



# The age of *age*

The argument for *more* and *better* representations  
of mid-life+ women in advertising

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# An Introduction\_

## Is gendered *ageism* the new *sexism* in advertising?

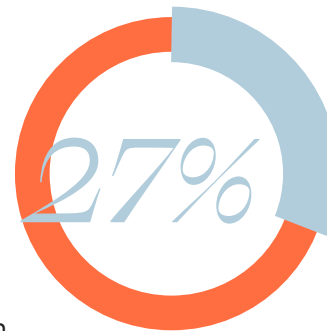
Is age the final diversity frontier for marketers? And is 2023 the year we finally grasp just how badly we've slipped up and double-down on fixing things?

We live in a culture that undervalues age and experience, and we operate in an industry obsessed to distraction with youth culture. In an effort to stay 'aspirational', we script ads in which mid-life+ women rarely feature or when and if they occasionally do, we consistently recruit younger women to play older women.

Is it any surprise that new research that we've undertaken here at CPB London reveals that as women in the UK age, they increasingly feel invisible to advertisers, with **six out of ten** of those over 55 saying there is a distinct lack of representation of older women in advertising?

## *six in ten* women over 55 feel invisible to advertisers

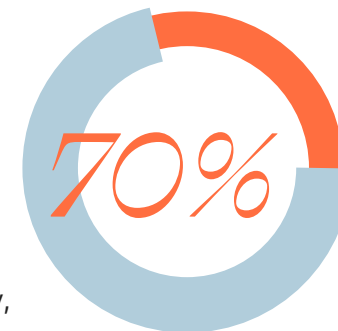
While we do not think for a minute that this neglectfulness is intentional – that would be pretty insane, given that women over age 50 account for **27% of all consumer spending** (that's 3% more than men of that age) – we do believe older women have been rendered invisible by cultural norms that the marketing industry has unthinkingly adopted.



Interested in the knotty intersection of marketing and gender as we are, and committed to getting marketing to women right for the long-haul, we wanted to dig into the **WHY**, serve up some pointers for

**WHAT NEXT** and share some thoughts on just how different marketing to mid-life+ women might look if we learn to do better.

The business imperative is clear: 70% of the UK's total wealth is **held** by those over 50 (the majority of which is predicted to be in **female hands** by 2025). As an industry, there's little doubt we're failing to resonate with most of those valuable consumers. But we're also failing to step up to the plate and be the change that the younger generation – those we so (over) value in marketing terms – expect brands to be when it comes to diversity and inclusion.



# Defining *mid-life+* Women

**1.** In the same way that generic 'women' should never be a distinct target audience, 'older women' or mid-life+ women is also by no means a homogenous group. Even before you get to intersectionality, this second act life stage spans a good 30+ years. Needs, hopes, and aspirations will and do all change within that large swath of time, significant shifts that marketers must remain mindful of if their brands are to have ongoing resonance.

**2.** However, for the purposes of highlighting women over 50's relative absence in marketing and advertising output – and validating so many women's stated sense of invisibility as a result – we believe there is value in framing things starkly by sometimes simply referring to 'mid-life+women.'

**3.** After all, a Nielsen report on Baby Boomer marketing as recently as 2016 described how typically, **"once a group of consumers reaches the so-called cut-off age of 49, marketers tend to go back to go."**

**4.** So, whether you're a 55-year-old empty nester, a 65-year-old new retiree or an 80-year-old marathon runner, you have, for many, already fallen off a metaphorical marketing cliff, and you and your fellow older women have done so collectively. Brutal it may be, but as the authors of Brandsplaining, Jane Cunningham and Philippa Roberts put it, as women age, the 'script fades, and so must they. A period of beigeness, dissolving into invisibility, begins.'

# 01\_Why?

To most of us, it's hardly news that marketers are under-targeting (or at least poorly targeting) women over 50.

That said, it's perhaps more relevant to ask,

## why *wouldn't* they be missing the mark?

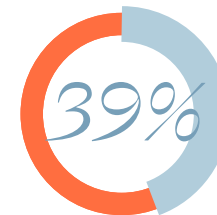
After all, so many intersecting factors are at play - society's negative perceptions around ageing as a whole, a lack of relevant data or at least the ability to turn that data into audience insight and, of course, the gender gap at the top of the marketing and advertising industry. Is it any wonder that examples of great marketing that targets older women are so few and far between?

For those examples to exist (and we were hard-pressed to think of more than perhaps five from recent years), credit is definitely due. Not least because the teams behind these campaigns will have had to overcome some if not all of the inhibiting factors below.

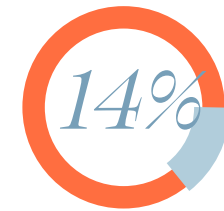
## The male gaze

Most of the narratives at the centre of marketing campaigns are still distinguished through the prism of the male gaze, with the viewpoints of heterosexual men accepted as the norm and the perspectives of all others largely ignored. While we've seen significant progress since the Mad Men days, there's still a long way to go. For instance, much has been made of the modern-day portrayals of 'real' women in certain ads, but in most instances, 'real' gets translated into a curvy body, a non-photoshopped face, or a sweaty workout scene. We need to move past the superficial to show a modern view of women - one she can relate to and that doesn't only talk to her body image. 'Real' should extend to women's emotions, aspirations, and experiences.

This male gaze that informs so much of marketing is, of course, hardly deliberate. Still, it is inevitable until a time when female marketers and content makers have an equal voice in senior decision-making. (Women hold less than 4 in 10 leadership roles in media and communications in the UK, while according to Creative Equals, only about 14% of London's creative directors are female.



Industry leadership roles held by UK women



Female creative directors in London

A large part of the answer lies in putting women at the heart of the story and storytelling process - so they themselves are creating more realistic depictions of women that, arguably, only a woman can. We need more female directors, more female creatives and more senior female marketing directors to help ensure we're reflecting back a multidimensional, complex, and frankly more interesting representation of women.

**"Too much advertising output is dominated by 'male lens' thinking; only valuing women for their fecundity and fanciability!"**

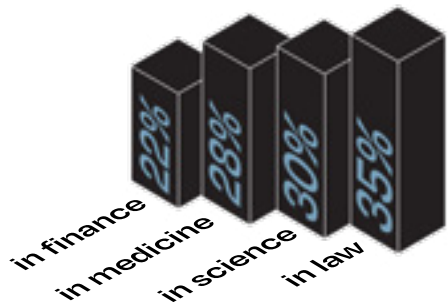
*Eleanor Mills, founder of [Noon](#)*

## An obsession with youth

Our industry's default position that

### youth = culture + creativity

means that today the over 50s represent just 6 per cent of the advertising community's workforce. (To put that in perspective, 22% of those in finance, 28% in medicine, 30% in science, and 35% in law are over 50.)



Overlay gender onto those stats, and you'll find the number of mid-life+ women in the most senior marcomms roles today is minuscule.

The generational make-up of our teams doesn't just reflect lazy ageism. More often than not, it demonstrates a fixation on the industry's dream target: the young. But while this concentration on younger demographics may have made sense decades ago when brand loyalty was a thing and advertising could create a customer for life – that kind of devotion is long gone. (And while we're at it, it's also time we stopped with the outdated notion that older female consumers will, in the right categories, find ads featuring millennial-aged actors aspirational. They won't.)

## The peach factor

We've all heard the analogy of men ageing like fine wine, while women are peaches – one wrinkle and you're past your sell-by date. Yes, ageing as a concept is not something that sits well with many of us in the West, male or female, but few would disagree that women have things particularly hard thanks to the accumulated effects of ageism and sexism and the automatic correlation of femininity with youthfulness. Just think of beauty brands' widespread use of the impossible term 'anti-ageing'. It won't come as a shock to hear that in our survey,

# 77%

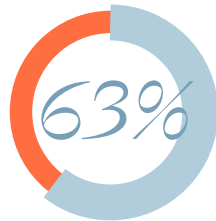
of women over 45 agreed that advertising contributes to the pressure to stay young (kudos here to The Body Shop for their September '22 relaunch of the brand's original 'Drops of Youth' best-seller, now rebranded as Edelweiss and any mention of 'anti-ageing' intentionally removed from product marketing.)

**"Ageing as a concept is not something that *sits well* with many of us in the *West*"**



## Stereotypes rule

When brands aren't too busy overlooking older women, they're often guilty of defaulting to lazy and inaccurate stereotyping. A survey of women last year showed that while 63% of respondents feel that younger females are portrayed positively by the ad industry, just 20% share that belief when it comes to older women's representation.



Respondents who feel that younger females are portrayed positively by the ad industry



Respondents who feel that older females are portrayed positively by the ad industry

Is it surprising that in our research, half of all women questioned said they wanted to see marketing that depicted women boldly breaking age stereotypes? Stereotypes like 'The Magical Grandmother' (in the kitchen serving food, smiling and supporting younger characters, with few spoken lines), one of seven female stereotypes that adland regularly falls back on – particularly if a script calls for an older character – according to shEqual, Australia's leading equality in advertising group. As Ali Hanan, the 50+ founder of Creative Equals, puts it,

"I'd like brands to not act like every woman who hits 50 is wetting herself all day long!

Or worrying that they actually look their age. And then it seems advertising then moves straight to funeral plans."

Female, 45-54

**"When we are portrayed, we're rarely seen in the way we truly are: *powerful, multi-faceted, trend-loving, fashion-forward.* We are healthy, wealthy and full of ambition. We are not just active but brand activists. Brands, try us, and we'll try you."**

# 02\_What Next Then



Understanding some of the reasons for how we've got here – a time and place in which two-thirds of women over 55 feel entirely invisible to advertisers, despite their disproportionate spending power – is one thing. Working out how to go some way to fix things is another. It can be daunting, there's no doubt, but here are five immediate things we can all think about:

## It's about stages, not ages

One of the reasons brands rely on depressing age tropes is because they're so focused on age itself. As marketers and advertisers, we're less likely to opt for plodding symbols and metaphors if, instead of thinking in terms of age and ageing, we think more about the course of life and the different stages along that course. While an essential part of segmentation, age-based generational marketing inevitably risks creating broad, overgeneralised and ineffective messaging and never was this truer than with the over 50s.

**The multidimensionality of the ageing process, let alone any intersectional factors, means that any marketing based purely on *chronological age* will always be suspect.**

The point is that far from disappearing into beige obscurity, women in their mid-life have many life stages yet to experience – the ups and downs of menopause, the prospect of more 'me' time if you're in a position to one day retire, and the joys of grand-parenting to name just some of the more obvious ones. Brands that take the time to research, gather insights, and demonstrate understanding of these life stages will win.

**"I dislike the term 'ageing gracefully' – brands don't actually want older women to look their age or act like they have any age-atypical interests because their idea of a "proper" older woman is quite narrow."**

*Female, 45-54*





## Team representation matters

# Bias, often of the *unconscious* kind, is at the core of stereotype creation.

Researchers also see bias in how we as humans categorise 'out-groups' (those we don't perceive ourselves as belonging to) and 'in-groups' (those we do). In particular, we think of out-group members as being very similar to each other, i.e. if you're younger, you're pretty likely to assume all older people share the same traits and characteristics. It's this fact that gives us insight into why the youth-dominated marketing and advertising industry generally fails when it comes to relatable, multidimensional, and varied portrayals of mid-life+ women. Because the audience is simply seen as 'other'.

This is when older women's potential to offer different points of view and contribute to brands and their agencies' creative thinking is invaluable. Over and over, we see data demonstrating that having diverse teams working on and indeed leading business boosts the bottom line.

And that's before you even get to the fact that as a brand or agency working specifically to target older women if there's literally no one on your team who embodies your target audience, how can anyone in that audience ever hope to see themselves in your marketing? The bottom line is that lived experience is crucial. If older women's hopes, worries, needs and aspirations are not on the personal radar of at least one key team member, you risk falling at the first hurdle.

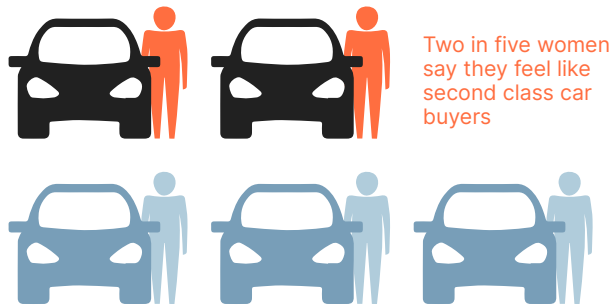
**"As a middle-aged woman, and later as I age, I don't want to feel 'different' to the rest of society!"**

*Female, 45-54*

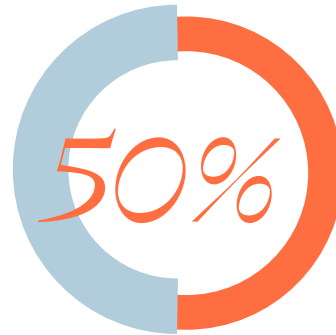
**How can anyone  
in that audience  
ever hope to see  
themselves in your  
*marketing?***

## Data is powerful (but insight is critical)

Industry research reveals that women have input into the final decisions on about eight out of every ten cars sold today, whether they are buying for themselves, as part of a couple or for a family. And yet, two in five female car buyers say they feel like second-class car buyers.



This factoid reminds us of an industry tale – an automotive brand that was certain it needed to focus on speaking to its male audience. So sure were they that the strategy conversations about the campaign direction and gender of the ideal target audience went on for months. Until the brand’s advertising team finally persuaded the client to let an AI choose the best target audience for the campaign (it was, unsurprisingly, women.) The result? A near 50% increase in leads from car buyers.

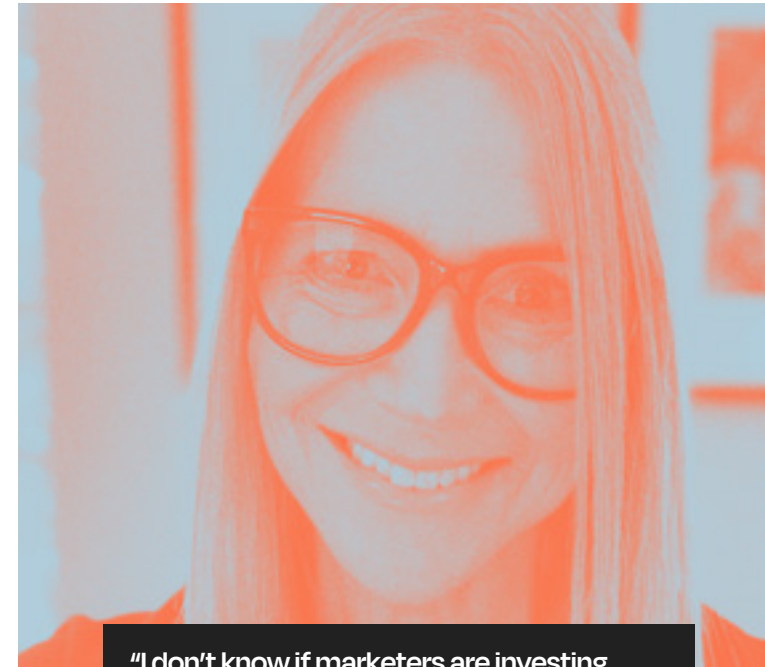


Increased sales leads after an AI opted for a female target audience

The interesting thing here is that an AI doesn't have

unconscious bias, so its finding was inevitable given the reality of women’s roles in car purchase choices. But as Caroline Criado-Perez has shown in her book ‘Invisible Women – Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men’, not all data is equal – a general lack of sex *and* age disaggregated data across industries and verticals means we really have very little insight into older women per se as a target audience.

Data is powerful, but insights understood through the lens of lived experience are even more powerful. Even when we invest in getting the data piece right, it’s the ability and the will to act on the emerging insights that ultimately make all the difference. But in an industry where mid-life+ female C-suite execs (but also product developers, strategists and creatives) are so thin on the ground, this doesn’t always happen. Indeed, in our discussions with brand marketers, we’ve heard plenty of examples of male or younger female decision-makers failing to understand the rich mid-life+ insights they’ve been served.



“I don’t know if marketers are investing enough in understanding what women in their 50s are truly going to respond to. But to take things a step further - I also don’t know how many men are able to understand the insights that relate to older women, and run with them.”

Jo Martin, CMO, Dreams

# What if we started with *resonance* and held firm when it came to *anxieties* about limited reach?



## Resonance vs Reach

Advertising campaigns start with reach and end with a hope for reaction, but in between sits all-important resonance. It's fair to say that if close to two-thirds of British women over the age of 55 feel invisible, then marketers are most definitely failing to reach this valuable demographic. What if we started with resonance and held firm when it came to anxieties about limited reach? And what about brands who are perhaps less concerned with niche targeting but live in fear of alienating their younger audiences if they actively associate themselves with older consumers' wants and needs? (FOMO, or Fear of Marketing Old as we say.)

**"Aging is something unique and different for everyone; people should not have to be pressured by society/media/corporations to pander to a quasi-norm that makes people purchase products to try to stay young."**

*Male, 18 – 24*



While the risks and rewards will vary across categories, of course, L'Oréal's 2019 partnership with Vogue magazine on the 'Non-Issue' issue, created for and by women aged 50+ provides some interesting learnings: the issue in question outsold the regular September magazine, with L'Oréal stating that by championing female empowerment among older women, the brand cemented its relevance in the hearts of progressive women in their 30s. (A fact that chimes with findings from our own research, revealing that it's young men and women aged 18-24 who most want to see women breaking age stereotypes in advertising.)

**"Gen Z is hugely aware and determined to hold themselves, society and brands to account for bias and stereotyping... for them, age simply isn't as divisive as it may have been. In Gen Z's eyes, we're all global citizens and deserve equal representation"**

*Dr Sarah Welsh, co-founder, HANX*

## The importance of intersectionality

Gendered ageism is by default an example of intersectionality - how various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other -

**because women moving into midlife and beyond face a double whammy of *ageism* and *sexism*.**

But the whammies, of course, keep coming if you're an older woman of colour, LGBTQ+, dealing with disability and so forth. Suffice it to say not all women over 50 experience day-to-day life similarly.

Thankfully modern marketing increasingly incorporates a contemporary and more nuanced approach to reaching marginalised groups, with an Ipsos 2021 study on the impact of intersectionality on UK advertising, carried out on behalf of The Unstereotype Alliance,

demonstrating clear value in adopting an intersectional lens: it benefits advertisers (by leading underrepresented individuals to feel closer to the advertised brands), and it benefits society (by providing psychological benefits to traditionally-excluded audiences).

One of the exciting findings in the research, which tracks back to the point above about the need for resonance among older female consumers, despite the fear of alienating other segments of the population, is that advertising that holds up a mirror to consumers who usually don't see themselves in ads seems to have no negative impact on the relationships between brands and other consumers.

This finding reminds us of an anecdote about a retail brand looking to speak to middle-aged shoppers. The resulting creative - which featured a band of merry female wild swimmers - was joyful, fresh, and hit the mark with women aged 60+. However, it didn't hit the mark with many older men in testing. In fact, they actively disliked the ad. But the brand bravely took the decision to run it, not only because it performed exceptionally well with the target, but also because it was the right thing to do to shine a light on an often under and misrepresented group.



# 03\_ Can we reframe ageing?

If, as many of our industry's critics claim, marketing contributes to negative perceptions of female ageing, then it begs the question, with new-found insight, more gender and age-balanced decision-making teams and a healthy dose of bravery,

**can we help flip the script, and recast ageing as something valuable, to be celebrated?**

"I'd love brands to show older people living amazing and fulfilled lives, active, modern and looking forward to the future. Older people appreciate and enjoy life so much and are invaluable resources for a younger generation to learn from."

*Female, 45-54*

While our industry didn't invent gendered ageism, the unfeasibly young talent we often choose for our campaigns, the exceptional-looking celebrity spokespeople, and the relentless default to Gen Z imagery can undoubtedly work together to reinforce it. Set that against the backdrop of a society whose members are deeply uncomfortable about their own mortality and thus inclined to 'other' anyone who doesn't tick the youthful box, and you find yourself precisely where we are today, despite our growing sense that both ageism and gender roles ought to be things of the past.

To be clear, the challenge is not insignificant – we're not talking about changing the way we talk about ageing (from anti-ageing to age-defying or ageless, for example, each of which is just a slightly less non-sensical spin on its previous incarnation, of course) but helping to change fundamental perspectives on ageing. From shifting the notion of growing older as an inevitable decline to instead a dynamic process that leads to new abilities and knowledge, from fighting the signs of ageing to focusing on feeling good at any age and from retiring from work life to the building of new life stages.

**"Beauty is not an age-driven concept. There is beauty in many things that cause fine lines and wrinkles over time, like laughing, eating outside in the sun with friends, smiling, raising children, and healing from trauma. So, ageing is not beauty leaving the body. It is beauty swelling within."**

*Skincare influencer, Cassandra Bankson*



**In summary**, times are changing, tides are turning, and the younger generation expects us to keep up. Media and advertising have incredible power to change how people think about gender roles and ageism and, at the same time, to help shape how we view one another. Next time we think about how we engage with our mid-life+ audiences, we have an opportunity to decide if we lazily replay social stereotypes via our campaigns or opt to reimagine things for the better.

In their own ways, marketing and advertising have contributed much to the considerable shifts in attitude we've seen around race, disability and sexual orientation.

# Isn't it time we now also help move the needle on gendered *ageism?*





# Thank *you!*

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