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This thesis attempts to illuminate the processes and understanding by which art directors at major (national/international) ad agencies attempt to reach target generational demographics, specifically Baby Boomers, Gen Xers and Gen Ys. Seven focus group sessions were conducted among members of these generations (2 for Boomers, 2 for Gen Xers and 3 for Gen Ys). These discussions were driven by a set of six print ads selected from magazines intended to target these respective generations. Participants were asked to critique the ads, and comments were compared among those the ad was intended to target and unintended target demos. The focus group findings were then used as a basis for qualitative interviews with six practicing ad agency professionals, among them art directors and creative directors with considerable experience.

The results indicate that many art directors practicing today do not have a clear understanding of the generations as market segments, and do not see them as discrete groups with unique identity traits with individual perspectives on advertising and media. While focus groups show a strong division of opinion of the generations toward advertising, art directors seem only intuitively aware of them, if at all.

The findings of this thesis support the notion that over the next 10 years art directors will find previously held beliefs about once-successful techniques and strategies challenged by the maturation of a generational cohort that does not respond to certain messages the way the previous generation did. If advertising creatives aren't (and don't make themselves) aware of the differences in attitudes among the generations, they are likely to make egregious assumptions about the appropriateness of advertising messages in the future.