

## **"We can drink our coffee more slowly." Discursive uses of age in relation to holiday consumption – examples among Danish and German mature travellers**

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### **Abstract**

'Being old' has often been presented as something negative, and advertisers have often sought to avoid addressing age, emphasising the importance of appealing to "cognitive" (psychological) rather than "chronological" (biological) age. But is age always perceived negatively by people who are not young? The present study is an interpretive and explorative study made in connection with a study on mature couples' perceptions of the good holiday, based on interviews and focus groups with couples in Denmark and Germany on issues related to holidaying and indirectly on the meaning of age. Relevant here is the fact that the interviewees and focus group participants did not present themselves as victims, but quite the opposite. Instead of dissociating from the concept, they discursively took on the identity of being older. The findings of the study show that the participants perceive age also as a privilege, a situation of independence and freedom and as something positive and empowering which can be used to legitimise certain decisions and make certain demands.

*Keywords: Mature consumers; Age; Holidays; Identity; Discourse*

### **Introduction**

For decades debates have existed over the fact that older consumers have either been ignored, ridiculed or victimised, and not treated and presented as empowered consumers in advertising. 'Being old' has often been presented as something negative, and in market communication until recently, advertisers have often sought to avoid addressing age, emphasising the importance of appealing to the "cognitive" (psychological) rather than the "chronological" (biological) age. But is being old always perceived as a problem for people who are not young?

It is the assumption in this article that the one-sided perception of age being a taboo and a merely negative issue for mature consumers is too limited. This article seeks to nuance this discussion through an analysis of how groups of Danish and German mature travellers perceive age.

Among researchers a broad consensus was found that age and the meaning of age are culturally constructed (Smigzin & Carrigan, 2001; Wilson, 2000) and that the "healthy majority of pensioners in countries where the social security system delivers a 'retirement wage' (Myles, 1991) rarely think of themselves as old when they retire" (Wilson, 2000, p. 5).

When it comes to market communication research where these matters have been debated intensively, a number of sources stress that the complexity of older consumers is so central that a focus on generation is too simplistic (Bradley & Longino, 2001; Kreilkamp, 2005; Morgan & Levy, 2002; Treas & Longino, 1997). Also the very perception of being older and what one can do when one is older has been and is changing continuously (Morgan & Levy, 2002). Bradley and Longino (2001) write that younger people have a much clearer image, although stereotypical, of how older people are, than older people have of themselves. They mention an analysis of caricatures of ageing bodies carried out by Scarfe (1993). The caricaturists make deep wrinkles in the face, hanging skin under the chin, draw people bald or with grey hair, with shrunken lips, liver spots, bowed legs and stooped backs and with all kinds of accessories as walking canes, walkers or wheelchairs.

Being old has a number of negative connotations (health is degrading, one is not able to manage without help, life is coming to an end) and a number of stereotypes of being old exist: that old people are passive, conservative, stingy, submissive, fragile and helpless (Gunter, 1998) and according to Callan and Bowman (2000) some marketers still tend to view the over 65 year olds as impoverished and in poor health even though mature segments have both socio-political and consumer power: "the emphasis on youthfulness in contemporary culture has meant that aged bodies have often been marginalized or subject to ridicule." (Hodgetts, Chamberlain, & Basset, 2003, p. 418). Also, it is documented by various studies that media images of elderly people to a great extent consist of caricatures, which do not correspond to the way mature people live or perceive themselves (Hodgetts et al., 2003). Wilson

writes (2000) that there is a "*fear of old age*" (p. 1-2) and this fear means that an alienation from older people takes place.

In literature about mature consumers from recent decades, most stereotypes about older people are confronted. For example in an estimation from 1992, 76% of Americans older than 55 years were estimated healthy enough to travel (Ananth, Demicco, Moreo, & Howey, 1992) and it is likely that this number has gone up. This does not, however, change the fact that perceptions of older people and their health are long-lived and may over-ride actual facts.

A recent change has been seen in the general presentation in the way older people are presented in the media "*to include the 'active' or 'remarkably youthful elderly'*" (Hodgetts et al., 2003, p. 419). Older people are slightly more present in media representations, but with a focus on the youthful and well-kept look (Carrigan & Szmigin, 2000). The old-looking individuals as role models are therefore not part of the realm of advertising, and the outlook on mature consumers from a media perspective is thus focussed on a particular representation of age, i.e. as youthfulness being more appealing.

This fits well with some studies which find that chronological age does not seem to be central in people's self-perception, stressing a number of reasons why people perceive themselves as younger than they are (Lazer, 1985, Millian & Erffmeyer, 1989). Biggs (1999, as cited in Bradley & Longino, 2001) suggests that people create their identity later in life through what they have achieved in the past and according to which plans they have for the future, rather than from a set of stereotypes and most often negative characteristics of what it means to be older.

Identity is, as several theorists will argue (e.g., Deschamps & Devos in Worchel, 1998; Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Jenkins, 2008), a continuous, dynamic negotiation, which means that it is adjusted to one's own experience as well as social surroundings all the time and in accordance with changed perceptions of age, among other things, as part of one's self. Identity construction is closely linked to the past and to occurring changes in people's lives. Past experiences and change become self-narratives that represent self-perceptions, and as such, being old is a matter of experience and perception.

Mature consumers identify themselves with several other aspects besides their age, which is also a well-known contention of identity theory in which multiple identities is a common concept (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Jenkins, 2008). Cognitive or psychological age is the construct of how old an individual feels he or she is. It is quite often in opposition to biological or chronological age (Van Auken & Barry 1995). Furthermore, several studies have found that cognitive age is more relevant than chronological age when attempting to predict behaviour (e.g., Smith & Mochis, 1984). Thus according to these studies, individuals

dissociate themselves from a certain chronological age, perceiving themselves as several years younger than their chronological age would indicate, only categorising themselves as being old when they are sick or depressed.

As demonstrated above, a number of stereotypes and negative associations prevail in relation to perceptions and representations of age. The objective of this study was to find out how mature couples perceive age and the significance of age in the context of travelling and particularly to explore positive perceptions of ageing – in contrast to current debates.

## Method

This paper is based on an empirical study among Danish and German mature consumers, as these are main target groups for travelling in Denmark, and the study was commissioned by VisitDenmark. The aim of the initial VisitDenmark study was to find out what mature couples perceive the good holiday to be and the significance of age in that context. The study is placed in the interpretive paradigm, seeing age as a socio-cultural construction anchored in time and space.

## Participants

In total, 63 individuals took part in the study (28 Danish and 35 German participants). First, five qualitative pilot interviews with couples were carried out in Aalborg, Denmark (with 10 individuals). Two interviews were carried out with what was defined as "empty-nester couples" (aged 45-59 years – couple 1 aged 58 and 51 years, couple 2 aged 57 and 55 years). Two interviews were made with "senior couples" (older than 60 – couple 1 aged 69 and 68 years, couple 3 aged 66 and 63 years), and one mixed couple (empty-nester/senior - where the husband was 62 and his wife 58).

Second, six focus groups were carried out in Aalborg (Denmark), Düsseldorf and Hamburg (Germany) with 53 participants, with 8-9 participants in each group. Again, the sample was split into two groups, "the empty nester group" (with ages ranging from 45-59), and "the senior group" (with ages ranging from 60-75), in each of the three cities. Eighteen individuals took part in the Danish focus groups (10 empty-nesters and 8 seniors), 35 individuals took part in Germany (9 empty nesters and 10 seniors in Düsseldorf, and 8 empty nesters and 8 seniors in Hamburg). The informants were between 45 and 75 years of age. This article focuses mainly on the oldest group of participants, i.e. 60-75 years of age.

With regard to gender, a good mix was obtained in Germany with 18 men and 17 women in the focus groups. In the Danish focus groups only two men participated in each group (a total of four men and 14 women). A better gender balance in the Danish groups would have been preferable, but luckily the few men in the Danish groups were very active and happy to share their thoughts.

## Procedure

The participants were recruited by market research institutes and the interviews and focus groups were carried out by one of the authors (MG) and colleagues. A criterion of selection was that they were living in couples and were active travellers, defined as travelling several times a year. A qualitative approach was chosen as the aim was to explore new and unknown meanings (Kvale, 1994) related to mature consumers and travelling.

The pilot interviews lasted between one and two hours, and the focus groups all lasted two hours. The interviewees and focus group participants were informed about the aim of the study, which was to explore what mature couples travelling without children seek from their holiday, and they were granted full anonymity. Their names have been changed in the following to a letter indicating their gender (M/F) and an identification number, e.g., M1, F1, M2, F2, etc. The participants clearly enjoyed talking about their travel experiences. They received a small gift for their participation. The interviews were carried out in people's homes, and the focus groups in market research institutes in Aalborg, Düsseldorf and Hamburg. All interviews were voice-recorded and all focus groups were videotaped. Both interviews and focus groups were transcribed verbatim.

## Measures

To generate discussion about holidays and the meaning of age, participants (in both interviews and focus groups) were asked to make a collage by picking out 5-6 pictures from 47 promotional pictures featuring various holiday activities, accommodation and nature with both young and elderly models. This exercise was used to make the participants relax and help them to remember and think about their holiday experiences, and in order to hear their reactions to and discussions of various types of models. With a point of departure in these collages a number of relevant themes were brought up and discussed in the groups. Also, the participants were asked to comment on 3 posters with various product offerings, particularly aimed at mature consumers, also featuring elderly to old models. This exercise aimed to direct the discussion more specifically to the theme of ageing and travelling. Only at the end of the interview was age introduced directly by the moderators.

With a point of departure in the literature study the data was analysed through thematic interview analysis (Kvale, 1994) with an openness towards patterns and tendencies, which offers knowledge about the participants' perception of age, related to holiday consumption. The analysis focussed on how the participants talked about age, both in a positive way and also how they in some cases aligned themselves with stereotypes about being old. The study was explorative and allowed for detailed and in-depth analysis of the

participants' perceptions of the concept of age. It is plausible that the findings are valid not just in this specific context, even though data is gathered among a sample of mature consumers who are wealthy and physically fit, and thus socioeconomically advantaged. If the socioeconomically advantaged part of the mature consumers in some situations chooses to identify themselves with being old, why should the less advantaged part of the group not choose to do so as well?

## Results

The travel preferences and forms did not seem to change much with age for the participants in the focus groups and interviews. With age the participants appeared to prefer more comfort in certain ways, but many of them stressed that they were actually more active now when on holiday than they used to be. Age rarely arose as an issue among the empty nesters, but it was more commonly mentioned among senior participants, who were often in the midst of a number of changes in their lives.

Several participants discussed recent life transitions. Some had left the labour market. M1 (senior group Aalborg) had just sold his boat; F1 and M2 (empty nester couple Aalborg) had sold their holiday residence and their house and moved into an apartment. M3 (senior group Düsseldorf) started going skiing with his grandchild, because his wife could no longer accompany him. M4 (senior group Aalborg) no longer skied because he was frightened by a crash last time he did so. For some, the grandchildren were reported as taking up considerable time and energy. Some brought their grandchildren on holidays. Deaths among old travel companions also led to changes in holiday plans and expectations. Many participants therefore had to redefine and reconstruct their holiday habits to some extent.

The participants were asked if and how their holiday had changed from earlier. Several emphasised that they were now travelling 'on their own terms'. F2 from the senior group in Aalborg thought that her holiday time is now more luxurious and more egoistic: "*Now we don't have to take the needs of the children into account any longer*". F3 (also the senior group Aalborg) continued this theme, referring to past holidays: "*It was on their [the children's] terms*".

The new freedom (from work, from dependent children) is considered a privilege: "*This [new freedom] is our advantage now: we can do as we please, and then you should do it*" (M1, senior group Aalborg). Whether the participants really live out this new freedom to the extent that they claim is not central here; they construct themselves discursively as free and lucky in this context.

The participants in this study were frequent travellers. Several of them portrayed themselves as being financially secure in comparison to earlier in their lives. M5 (empty nester group Hamburg) told about eating out: "*30 years ago we couldn't afford it [eating out]*."

*Today where we are alone, or without children that is, we treat ourselves to this luxury".*

When the participants were asked if they thought that their holiday habits would change in 5, 10 or 15 years several answered "No" spontaneously. M1 did not think that he would be horse riding in 10 years, but then again: *"In ten years, I don't think so, well, I don't know. There is someone I have been doing some evening rides with. He is 82. I won't be that [82 years] in ten years. So maybe one should never say never"*.

F2 (senior group Aalborg) imagined that age might play a role for her physically: *"Maybe you can't take all those walks you can now. If you are in Copenhagen for instance, or in another big city you have to see. Maybe you will have to take a cab or a tram or a bus at a certain point in time"*. It is interesting to notice that she does not intend to stop travelling, but rather to make use of transport facilities instead of walking, indicating a desire and expectation that she will continue to travel.

Particularly in the senior groups, health problems were mentioned – both as a reality for some but also something which from day-to-day can change one's life situation. Several interviewees in the German groups considered stays at health resorts (for which there is a long tradition in Germany, where visitors can receive medical check-ups, treatment, etc.). Health started to play a role for some in the holiday: *"You learn to live with what you can do, right? That is how it has to be. You don't jump and dance any longer"* (M6, senior interview 1 Aalborg). The wife in this couple was using a walker after having broken her thighbone. The couple had experienced limitations on where they could go, for example difficulties going to the beach.

On the whole, and consistent with the literature, participants did not appear to consider themselves old or elderly, but there seemed to be an underlying anxiety about how long they can stay fit: *"The older you get, the more you will travel around at home [in Denmark]"* and *"You are inclined to say that as long as we can travel, we'll do it"* (F4, the senior group Aalborg). M1 continued...:

*I think it is a very big truth that this is why [because the health is good now] we travel so much. It is because we are in good health as we sit here. And then I think it is important that we get to see all those things we did not see when we had the kids and went to work more or less stressed. Now we have the time, and we have the money, most people in Denmark. And we can go as pensioners, more or less. [...] We definitely have to do it now, it is not damned sure we can do it in 10 to 15 years* (M1, senior group Aalborg).

*"It is not damn sure"* they can go in 10 to 15 years, M1 argues. He does not just say *"we can't go in 10 to 15 years"*, they probably will continue to holiday, but to be sure they should not wait. Some have had to change their ways already: [M4 does not ski any longer]: *"I'm too bloody old for that now"* (senior group Aalborg).

Travelling means a lot to the participants. At the thought of not being able to travel as much in the

future, F2 said: *"Oh, it will be horrible"*. In the senior group in Aalborg, the participants discussed that in future they will again have to go to the places where they were when their children were young. These are places perceived as safe and accessible. They mentioned for example that long flights start to become tiring. Their comments reveal an anticipated image of themselves as in need of care and extra security, just like that needed by children. Particularly among the seniors, there is worry that they cannot count on their health to be fine in 10 or 20 years time. On the other hand the senior groups currently enjoy the most freedom, and several of them express that they feel privileged: *"We have time, we have money. We can drink our coffee more slowly"* F5, (senior group, Düsseldorf).

As mentioned in the introduction, most people only feel old when they are ill or depressed. The participants in this study do not seem to perceive themselves as being old. As part of the focus group discussion the participants were shown market communication for holiday offers featuring very wrinkled people – among many other types of market communication. These pictures were not appreciated by the participants. Still in certain situations the participants chose to designate themselves as older as a discursive justification (Smed, 2009), as explained below.

For example, F6 from the senior group in Hamburg was attracted to holiday resorts offering Yoga or Chi Gong. She said, *"If this was offered I'm sure this would be very interesting. Especially for our age group"*. By saying 'especially for our age group', F6 is reflecting the existing stereotypes of elderly people as those with special needs different from other age groups, and for whom peaceful activities are appropriate.

A different kind of example comes from M4 from the senior group in Aalborg. He recounted a recent trip to Malaysia, where they had to go by night-train from Kuala Lumpur to Penang. The man at the railway booking office said: *"You look at bit grey in the top"*, and M4 replied *"But that's because we are old"*. This resulted in the group being able to purchase tickets at a very low price, which they were very happy about. When it came to negotiating price, M4 was not unhappy about accepting the self-description of 'old', with the accompanying stereotype of being poor and in need of special reductions. This happened even though throughout the focus group M4 had presented himself as an active, empowered and independent traveller.

Age could also be used as a justification for certain privileges, or to avoid particular activities. Regarding not having one's own bathroom when on holiday, almost all participants agreed with the sentiment: *"This is something you don't want"*. F2 from the senior group said: *"No, not when you are past a certain age,"* and F7 continued: *"I think we have grown away from that"*. These comments also appeared in the empty nester groups. This is also an example of how, to obtain a privilege, age may be used as an argument, again

playing onto the traditional stereotypes of needs or special care and expectations of certain rights.

F2's husband did not want to go to cafés. She said: "One of the things we discuss the most is...I love going to cafés and so on. Particularly in Paris or Copenhagen. Then my husband says 'Arhh, that's only for young people and so'. Then I say: 'That doesn't matter. I would like to try that'". This is an example of how age can be used as an argument against participation in an activity. Going to the café was by the husband presented as being inappropriate for not-so-young persons, and for the sake of the argument he here accepted categorising the couple as not young.

Our data thus indicates that in certain situations the interviewees can label themselves as being old, to avoid doing something (not going to cafés, not sleeping in a tent), or to get something (attractive prices, special courses).

### Discussion

The concepts of chronological and cognitive age are relevant to understand the lifeworlds of the German and Danish participants in this study. The participants do not consider themselves as particularly limited due to their age. To a great extent they lead active lives and enjoy travelling. Many state that they have become more comfortable with age, but also that they have become more active. Instead of lying on the beach for hours they want to walk, ride bikes and go sightseeing.

Health issues may intervene for a few participants, primarily from the senior groups, and deaths in their circle of friends can bring to mind the thought that travel activities (and everything else) will not last forever. There is a clear perception that "we have to travel while we can", but there is also a belief that travel activities can still go on for a really long time.

In contrast to earlier writings it was found that being old was not a taboo subject among these mature travellers. Being of a considerable age was sometimes used as a means of negotiation to gain or avoid something, and to discursively justify certain decisions or demands. This is a completely different and open way to talk about age than previously described in the literature. The concept of cognitive age usually entails presenting the self as younger, more dynamic and fitter, whereas the participants in the current study sometimes embraced stereotypes of being old, poor, helpless and passive to their advantage.

Age represents a very complex web of meanings. It is a matter of constructing the self and also a strategic, discursive tool, where mature consumers in certain situations can align themselves with the stereotypical images of old people even though they for the most part dissociate themselves from these stereotypes. The mature consumers in this study appeared as strong and empowered consumers who knew what they wanted and were not victims or passive bystanders in relation to the holiday experience.

This study was carried out in a North German and Danish context and these consumers, chosen because they travel often, are wealthy. This possibly empowers this group of consumers more than similar age groups in other geographical areas. It would be interesting to examine if this active way of using age continues and can be found among even older groups of people and among less well-off seniors.

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