

An examination of cognitive versus chronological age factors

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Abstract:

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the importance of cognitive- versus chronological-age factors in activewear apparel advertisements targeting female baby boomers in the USA.

Design/methodology/approach – A total of 50 female participants aged 41-65 were asked to view two print advertisements: one showing activewear apparel worn by a cognitive-age model and the other by a chronological-age model. Participants then responded to a four-part questionnaire that included a measurement of cognitive age, physical activity, response to the advertisements, and purchase intent.

Findings – The responses indicated that the participants view themselves as younger than their chronological age and were more inclined to respond favorably toward the advertisement using the cognitive age model.

Research limitations/implications – Although this study focuses on only one consumer group – US baby boomers – it reveals their current attitudes toward advertisements of activewear apparel as well as their motivations for purchasing activewear apparel. More research on this age demographic and the impact of cognitive age vs. chronological age on their perceptions of advertising is needed.

Originality/value – Currently one of the largest age demographics in the USA, baby boomers are known for having higher amounts of disposable income as compared to other age cohorts and for their interest in physical fitness and leading active lifestyles. The results of this study point to the need to understand the age-related perceptions of this consumer group in order to successfully market activewear apparel products directly to them.

Keyword(s):

Advertisements; Baby boomer generation; Clothing; Demographics; Consumer behaviour; United States of America.

Article:

Introduction

Every eight seconds, someone in the USA turns 50 (Caudron, 1997). Currently the largest age demographic, consumers aged 35-60, also known as “baby boomers”, are estimated to be 75 million strong and, by 2008, are projected to dominate the number of US households currently headed by people aged 25 to 44 (Edmonson, 1999; Ehmann, 1999). Spending power is concentrated among those 40 and older with household income being highest for those aged 45 to 54 (*Marketing and Media Decisions*, 1985; Lee, 1997). As this age cohort move into the “empty nest” stage of life, they have fewer mouths to feed, and, in turn, an increasing amount of disposable income. The sheer numbers of these baby boomers have affected American life on many different levels. Now that they are reaching retirement age, this group is even altering the expectations of old age.

As the baby boomers age, they help to shape the way that old age is viewed. The stereotype that the elderly are poor, uneducated, and feeble does not apply to the baby boomer generation in the USA (McGarvey, 1999). Further, baby boomers are not a homogeneous group of consumers (Hamilton, 2000). Their demographics vary in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, class, age, education, marital status, and lifestyle. All of these considerations necessitate specialized attention from marketers. Marketers who fail to focus on baby boomers and correctly portray them in their diverse and active lifestyles run the risk of alienating this enormous consumer group (Elkin, 1999). Several studies have been conducted to examine how members of this age cohort respond to the variety of ways they are portrayed within advertisements (Gantz *et al.*, 1980; Klock and Traylor, 1983; Peterson, 1992; Rotfield *et al.*, 1989). Each found that this cohort responded more positively to advertisements depicting a younger image of this market. The present study takes such findings into account, and examines responses of this age cohort to advertisements specifically for apparel.

New ideas about health and wellness that promote a general well-being have been brought into the spotlight as baby boomers grow older. Because of this, personal fitness has become an important part of everyday life for middle-aged individuals. The middle-age population of the early twenty-first century is more interested in fitness than those of generations past (Johnson, 1996a). Female baby boomers in particular are striving to distance themselves from the negative stereotypes about growing old by exercising more and participating in a wide range of physical activities (Lack, 1999). Considering their interest in leading active lifestyles and their large numbers as a consumer group, this study narrows the focus of apparel to specifically examine how activewear apparel designed for use in active sports is advertised to female baby boomers.

Background

The US baby boomer market

The first boomer turned 50 in 1996 and will turn 65 in 2011 (Edmonson, 1999). By 2010, over 96 million people will be over the age of 50, accounting for 32 percent of the US population (Mitchell, 1999). By 2040, the number of Americans 65 or older will reach 55 million, compared to 25 million in 1980 (Hamilton, 2000). Today, one-third of all US households are headed by people 55 or older (Mitchell, 1999). These figures reinforce the fact that the average age of the American population continues to increase.

Aside from age, baby boomers have several other unique demographic characteristics distinguishing them from other consumer markets. From the beginning, baby boomers have been shaped by the desire to live in comfort through education and self-fulfillment (Hamilton, 2000). Baby boomers are the most educated generation in the USA, with more than half having attended or completed college (Schwartz, 1996). It is predicted that as boomers continue to age, their overall educational attainment will far exceed that of older generations (Mitchell, 1999).

According to Schwartz (1996), the political upheavals in the USA during the 1960s splintered the mass market into many different lifestyle sub-segments. As a result, it is not enough to know a consumer's sex, age, and income (Heath, 1996). Baby boomers have a variety of interests, yet their sub-segments are often overlooked (Greco, 1986). For instance, just because baby boomers are 50, does not mean that they will act like the 50 year olds of the past (Schwartz, 1996). One of the most important lifestyle characteristics of the baby boomer cohort is the desire to stay fit. As a whole, this group participates in a wide range of exercise, but particularly low and no-impact forms such as walking and swimming (Johnson, 1996a). Yet, members of this generation are as much into running, skateboarding, cycling, hiking, golfing and tennis as younger generations are (Active and Ageless Media Release, 1999). As a result, the pursuit of an active lifestyle is predicted to create a surge in 50 plus sports leagues like bowling, volleyball, water aerobics, walking, golf, tennis and bicycling over the next few years (Johnson, 1996a). Consequently, as the baby boomer market continues to age it will change the face of fitness. As Johnson (1996a, p. 44) writes, "Health care and fitness service firms, which predict and provide for the needs of the mature market, will experience tremendous growth in the coming decades". However, despite the increasing numbers of Boomers enjoying the outdoors and spending a lot of money on products like footwear, apparel and equipment, most advertisements present the image that "younger is better" (*Sporting Goods Business*, 1996; Walzer, 2000).

As a result of a focus on youth, little was known about the buying behavior and needs of older adults until the 1980s. It is now clear that the over 55 market has enormous spending power and is a particularly large market for luxury goods and travel (Joyner, 1993). Moreover, this market is willing to spend freely and is open to experimentation with brands and products (Elkin, 1999). This market is also eager to buy. The average number of times members of the baby boomer cohort shop for apparel is estimated at one to three times per week (*Discount Merchandiser*, 1993). Silverman (2000) found that shoppers aged 45 to 64 make up 42 percent of dollar sales for department stores, 36 percent of sales at national chains, 34 percent at specialty stores, 20 percent at discount stores, 38 percent in direct-mail sales, and 36 percent of online purchases. Yet, despite their size and disposable income, many retailers fail to address the diverse needs and wants of this particular consumer market (Elkin, 1999).

Advertising and the boomer target market

Annually, baby boomers spend over \$40,000 on eating out, cars, entertainment, education, insurance, and apparel (Guttman, 1996). As a result, the baby boomer demographic could be considered one of the best segments to target. In spite of this fact, marketers focus multimillion-dollar product campaigns on the 10 to 18 year old demographic. Presently, very few characters in advertisements represent the baby boomer segment due to a youth ideal (Klock and Traylor, 1983). If baby boomers or older groups are depicted in advertisements at all, it is generally in a

negative light. Since boomers, like other age cohorts, would prefer to be represented as they see themselves, it would not be hard to slightly alter advertisements targeting younger cohorts to make them more appealing to older generations (Mertz and Stephens, 1986).

Since a one-size-fits-all mentality is not appropriate for the older consumer, successful marketing should be as tailored to baby boomers as it has been to their younger counterparts (Lefton, 1996; Tynan and Drayton, 1988). DeLong *et al.* (1997, p. 87) found that “Media representations reflect general notions of what an older person is like, and tend to use imagery that does not recognize individual differences between members of this age group”. Yet it is not just the marketing that needs to change to accommodate the growing numbers of aging boomers, but the product mix as well. According to Petre (1986), products and services should reflect boomers' interest in diet, exercise, and healthy living.

The modern advertising industry was a creation of television, and its present prosperity is based on the economic and cultural forces brought about by television. In the USA, television became a cultural phenomenon after the Second World War, the same time that the first of the baby boomers were being born (Hamilton, 2000). The number of commercial television stations grew from nine to 103 in the five years between 1945 and 1950 (Hamilton, 2000). In the 1950s, television became a focus for fashion, furnishings, behavior, and buying habits. Commercials soon created the desire and need for all manner of products (Hamilton, 2000).

Media analysts agree that the 50 plus market watches more television than younger generations (Thompson, 1990). Despite the fact that older Americans spend a lot of time watching television, a negative relationship between aging and television has been found, especially for women (Chandler and Kaiser, 1985). Traditionally, aging has a greater negative connotation for women than for men due to societal norms that associate women's worth with appearance. Despite the fact that women actively seek fashion information, they are less likely than males to find age-similar, non-stereotypical role models in the media (Chandler and Kaiser, 1985).

Currently, women of all ages are a significant segment of the US population and hold much of the overall spending power. Popcorn (2000) states that women buy or influence the purchase of 80 percent of all consumer goods. However, female baby boomers assume a great deal of importance for the simple reason that they outnumber men in the 50 to 54 category, by 100 to every 95 (Mitchell, 1999). Despite the fact that women are an economic powerhouse, marketing firms still do not have a grasp on how to market to them.

The first step in understanding female consumers is comprehending their lifestyles and life stages. Women's lives encompass many different facets that are usually acknowledged by all successful marketing attempts (Popcorn, 2000). Mature women of today are educated, employed, and more self-confident about their looks than women 10-15 years younger (Silverman, 2000). Women in the USA have increased their labor force participation from 37 percent in the 1960s to 51 percent in 1997, and are remaining in the workforce later in life (Mitchell, 1999). Women are interested in things that make them feel better, such as being health-conscious, working out frequently, and shopping. Fueled by their changing body types and the desire to be healthy, women in the baby boomer cohort have helped support consistent overall growth in the active sports industry (Abend, 1998; Hall, 1986). “Whether they're walking, playing golf or tennis,

doing aerobics or riding bikes (10-speeds and Harleys), baby boomer women are breaking stereotypes and outfitting their active lifestyles wisely” (DeMartini, 1998, p. 42).

Whether these women may have been athletes all of their lives, or have just recently started to exercise, they still want to be treated as serious athletes (DeMartini, 1998). In 1998, activewear apparel growth was strongest for golf, outdoors, and the women's market (Sports Apparel Monitor, 1998). This is due to the fact that women account for 79 percent of purchases involving activewear apparel (Sports Apparel Monitor, 1998). Due to fashion trends, activewear apparel has become an extremely broad category, and can often include apparel purchased for everyday use beyond participation in sports or physical activity. For the sake of clarity and to narrow the focus for the purposes of the present study, the most commonly used definition of activewear apparel will be used here: apparel purchased with the intent that it will be used in active sports (Sports Apparel Monitor, 1998). The use of this definition implies a focus on active sports, thus, footwear is an essential component of the activewear category of apparel. Currently, footwear within the US activewear market is segmented and marketed to consumers based on the specific activity for which it will be used, e.g. walking shoes, running shoes, and hiking shoes.

Baby boomers read as much as they watch television, making print advertisements a viable medium to target this group. It is no accident that magazines are shifting their focus specifically to target older audiences (Thompson, 1990). Magazines aimed at 50 plus audiences, such as *Prevention* and *Modern Maturity* are starting to segment themselves into various lifestyles and special interests (Thompson, 1990). Boomers are also becoming avid web shoppers. More than half of online purchases are made by those aged 35 and over (McDonald, 2001). Online boomers have household incomes averaging \$75,000 and over, compared to \$58,000 among the overall online shopping population (Ehmann, 1999). Reaching the consumer via the internet will likely occur more and more as technological advances continue to be made and more households go online.

Conceptual framework

It has been found that in today's society, older people generally prefer to look 10-15 years younger than their chronological age (Greco, 1986; Johnson, 1996a; *Discount Merchandiser*, 1993; Milliman and Erffmeyer, 1990; Solomon and Subramanian, 1999). This suggests that a person's chronological age is no longer the only determinant of behavior and lifestyle. As a result, non-chronological age variables – such as cognitive or perceived age – must be examined for their effect on spending patterns and purchase behaviors. Cognitive age is defined as the age one perceives oneself to be (Johnson, 1996b). Barak and Schiffman (1981) define cognitive age based on the following measures:

- feel-age (how old a person feels);
- look-age (how old a person looks);
- do-age (how involved a person's interests are as compared with members of a certain age group); and
- interest age (how similar a person's interests are as compared with members of a certain age group).

They found that all mature consumers view themselves as significantly younger than their chronological age. Johnson (1996b) found that marketers who fail to use cognitive age as a segmentation variable overlook important opportunities and could potentially alienate their customers. Similarly, Mertz and Stephens (1986) found that combining cognitive age with chronological age has positive advertising implications.

As the baby boomers continue to age, the elderly population will increase by large numbers. In addition, benefits of physical fitness will increase the average lifespan of baby boomers, making them an even larger, more important market for years to come. A study by Clark *et al.* (1999) found that older females who participate in physical activities have a younger cognitive age than their less active peers. Moreover, just because people age does not mean that they automatically become uninterested in clothing or fashion. Promotion should target the active, fashion-oriented sub-segment of baby boomers (Mertz and Stephens, 1986). In doing so, the advertisement should be congruent with the self-image of the consumer (Greco, 1986). The current study will address the importance of cognitive age specifically in regards to activewear apparel advertisements and the female baby boomer.

Methodology

The focus of this research was to explore the importance of cognitive age in activewear apparel advertising aimed at the baby boomer market. To achieve this, a survey that incorporated a cognitive versus chronological age measurement was used. The participants selected for the study consisted of women, age 40-65, who were affiliated with one of three identifiable groups: church, woman's club, and university-related groups. The researcher attended two meetings of each type of group to introduce the study and recruit volunteers. Although the participants all lived within one particular Southeastern US state, variety of location was considered to include a cross-section of upper, middle, and lower income levels within this geographical area. A total of 50 females aged 41-65 agreed to participate in the study. Of those who completed the survey, the majority (60 percent) of the women were 56-60 years old, 14 percent were 51-55 years old, 22 percent were 46-50 years old, and 4 percent were 41-45 years old.

Instrument

The instrument was used to obtain information on the relationship between cognitive age, physical activity, and perceptions of the role of age within activewear apparel advertisements. The instrument consisted of four parts:

1. a measurement of cognitive age;
2. a measurement of physical activity;
3. a measurement of positive, negative and undecided response to the advertisement; and
4. a measurement to determine purchase intent.

Cognitive age

Cognitive age is often used as an alternative to chronological age measures and is thought to be a viable way to segment baby boomers (Clark *et al.*, 1999). Barak and Schiffman (1981) found that cognitive age could be used to more accurately measure consumption patterns. Their notion of cognitive age is based on four dimensions: feel age, look age, do age, and interest age. In 1991, Clark *et al.*, used these four dimensions along with two more: health age (how old a person feels

in terms of her perceived physical condition) and think age (how old a person considers herself to be based on her thinking process). The present research utilizes all six dimensions of cognitive age.

Physical activity

Physical activity is linked to a younger cognitive age, therefore it is pertinent to measure the physical activity of baby boomers (Clark *et al.*, 1999). In order to measure the degree of physical activity engaged in by the respondents, the Physical Advanced Activities of Daily Living Scale (AADL) developed by Clark *et al.* (1999) was adapted for use in this research.

Advertisements

It is important to understand what makes an advertisement an effective means of communication (Steinhaus and Lapitsky, 1986). The model in an advertisement is a variable that can have an effect on consumer purchasing behavior. It has been found that when the message source (an advertisement) is perceived as similar to the message receiver (the consumer), there is an increase in purchase intent (Steinhaus and Lapitsky, 1986). For the purpose of this study, respondents examined two activewear advertisements for athletic footwear. One advertisement featured a model similar to the baby boomers' average chronological age of 53. The second advertisement used a model that is closer to their average cognitive age of 43. Average age was used as a target number and determined by using the midpoint age within the range for this cohort's chronological and cognitive ages. In both advertisements, the model wore the same activewear apparel, including shoe style. It was assumed that since the baby boomer cohort is inclined to be interested in physical fitness, and do not respond to images in advertisements depicting their age group as sedentary, the model was depicted as being in the act of fast walking (also known as "power-walking"). The framework used by Steinhaus and Lapitsky (1986) to measure the perceived similarity between the advertisement model and survey respondent was utilized.

Purchase intent

The "Purchase intent scale" attempts to measure consumer interest in a product. Steinhaus and Lapitsky (1986) designed this scale to offer the respondent the same choices presented to them in a real life shopping situation: inspection, trial, and purchase of the garment. In using this scale, it was necessary to tell the respondent to assume that they can afford the garment depicted in the advertisement.

Analysis of responses

Once all of the completed questionnaires were collected, the data were analyzed through descriptive statistics. A discussion of response to each component of the survey follows.

Physical activity and frequency

In order to measure the degree of physical activity engaged in by the respondents, the Physical Advanced Activities of Daily Living Scale (AADL) developed by Clark *et al.* (1999) was adapted for use in this research. The survey measured the physical activity of the 50 participants. The participants were asked to mark all physical activities that they engage in regularly. The options on the survey were: "Walking", "Running", "Weightlifting", "Aerobics", "Tennis", "Bowling", "Golfing", "Volleyball", "Bicycling", and "Other". The results found that the

majority of women walk for exercise (88 percent), 42 percent participate in aerobics, 10 percent bicycle, 16 percent lift weights, 6 percent golf, 16 percent lift weights, 2 percent use the Nordic Trac, 4 percent jog, and 2 percent do yoga (see Figure 1). As indicated by the percentage, most respondents participate in more than one type of physical activity on a regular basis.

The participants were then asked how frequently they engage in any active sports that cause them to work up a sweat or become winded. The options on the survey were: “None”, “One time per week”, “Two times per week”, “Three times per week”, “Four times per week”, or “Five or more times per week”. According to the results, 10 percent of the women participate in active sports five or more times per week, 26 percent participate four times per week, 16 percent participate three times per week, 16 percent participate two times per week, 28 percent participate one time per week, and 4 percent never participate in active sports (see Figure 2).

Cognitive age

Cognitive age is often used as an alternative to chronological age measures and, as discussed earlier, is thought to be a viable way to segment baby boomers (Clark *et al.*, 1999). The research utilized six dimensions of cognitive age. The dimensions included the following prompts: “I feel as though I am ...”, “I look as though I were ...”, “My health is as though I were ...”, “I do most things as though I were ...”, “My interests are mostly those of a person ...”, “I think as though I am ...” Participants were asked to check the category that most represented their age given the statement. The age ranges were: 25-35, 35-45, 45-55, 55-65, 65-75, and 75-85.

While there were differences in cognitive age, the majority of women reported that they felt, looked, acted, had interests, and thought younger than their chronological age. Beginning with the first of the six dimensions measured – “feel age” – the responses indicated a younger overall response (see Figure 3). Of the total, the majority of participants (48 percent) felt five to ten years younger, while 44 percent felt their actual age or a few years younger. A small percentage (8 percent) actually indicated that they felt older than their chronological age.

The second dimension measured was “look age.” In response to this prompt, the majority (58 percent) indicated that they felt they look five to ten years younger than their actual age, and 36 percent felt they look the same as their actual age or a few years younger. The smallest percentage (6 percent) indicated that they did not feel they looked younger than their actual age, and instead believed they looked older (see Figure 4).

Half of the participants, in response to the third dimension, “health age,” felt that their health was between five and ten years younger than their actual age. 40 percent felt that their health was that of someone of the same age or a few years younger, and 10 percent indicated that their health was that of an older individual (see Figure 5).

The fourth dimension of cognitive age – “do age” – was also measured. A little over half (58 percent) of the participants felt that they do things as if they are at least five to ten years younger, 38 percent felt that they do things as if they were the same age or a few years younger, and 4 percent do things as if they were older (see Figure 6).

According to the responses to the question measuring “interest age,” 46 percent of participants felt that their interests were at least five to ten years younger than their chronological age, 48 percent have interests the same as their age or a few years younger, and 6 percent have interests that are older than their age (see Figure 7).

Response to the sixth and final dimension of cognitive age – “think age” – was also included. Nearly half of the total participants (46 percent) indicated that they think as if they were between five and ten years younger than their chronological age, 44 percent think as though they were the same as or a few years younger of their chronological age, and 10 percent think as if they were older (see Figure 8).

Response to advertisements

Participants then examined two activewear apparel advertisements for athletic footwear that had previously been tested in focus groups. The primary difference between the two advertisements was the age of the model depicted. Advertisement A featured a model similar to baby boomers' mean chronological age of 53. The second ad, advertisement B, had a model closer to the participants' average cognitive age of 43.

The participants were asked to respond to a series of questions pertaining to the two advertisements in order to measure the degree to which they perceive themselves to be similar in age to the model used in the advertisement. First, they were asked to look at advertisement A and decide if the model had much in common with them. Once they had decided, they were then asked to mark one of the following options: “Not at all,” “Not very much,” “A little bit,” “A lot,” or “Everything.” The participants were then asked to provide reasons why they selected that option. They were then asked to complete the same three steps in response to advertisement B.

Overall, the majority of participants indicated that they had at least “a little” in common with the model in both advertisements. However, more felt they had “a lot” in common with the model in advertisement B, the cognitive age model, than with the model in advertisement A, the chronological age model. When asked to describe what they had in common with the model, participants indicated a wide range of examples, including such factors as physical activeness, age, body size, and looks. None of the participants felt that they had everything in common with the models in either advertisement.

Purchase intent

In order to determine how important athletic shoes are to female baby boomers, participants were asked to respond to the question: Within what price range are the athletic shoes you typically purchase? The survey found that 4 percent of the women purchase shoes costing less than \$25, while 32 percent spend \$25-40. A total of 24 percent spend \$40-60 and 22 percent spend \$60-75; 16 percent spend \$75-100, and 2 percent spend over \$100. It was found that participants who exercise on a more frequent basis spend more on their athletic shoes (see Figure 9).

The participants were then asked to indicate whether or not they would buy the footwear in advertisement A or B. The brand of the athletic shoe was removed from the advertisements using Photoshop to prevent the response from being contingent on brand recognition or loyalty. Once they had decided, they were then asked to select one of the following: “Definitely not”,

“Probably not”, “Would like to go to store and look at garment”, “Might like to buy”, and “Definitely would buy”. They were also asked to provide comments regarding their choices. The participants were then instructed to go through the same three steps in response to the second advertisement.

Nearly half (48 percent) of the participants indicated that they preferred the shoes in advertisement A, but that they would like to go to the store and look at the item before purchasing. That is, the participants were willing to try a new shoe, but they wanted to be able to see the actual product before making a final decision. Participants who indicated they probably would not buy the shoe cited the fact that the activity in the advertisement did not appeal to their physical activity of choice.

Conclusions and implications

Cognitive versus chronological age

Cognitive age has often been used as a marketing tool to segment and target baby boomers in the USA (Clark *et al.*, 1999). The majority of the participants in the present study saw themselves at least five to ten years younger than their chronological age. These findings further support the importance of using cognitive age versus chronological age as discussed in previous studies on baby boomers by Greco (1986), Johnson (1996a), and Solomon and Subramanian (1999). The findings of the present study further establish that a person's chronological age is not the only determinant of behavior and lifestyle.

This study also found that females of this age cohort are exceptionally interested in staying active and in finding apparel that meets their physical activity requirements. Therefore, athletic shoes were an appropriate type of product to use in the advertisements because of the participants' familiarity with the product type. In examining responses to the questionnaire with regard to physical activity and specifically their interests in activewear apparel, the majority of female baby boomers in this study did in fact view themselves as significantly younger than their actual age. This was true with regard to the majority of dimensions on the scale, including “feel age,” “look age,” and “health age.” Therefore, it could be inferred from the responses of participants within this study that when targeting female boomers, advertisements for activewear using characters in the age range of 35-45 have a better likelihood of success than those using characters in the age range of 45-55.

Ultimately, this study points to the importance of marketing activewear apparel to females in this age group, but more importantly, doing so in a manner that will likely bring about a positive response. The findings of this research are consistent with the theory that the baby boomer cohort espouses a younger cognitive age than chronological age. Further, it was found that participants in this study preferred to be represented as they see themselves. Therefore, advertisements created to target the interests of this particular age group should be cognitive-age appropriate for this cohort. There is, however, always the possibility of missing the mark and presenting an age outside of the baby boomer range. It can be inferred from the participants' responses that the model in the cognitive age advertisement was acceptable to the participants, in that the model was young enough to fit within the cognitive age range but not so young as to alienate the participants. That is, while there is a focus on youth in advertising (Klock and Traylor, 1983), the

results of this study illustrate that the models should be old enough to be perceived as another baby boomer, as opposed to a member of Generation X or Y.

Importance of physical activity

The participants in this study cited involvement in many different types of physical activities on a regular basis. These findings support previous examinations of this age cohort by Johnson (1996a) and Steinhaus and Lapitsky (1986), both of which found that Boomers of today, and especially females, are more interested in physical activity than older consumers of the past. In this study, walking was the number one favorite activity of the participants, with aerobics being second. Weightlifting was the third most selected form of physical activity. Not only did the participants indicate interest in a wide range of activities, but they also indicated that they engage in them frequently. Most of the participants worked out at least once per week, but they were followed closely by those that work out four times per week. The majority of the participants in this study worked out between two to three times per week. Baby boomer women – at least those included in this study – are not in fact the stereotype “little old ladies” but active and healthy women, who are interested in breaking stereotypes that are pinned on consumers beginning in their late 40s and early 50s. This suggests a strong need for activewear apparel advertisements to incorporate physical activity into the image as well as sensitivity to the age of the model as perceived by the consumer.

Advertising apparel

Given the acute interest in fitness – as well as the enormous expenditure on apparel in the USA today – on the part of female baby boomers, this research sought ways to maximize the targeting of this consumer group by apparel marketers. As other research has found (DeMartini, 1998; Elkin, 1999; Popcorn, 2000), differences between men and women of this age group, and women's lifestyles and lifestages in particular, are often ignored or overlooked. To avoid the “one size fits all” mentality, apparel marketers should find an appropriate character age in activewear advertising that will appeal to physically active female Boomers. This research supports the notion that advertisements that appeal to the specific target market should be a reflection of how females see themselves, versus how marketers see a particular age group. When participants examined two activewear advertisements, one that featured a model similar to baby boomers' mean chronological age (53) and the other closer to their mean cognitive age (43), the majority responded that they felt that they had “A lot” to “At least a little” in common with the cognitive aged model.

In order to be successful, this study suggests that activewear apparel advertisements should portray baby boomers as they would like to be portrayed. The fact that the participants did feel that they had something in common with the model reinforces this idea, in that it is important to understand how the female consumer views herself with regard to her age but also her lifestyle and interests. In this study, the results with regard to intent to purchase the apparel product in the advertisement support this idea even further. The participants were asked to look at advertisement A and B and decide if they would buy the footwear in the advertisement. Results indicate that the majority of the participants would at least go to the store and look at the footwear depicted in the advertisement with the cognitive age model. The participants who felt that they would not buy the shoes did not cite distaste for the model as their reason for not purchasing. Rather, they stated that the activity in the advertisement was not their physical

activity of choice or that there was not enough information provided in the advertisement to make a decision. Further exploration of baby boomer females could focus on comparing their diverse physical activity interests – such as walking, aerobics, hiking – with the wide range of demographic variables – including race, ethnicity and income – that characterize this age cohort within the USA.

Consumer likeability for an individual advertisement may be the single best determinant of advertising effectiveness (LaTour *et al.*, 1996). Therefore, it is key that marketers portray an accurate model age and accurate physical activity when targeting boomers. As indicated by the results of this study, the solution may be to use a range of middle age models participating in a range of physical activities. This may help to further connect the consumer with the product through advertising. As US baby boomers are not a homogenous group, further research into the implications of other demographic variables in addition to age, such as race, ethnicity and appearance of the model in advertisements is necessary in order to better understand how this diverse consumer group might respond to such advertisements. Moreover, though beyond the scope of the present study, further research could compare these appearance-related factors with other factors present in advertisements that may be linked to the consumer's self-image, such as apparel design, garment quality, and product brand.

Personal fitness has become an important part of everyday life for female baby boomers. As a result, they like to see models in advertisements that represent their lifestyles and physical activity of choice. The boomer participants indicated that they enjoy all manner of exercise, but particularly physically active forms such as walking and aerobics. Even though physical activity was of great importance to the females in this study, future research on the topic of cognitive age and apparel advertising might include other types of apparel, such as casual wear or business dress. Although beyond the scope of the current study, including other, more activity-specific types of activewear – such as rock-climbing, hiking, or golf – may lead to a more in-depth understanding of the types of activewear baby boomers purchase and for what reasons.

Baby boomers in the USA have grown up with advertising and the media, and will expect marketers to cater to them as they age. Moreover, the apparel industry must accommodate their product wants and needs. One way to do this is by keeping pace with the changing activewear apparel needs of this age group, and in particular the female segment of this cohort. By understanding how women of this age cohort identify with models in advertisements, marketers can maximize their potential for successful targeting of this enormously lucrative market. To do this requires going beyond the stereotypical depiction of seniors as old, gray, and feeble, and instead, portraying an image of physical fitness, health, and well-being.

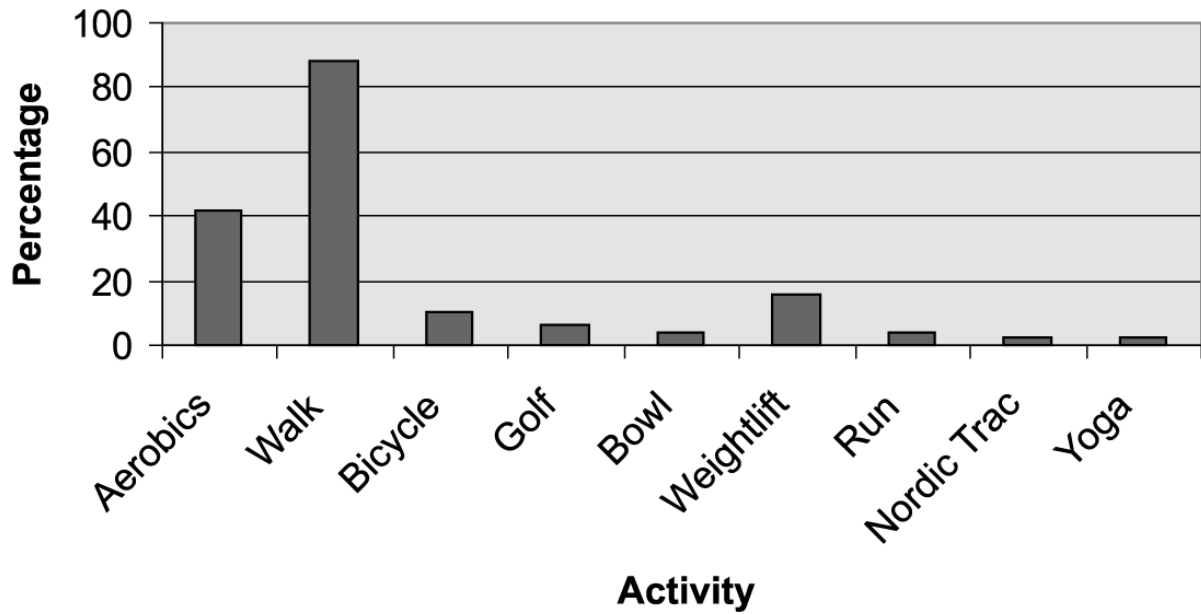


Figure 1 Type of physical activity

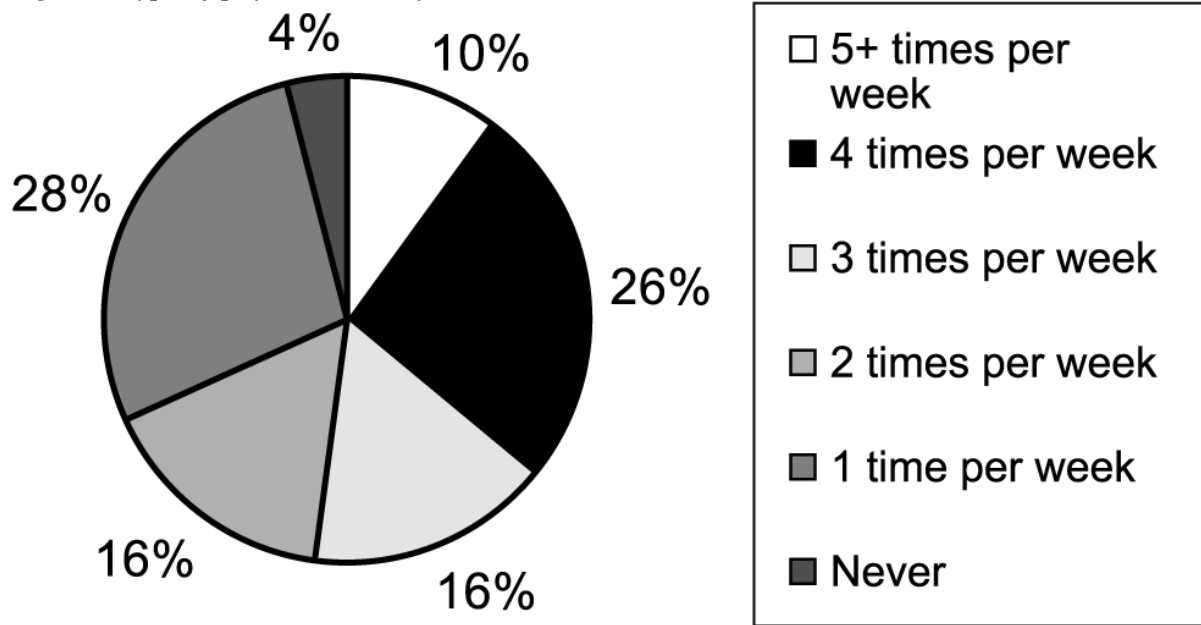


Figure 2 Frequency of physical activity

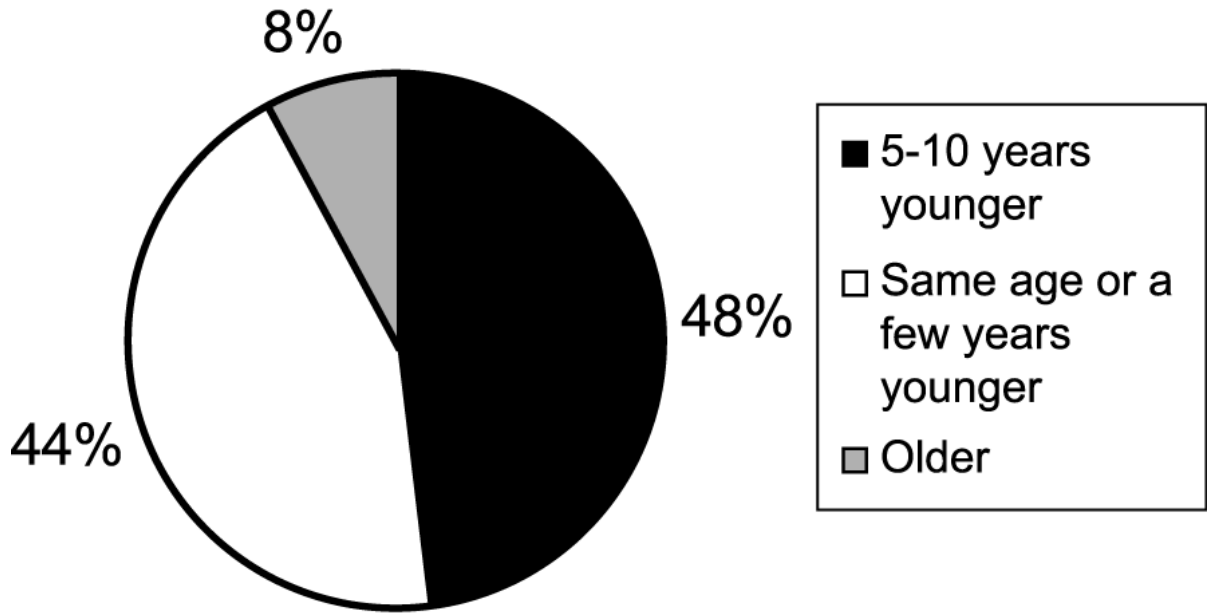


Figure 3 Feel age

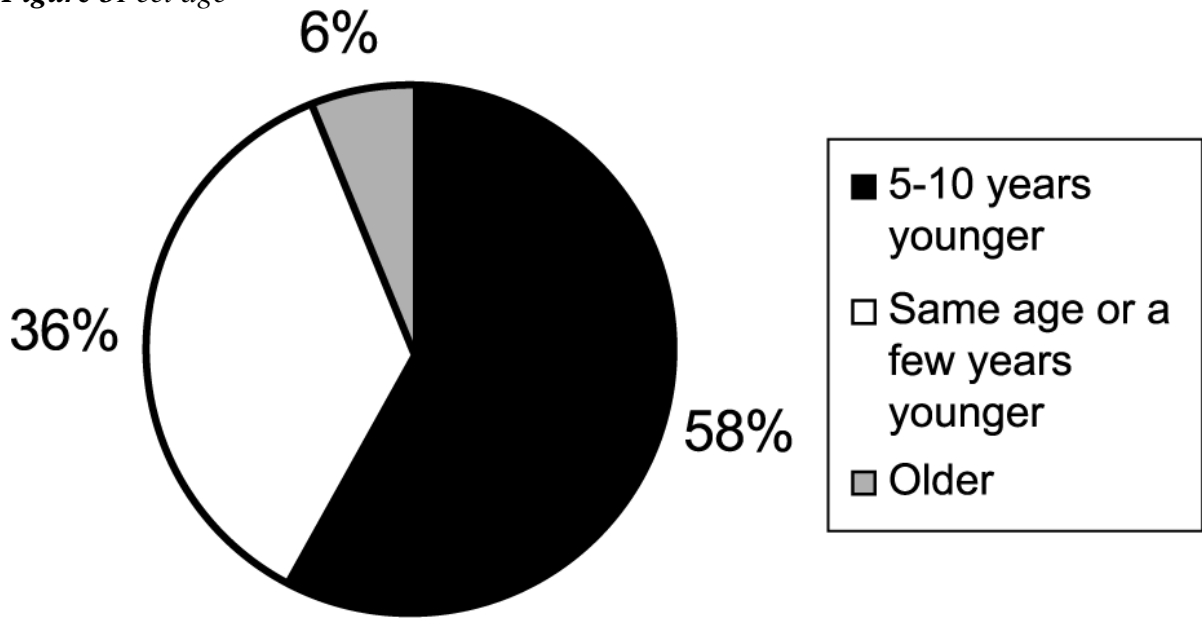


Figure 4 Look age

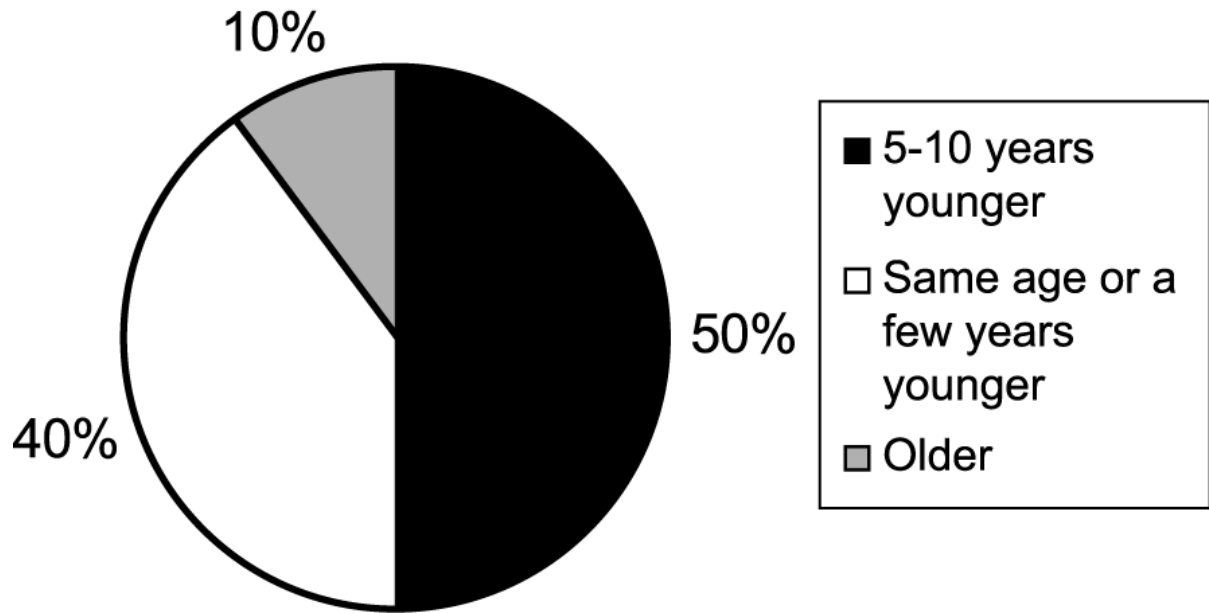


Figure 5 Health age

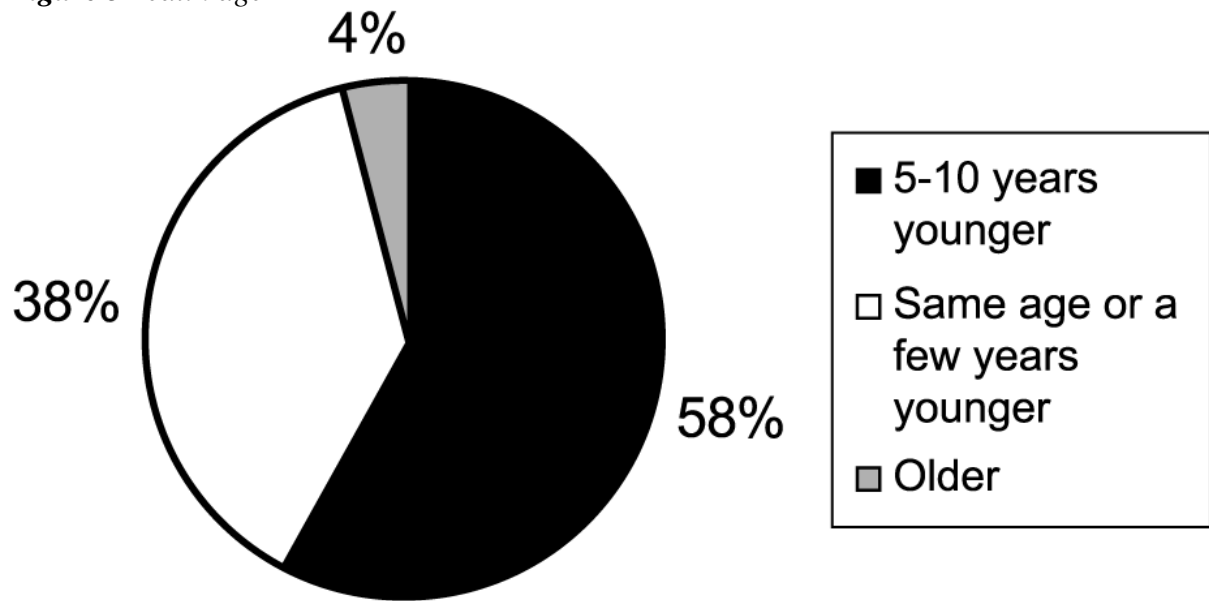


Figure 6 Do age

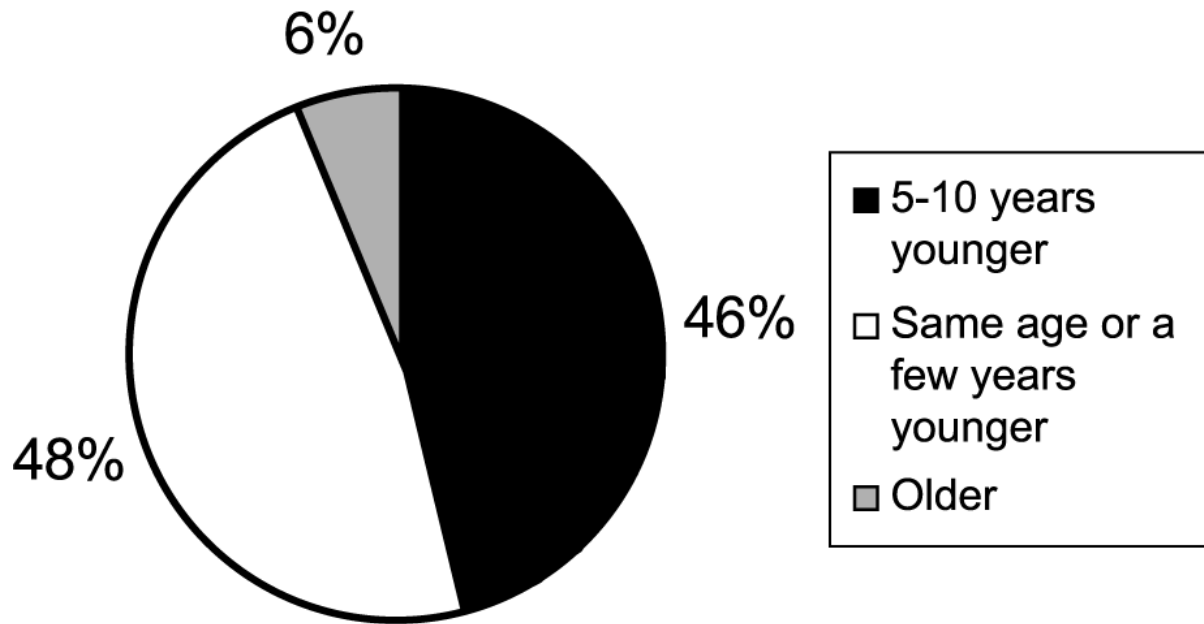


Figure 7 Interest age

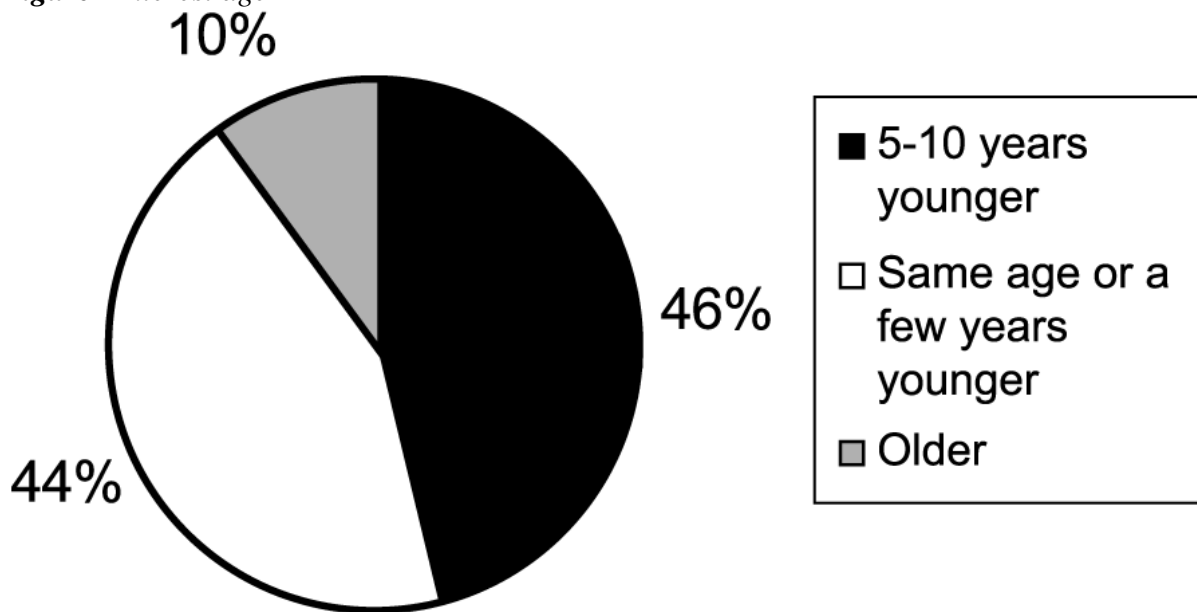


Figure 8 Think age

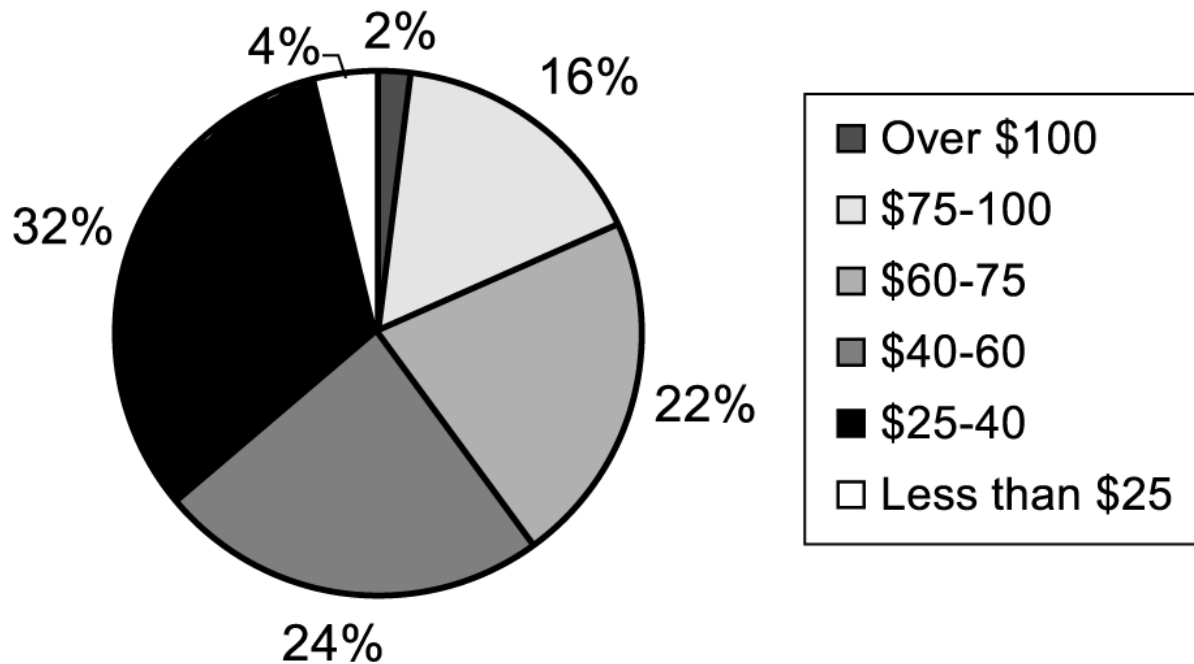


Figure 9 Athletic shoe purchase price

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