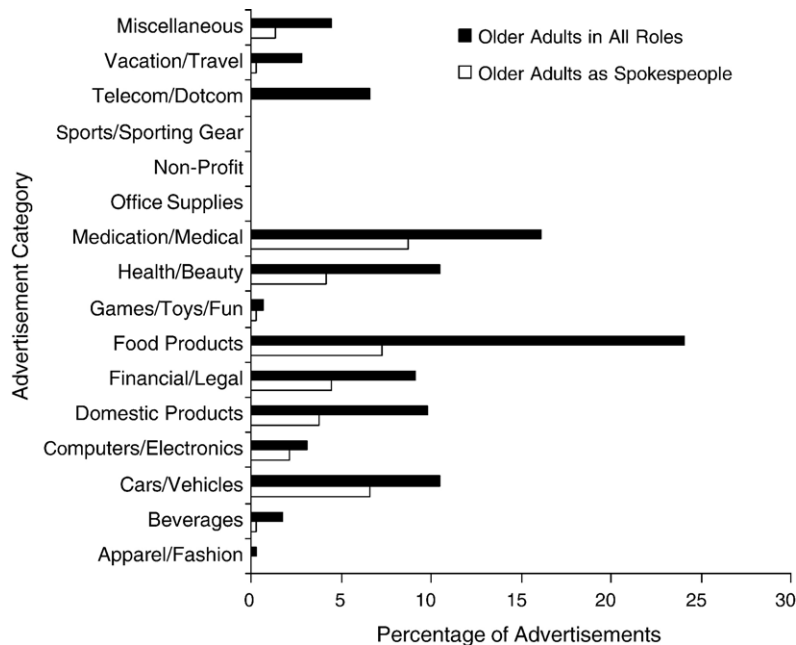

Fig. 2. Advertisements featuring older adults ($n=286$) by product/service.

and 0% as *Despondent*. An example of a *Golden Ager* appeared in an ad for spaghetti sauce in which several elderly women danced on lush green hills in slow motion to the song, "Born Free," because they no longer had to spend time preparing spaghetti sauce in using this product. A *Perfect Grandparent* appeared in an ad for cookies in which an elderly man and a child sat at a kitchen table sharing cookies and milk. An example of a *Severely Impaired* older adult appeared in an ad for car insurance in which an elderly contestant in a simulated game show slept through much of the

Table 1
Percentage of elderly spokespeople ($n=108$) characterized by each trait

Positive stereotypes	Traits	%	Negative stereotypes	Traits	%
Golden Ager (91%)	Active	72%	Despondent (0%)	Afraid	0%
	Adventurous	10%		Depressed	.5%
	Alert	81%		Hopeless	.5%
	Capable	42%		Lonely	.5%
	Curious	3%		Neglected	0%
	Determined	11%		Sad	0%
	Fun-loving	44%			
	Future-oriented	9%			
	Happy	78%	Recluse (0%)	Naïve	0%
	Health-conscious	23%		Quiet	1%
	Healthy	79%		Timid	0%
	Independent	31%			
	Interesting	0%			
	Liberal	2%	Shrew-Curmudgeon (1%)	Bitter	0%
	Lively	55%		Complaining	3%
	Productive	18%		Demanding	.5%
	Proud	3%		Ill-tempered	.5%
	Self-accepting	3%		Inflexible	1%
	Sexual	4%		Jealous	0%
	Skilled	30%		Prejudiced	0%
	Sociable	53%		Nosy	0%
	Successful	41%		Selfish	0%
	Volunteer	1%		Stubborn	.5%
	Wealthy	4%			
	Well-informed	17%			
	Well-traveled	6%	Severely Impaired 2%	Feeble	5%
	Witty	5%		Inarticulate	.5%
				Incoherent	1%
				Incompetent	2%
Perfect Grandparent (6%)	Family-oriented	10%		Senile	0%
	Fun-loving	44%		Slow-thinking	2%
	Generous	.5%			
	Grateful	4%			
	Happy	78%			
	Intelligent	4%			
	Kind	11%			
	Knowledgeable	6%			
	Loving	14%			
	Supportive	3%			
	Trustworthy	0%			
	Understanding	0%			
	Wise	.5%			
John Wayne Conservative (0%)	Conservative	0%			
	Emotional	.5%			
	Nostalgic	.5%			
	Patriotic	.5%			
	Religious	.5%			
	Reminiscent	.5%			
	Retired	2%			

ad and when prompted with a question, he responded with an incoherent and illogical statement. A *Shrew/Curmudgeon* appeared in ad for fruit juice in which an elderly woman sitting in the passenger seat of a car berated her husband's driving habits while he drove. Table 1 displays the percentage of actors characterized by each stereotype and trait.

4. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the presence of older adults in television advertisements in a cross-section of television programming during a typical week. In our sample of advertisements, older adults appear in 15% of all advertisements. Based on this sample, older adults do not appear to be underrepresented relative to their presence in the population, as has been suggested in previous studies (e.g., Atkins et al., 1990–91). Compared to their appearance in 15% of advertisements, older adults comprise 18% of the population in the region where these advertisements aired. In this sense, the demographics of characters in the television advertising universe, at least in terms of age, mirrors the demographics in the actual community.

At the same time, the gender and ethnic distribution of older actors differed greatly from the population in the community. Women appear in 38% of advertisements that feature older adults, while men appear in 82% of these advertisements. By contrast, in the census region where these advertisements aired, women represent 58% and older men 42% of the older adult population, a difference largely due to varying mortality rates (Gist & Velkoff, 1997). Thus, what viewers might learn from advertisements about who is old in America misrepresents the presence of older women. Consistent with feminist theories, the current findings support the existence of a subtle sexism in which younger women are celebrated in television ads while older women disappear (Kjaersgaard, 2005).

With regard to ethnicity, 86% of advertisements feature Caucasian older adults, even though only 64% of older adults in the census region exposed to these ads are Caucasian. In contrast, the representation of African-Americans and older adults of other ethnicities was comparable to their numbers in the population (13% and 12%, respectively). (This was possible because advertisements could feature multiple actors who may have been of different ethnicities.) Older Caucasians may be overrepresented in television advertisements because advertisers put more emphasis on appealing to Caucasian consumers because of real or perceived differences in economic status and buying power. One byproduct of overincluding older Caucasians could be a biased message regarding social status. Groups that are more prominent in media presentations are perceived as having more importance (Kubey, 1980), and advertisements that, as a set, include ethnic minorities less often might send a signal regarding their social position or value.

In terms of where older adults appear, they are present in advertisements less frequently on youth-oriented networks, such as FOX and WB, where the majority of viewers are age 18–49 (Nielson Media Research, 2000). This finding suggests that children, teenagers, and young adults are exposed to older adults in advertisements even less than other age groups. Of course advertisements are designed to sell products to an audience, so one might not expect to see older adults on networks geared to a younger demographic. Yet the consequence may be that younger people develop a sense that older adults are not part of their world, or at least the world they see on television does not accurately mirror the world they are likely to encounter when they leave their house.

As to when older adults appear in advertisements, they appear more frequently in the afternoon than in the morning or evening. This is surprising, as evening is the time of day when this age group watches the most television (Nielson Media Research, 2000). One explanation is that older adults may appear more often in the afternoon because retirees are more likely to make up whatever reduced audience is available then. Afternoon commercials are designed to appeal to that more demographically narrow audience. In contrast, in the evening the audience broadens, shifts downward in age overall, and the commercials do the same, responding to a different demographic. The consequence is that in the evening, when the most people are watching, television viewers are exposed less frequently to older adults in advertisements and even then to narrow and skewed representations.

In examining the content of advertisements, older adults do not typically promote products such as apparel, office supplies, games, beverages, computers and electronics, and vacation and travel. Instead, particularly when older adults are cast in prominent roles, they tend to represent medications and medical services, food products, cars, and financial and legal services, perhaps suggesting that these products and services are most relevant to the elderly. To some degree that may true. But another implication is that these depictions reinforce stereotypes of older adults as being overly concerned with declining physical functions and financial/legal vulnerability. While it may true that older adults have medical and financial concerns, they also have a wide range of other interests, experiences, and concerns that make up the lifestyle of many older adults.

Despite the limited visibility of older adults in advertisements, current findings do reflect a trend toward positive portrayals of older adults in advertisements, as described in previous research (Miller et al., 2004). Older spokespeople were overwhelmingly characterized with positive traits, and 97% of elderly spokespeople were described as either *Golden Agers* or *Perfect Grandparents*. Their characters are uniformly healthy, active, and happy, enjoying time with friends and family, competent and capable in dealing with growing old.

Our primary concern is that the overall picture of older adults that emerges from this snapshot of television advertisements misrepresents aging in ways that could be unfortunate for many viewers. These advertisements underrepresent older women, overrepresent older Caucasians, and they provide a skewed perspective in the characterization of older adults. On the one hand, older adults are portrayed as vibrant, successful, and content, but mostly in the context of dealing with health care and financial management. Missing are portrayals that reflect the wide range of experience people have with aging. So when younger adults and older adults find themselves coping with aging, what they encounter may differ from what they have expected based on their television viewing. Of course people learn about aging in other ways, and advertisers may not have a unique obligation to reflect reality in their sales pitches, but advertisements, though brief, comprise 20% of all television programming (Cobb-Walgren, 1990) and may exert a subtle but powerful influence on how people think about aging.

A few methodological limitations of this study are worth noting. Although careful precautions were taken to maintain the reliability of coding, the raters ranged in age from 22 to 47. It is possible that their perceptions of actors' ages do not reflect those of the average television viewer, and miscategorizations of characters could have been possible. It is also important to note that findings from this study may not generalize to advertisements aired throughout the country, as advertisements likely reflect regional populations and preferences. Finally, we took a macro-level approach in characterizing the advertisements. While the coding strategy provided some information about the visibility of older adults in advertisements, there is much information overlooked by not describing the actors more specifically. For example, we may have noted that an advertisement included at least one elderly African-American female, though it may have been the case that the advertisement actually included five such actors, which could have a different impact on viewers.

Despite these limitations, results from this study update earlier work on older adults in advertisements (Atkins et al., 1990–91) and suggest the need for further examination of television advertisements and their influence on attitudes about older adults and aging. Furthermore, while current findings indicate that advertisements are depicting older adults in a more positive light, there are risks to this approach as well, reinforcing stereotypes that may be unrealistic for older adults with genuine limitations. A next step for researchers might be to examine how the content of advertisement-based stereotypes and the frequency of exposure to stereotypes interact. More definitive experimental work is needed to examine the impact of advertisements on actual attitudes.

Acknowledgements

References

Atkins, T. V., Jenkins, M. C., & Perkins, M. H. (1990–91). Portrayals of persons in television commercials age 50 and older. *Psychology: A Journal of Human Behavior*, *27–28*, 30−37.

Cobb-Walgren, C. J. (1990). The changing commercial climate. *Current Issues in Research in Advertising*, *13*, 343−368.

Davis, R. H., & Davis, J. A. (1985). *TV's image of the elderly: A practical guide for change.* Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.

Gist, Y., & Velkoff, V. (1997). Gender and aging: Demographic dimensions. Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census.

Hummert, M. L. (1990). Multiple stereotypes of elderly and young adults: A comparison of structure and evaluations. *Psychology and Aging*, *5*, 182−193.

Hummert, M. L., Garstka, T. A., Shaner, J. L., & Strahm, S. (1994). Stereotypes of the elderly held by young, middle-aged, and elderly adults. *Journal of Gerontology: Psychological Sciences*, *49*, 240−249.

Kjaersgaard, K. S. (2005). Aging to perfection or perfectly aged? The image of women growing older on television. In E. Cole & J.H. Daniel (Eds.), *Feminist analysis of media,* (pp. 199−210). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Kubey, R. W. (1980). Television and aging: Past, present, and future. *The Gerontologist*, *20*, 16−35.

Miller, D. W., Leyell, T. S., & Mazachek, J. (2004). Stereotypes of the elderly in U.S. television commercials from the 1950's to the 1990's. *International Journal of Aging & Human Development, 58*, 315−340.

Nielson Media Research (2000). *2000 report on television: The first 50 years.* New York, NY: Author.

Passuth, P. M., & Cook, F. L. (1985). Effects of television viewing on knowledge and attitudes about older adults: A critical reexamination. *The Gerontologist, 25*, 69−77.

Shrum, L. J., & O'Guinn, T. C. (1993). Process and effects in the construction of social reality: Construct accessibility as an exploratory variable. *Communication Research, 20*, 436−471.

Signorelli, N., & Bacue, A. (1999). Recognition and respect: A content analysis of prime-time television characters across three decades. *Sex Roles, 40*, 527−544.

U. S. Census Bureau. n.d. Statistical abstract of the United States: 1999. Retrieved February 22, 2006, from http://www.census.gov/prod/99pubs/99statab/sec01.pdf.