



Ageism in Media

October 2024

Background

As media professionals, we're always on the hunt for the newest platforms, the hottest trends, the cultural forces at play. And as an industry, we assume these are largely driven by the youngest generation on the horizon. Yesterday, that was Millennials. Today, it's Gen Z. Tomorrow, Gen Alpha. Inherent in this youth-centric approach is the assumption that Americans age out of media.

But across so many platforms and properties, we see virtually identical engagement from Gen Z and Boomers.

Usage within the past 30 days

Gen Z		Boomers
20%	Pinterest	20%
70%	YouTube	50%
20%	Pandora	20%
50%	Amazon Prime	50%
54%	Facebook	62%
20%	Peacock+	20%

Sources: MRI, ComScore

As part of our Connections Series (an ongoing exploration into how media is modernizing and morphing), we sought to reexamine what we think we know about Americans over 55, and design a media experience better suited to the needs of everyone.



Methodology

To pressure test our cultural assumptions about age and media, we analyzed 1st and 3rd party data on digital engagement and layered on custom survey data from 1000 Americans ranging in age from 15 to 80+. In this report, we debunk three common myths we've found in our research about how audiences over 55 engage with media and offer better ways to create resonance across generations.

We specifically looked to explore these consumers' impact on (1) future business outcomes, (2) digital engagement and (3) culture.

Short on time, take a look at our [TL;DR](#) wrap-up for the highlights.

The over-50 segment is expected to grow

3x

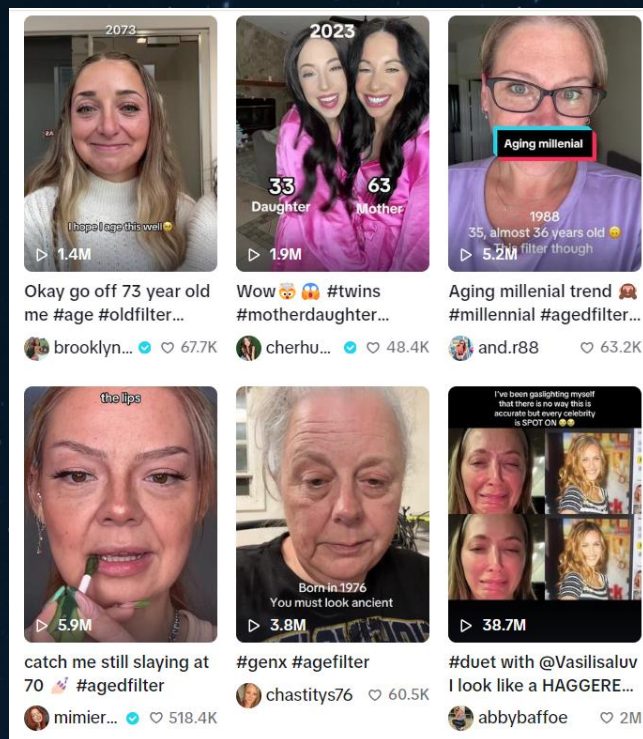
faster than A18-49 from now until 2030.
(Source: Epsilon)

A60+ are the only ones to have ramped up spending in the last year, making up

40%

of the nation's spending in 2023.

(Source: Bank of America)



Youth Obsession

The TikTok aging filter introduced last year uses AI to imagine how someone will look as they age. How people have used the filter highlights how negative our cultural associations are with the aging process. The landscape is littered with posts lamenting a loss of beauty and implying people become irrelevant after a certain age.

52%

respondents A60+ said they like seeing people their age in ads, but were half as likely as Millennials and Gen Z to say brands do a good job speaking to their age group.

(Starcom Proprietary Study)

Myth 1 Audience

Future proofing your brand means going all in on Gen Z.

The Perception

It's often Marketing 101 to design for the future consumer. In 2024's case, that means Gen Z. But for many brands, that has come to *only* mean Gen Z. The idea is that designing for these next-gen (and already current-gen) consumers doesn't alienate older consumers, because Gen Z drives the culture and trends that impact them as well.

The Reality

In 2022, the median age of an American reached an all-time high of 39-years-old—a nine-year increase over the median age in 1980, when the first Millennials were being born (Source: US Census Bureau). And for global brands, the same is true in many other markets as well: The world as a whole is aging.

This demographic change and the last half-century of economics mean Americans over age 60 hold the vast majority of the country's disposable income. Furthermore, they are projected to control discretionary spending for the next five to ten years (Source: Visa).

The Consequence

Even as the speed of cultural change seems to move faster every year, our aging population will probably mean our audience targets won't shift as rapidly in the future. While speaking to audiences under 30 is indeed important to build a strong next-gen consumer base, their parents' generation will continue to be critical to driving sales volume for decades to come. In other words, current audiences are *also* future audiences. Deprioritizing them isn't future proofing your brand.

Myth 2 Engagement

Older generations aren't digitally engaged.

The Perception

If you spend 30 seconds on r/oldpeoplefacebook, it's pretty clear we assume aging and digital spaces don't mix. There's misused slang, tonally confusing memes, misinformation, and lack of mastery over basic tech functionality. As a culture, we treat people over 55 like tech dinosaurs. There are some reasons to feel this way: In our Caregiving report, we noticed one of the main ways people aided their parents and grandparents was with tech support.

The Reality

Smartphones have been around since 2007, which means the average Boomer has been using one for a decade and a half. While it might be true that adopting new technology gets harder as you age, people in their 60s and beyond are in fact not living under a metaphorical rock. They're engaging on social media (and yes, even TikTok), and are quite likely to be early tech adopters since they're tend to have the discretionary income to spend on expensive new gear. They shop online, they bank online, they socialize online. In fact, our survey results showed that Boomers and Gen Z were equally likely to say they struggle to keep up with new technology.

39%

of survey respondents A60+ said they like to keep up to date on the latest tech .

(Starcom Proprietary Study)

40%

of Gen Z respondents said they like said they worry about the pace of tech change

(Starcom Proprietary Study)

The Consequences

Assuming people over 60 aren't tech savvy can result in media plans with too much linear TV, digital creative that doesn't serve the needs of Gen X and Boomer consumers, and in some categories, ignoring these valuable cohorts altogether.



Computer Confusion

Congressional hearings with social media companies and tech companies have highlighted a grave misunderstanding on the part of some Congressmen over 60 of how technology works.

1M

Boomers in the US are expected to start using TikTok within the next year. They join the 13% of them that already do.

(Source: eMarketer)



Granfluencers

Irvin Randle (@irvinrandle, age 62) and Helena Van Winkle (@badiewinkle, age 96) are two of a whole generation of so-called "granfluencers": people over 60 proving that they know how to work social media just as well as the kids. And brands are noticing. Randle has partnered with brands like Fashion Nova, and Van Winkle released a custom line of cosmetics with Sephora. These partnerships show just how technologically engrained not just these A60+ Americans are, but also their A60+ followers as well.



Age Diverse Casting

When then-50-year-old actress Monica Bellucci became the oldest Bond girl ever in 2015, it made headlines. In the nearly decade since, movies and TV shows have started to embrace the reality that there is in fact demand for age diversity in the people we cast and the stories we tell. Case in point: *The Golden Bachelor* managed to capture the attention of Gen Z and Millennials despite featuring no cast members in their age group.

52%

of respondents A60+ said they like seeing people their age in media.

(Starcom Proprietary Study)

57%

of people say they're interested in shows and movies about people older than them.

(Starcom Proprietary Study)



Boomer Trendsetters

Octogenarian Taiwanese laundromat owners Wan-Ji Chang and Sho-Er Hsu became globally famous by posting pictures of themselves on Instagram of clothing people left behind at their business. The vast majority of their fans are younger than 40, and their success celebrates the continued cultural relevance of people over 60.

Myth 3 Relevance

Gen Z doesn't want Boomer content.

The Myth

Hidden among "Okay, Boomer" memes and the already-outdated term "cheugy," is the assumption that Gen Z isn't interested in seeing or hearing from anyone older than them in culture. It's why the term "generation gap" exists, and why it's "cringe" to hear someone over 50 saying "rizz."

The Reality

Human stories are human stories, no matter the age. For many Gen Z and Millennial Americans, influencers older than them provide a kind of authenticity and realness they struggle to find elsewhere. Boomer influencers in fashion, fitness and food are showing them a version of life and aging that feels optimistic and encouraging as opposed to other content they see online.

The Consequences

Many brands assume they should stay away from imagery and messaging relevant to audiences over 60 in case it alienates their coveted 20-somethings. What they're actually often doing is alienating the 20-year-olds *and* 60-year-olds alike. And for certain campaigns and brands that are seeking to establish authenticity, influencers and images of people over 60 might paradoxically be *more* resonant even for Gen Z targets.

Younger audiences are also proving to be particularly sensitive to the question of diversity. And while brands have historically taken that to mean gender and racial diversity, age diversity and visibility for disabled folks (which intersects with age) matter to Gen Z, too. Showing a variety of ages' experiences can help build authenticity for the message and inclusivity for the brand.

So What?

It's clear embracing Americans over 55 is prudent for brands moving forward. And doing so can go a long way in actually improving relevance and engagement with younger Americans as well. We see age inclusivity having two specific positive impacts with audiences of *all* ages:

Authenticity

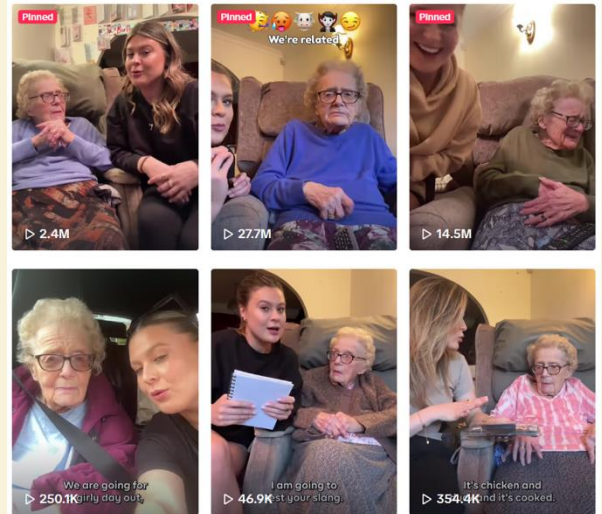
In our 2024 Trends and Refresh reports, we spoke at length about the new ways people are bending the definition of “authentic.” But sometimes, what signals “legit” to Gen Z is people who have a lifetime of experience living their truths. Finding non-patronizing and fresh ways to incorporate older people can be a good way to show earnest authenticity that jaded Gen Z craves.

“You can learn a lot from older people. They have experienced a lot of stuff that can help you out, or keep you from making the same mistakes that they made when they were younger.”

-Survey Respondent, Gen Z

Community & Diversity

Throughout our survey, we repeatedly heard respondents say interacting with other generations was important to building strong relationships and community. For brands seeking to engage with existing communities and create ones of their own, age diversity can help build necessary cross-generational connections. Furthermore, all generations are indicating to us that age diversity is important for them as a value they'd like to see brands embrace. In our survey, it was second only to race/ethnicity as the type of diversity people thought was most important to represent. This is even more salient in multicultural audiences where multigenerational households are common and fostering connection between generations is culturally valued.



Cross-Gen Content

Grandparent-grandchild accounts like @jessandnoma have cultivated millions of followers who appreciate the wholesome vibes of multigenerational love and connection. Elsewhere on the internet, Pete & Bas, a UK-based rap duo in their 70s, perform high-production rap music with the (not visible) help of their grandkids. And 26-year-old @jaadiee built a 5.2M following by photographing his grandfather wearing his streetwear and sneakers.



Slowing Down Is For Everyone

Taco Bell opened The Cantinas this summer, a weekend experience giving people of all ages the chance to enjoy the relaxed life of a luxury retirement community. With stereotypically “retiree” activities like shuffleboard and pickleball on offer, they showed not only that people of *all* ages like the many of the same things, but that this slower pace of life embodies what they mean when their brand says to “live Más.” This activation echoes the same sentiment underlying the FIRE movement: an increasing number of Millennials and Gen Zers who adopt extreme saving and investment strategies in order to achieve this retiree lifestyle as soon as possible.

What This Means For Brands

America as a whole isn’t just getting older: We are at the precipice of a generational shift for A60+. This group, once defined by the Boomer generation, is on the cusp of including Gen X in its ranks as well. This also means a shift in our culture’s (already incorrect) assumptions about what being of retirement age looks like and means. As this shift continues, brands will need to maintain resonance with these A60+ audiences even while building relevance with the next generation of consumers. Embracing age diversity allows brands to resonate with the 60+ audiences that will continue to drive large portions of their sales without alienating Gen Z who will one day take the mantle.

Furthermore, audiences of all ages are signaling to us that there are certain parts of both aging and youth that feel universally relevant. To many consumers, age is a number that doesn’t reflect how they truly feel. In our survey, we saw teenagers gravitating toward a slower pace of life more stereotypically associated with retirees, and we saw Boomers with a social calendars to rival any college kid’s. And indeed, our survey showed many places where the attitudes and perceptions of Gen Z actually most closely mirrored those of Boomers.



Here’s how embracing age diversity can (and has) come to life across industries:

Fashion & Beauty

People have been rejecting the idea that beauty is synonymous with youth for a few years now. There’s been increased publicity for celebrities and brands that forego airbrushing and Botox in favor of capturing the way faces and bodies naturally age. We highlighted this in our 2024 Trends Refresh, where we described a movement toward removing filters that hide signs of aging. Brands in this space that use Gen X and Boomer models are still capturing the hearts of Millennials and Gen Z.

Tech

Implicit in our second debunked myth is the idea that adults over 55 are not a priority segment for the tech industry—an assumption that excludes large swaths of their potential consumer base. But these Americans often have the discretionary income to spend on expensive tech gadgets. When brands highlight the features and use cases most relevant to this audience, they even have the potential to become early adopters. Amazon, for example, has focused a lot of messaging on how their Echo can improve connectivity and independence for Americans over 55.

Healthcare

In healthcare, where people over 55 have long been a priority, America’s changing demographics will create a drastic change in supply and demand. Demand will increase swiftly for products and services needed to support the mental and physical health of people as they age, but supply will take longer to adjust. Things like senior housing, an eldercare nursing workforce, and treatment options for conditions that disproportionately impact Americans over 55 will take a while to meet demand. And if demographics shift again, the investment we’ve made in healthcare infrastructure for A55+ will need to pivot and be repurposed.

Entertainment

As new streaming options and social platforms pop up, our content options have gotten increasingly diverse. This has allowed people to find their content niches, but has also facilitated echo chambers and disinformation, particularly among Americans over 55. In our current media ecosystem, we don’t *have* to create content that is age diverse in order to find an audience, but doing so might help combat some of the more challenging and isolating consequences of media proliferation.

Birthday Buddies

What do Sandra Bullock, Lenny Kravitz, Stephen Colbert, Marisa Tomei, Rob Lowe, Kamala Harris and Keanu Reeves all have in common? They turned 60 in 2024, and remain culturally dominant across all age groups. As Gen Z continues to keep *Friends* in the zeitgeist, Courteney Cox turns 60 too. Being over 60 today really highlights that age can be just a number.



Smashing Stereotypes

Dove’s recent campaign is taking the derogatory notion that Dove soap is “for grandmothers,” and spinning that around to celebrate how being a grandmother is a badge of honor, not an insult. They feature 10 grandmothers defying stereotypes by how they dress, the hobbies they pursue, and the way they live their lives.



Early Adopters

Apple has recently focused heavily on adults over 55 when marketing their smart watches. Touting an array of features that help people maintain independence and physical safety as they age, they hope to convert an oft-overlooked demographic in the industry.

What This Means For Media

Audience Targeting

America as a whole isn't just getting older: We are at the precipice of a generational shift for A55+. This group, once defined by the Boomer generation, is beginning to include Gen X in its ranks as well. This also means a shift in our culture's (already incorrect) assumptions about what being of retirement age looks like and means. As this shift continues, brands will need to maintain resonance with these A55+ audiences even while building relevance with the next generation of consumers. Embracing age diversity allows brands to resonate with the 55+ audiences that will continue to drive large portions of their sales without alienating Gen Z who will one day take the mantle.

Channel Planning

It's clear that pretty much *all* generations are digitally engaged at this point. Allocating a significant portion of the media budget for audiences over 55 to places like social is not a nice-to-have. It's a must. But it's not enough to just show up. Brands will need to explore what true relevance and resonance on digital channels looks like for audiences over 55, and the ways in which to use these spaces to celebrate age diversity, not just check a box.

Experience Design

Furthermore, audiences of all ages are signaling to us that there are certain parts of both aging and youth that feel universally relevant. To many consumers, age is a number that doesn't reflect how they truly feel. In our survey, we saw teenagers gravitating toward a slower pace of life more stereotypically associated with retirees, and we saw Boomers with a social calendars to rival any college kid's. And indeed, our survey showed many places where the attitudes and perceptions of Gen Z actually most closely mirrored those of Boomers.

62%

of people over 60 feel ads have an unrealistic representation of people their age, and 47% say they reinforce outdated stereotypes.

(Source: AARP)

4%

of people appearing in global ads are over the age of 60.

(Source: CreativeX)



Inclusive Luxury

For many luxury brands in particular, brand perception hinges on Gen Z, but sales come from wealthier cohorts older than them. Beauty brand La Mer has found success using models over 60 like Michelle Yeoh to signal representation to Boomer and Gen X customers, and inclusivity to Millennials and Gen Z.

TL ; DR

Our research showed many of our cultural assumptions of how Americans over 55 engage with trends and media are misguided at best. Gen X and Boomers are an important consumer demographic, and want brands to be inclusive of them and their needs. We saw this come to light in our survey data in three specific ways:

Audience: Americans over 55 will remain an important part of the consumer base for pretty much every industry for the foreseeable future.

Engagement: In 2024, pretty much *all* Americans are digitally engaged—not just the ones under 30. And as a result, people of any age can become vital influencers and drivers of culture.

Relevance: Contrary to conventional logic, featuring imagery, casting, and messaging relevant to people over 55 doesn't alienate Gen Z. And in some cases, young adults actively seek out content featuring voices and perspectives more mature than them.

As we continue to pursue diverse and inclusive media strategies, age diversity will need to be a priority for all the brands we serve.

What Next?

It's clear Americans over 55 still have an important voice in the future of the brands we represent. And yet our research showed nearly half of respondents in that age range feel brands only cater to younger people.

At Starcom, we are committed to finding ways to connect to *all* generations through media, and this starts with recalibrating our expectations of how Gen X and Boomer Americans engage with it.

For more information on how we are rethinking our clients' understanding and use of media, stay tuned for future installments of our Connections Series.

