Daniel Jolles   Claudia Vaccarone   June 2nd, 2025

Featuring grey hair, but not really including older workers

As attitudes towards ageing evolve, some brands are beginning to feature older models in their marketing campaigns. However, this is often a superficial shift that may be perceived as "greywashing" — when advertisements publicly promote age inclusivity while internal practices are far from inclusive. **Daniel Jolles** *and* **Claudia Vaccarone** *argue that a disconnect between purpose-driven messaging and actual practice undermines consumer trust.*

As longevity increases and populations age, wealth is increasingly concentrated in the hands of older consumers. The proportion of people aged 50 and above is expected to rise from 25 per cent today to 41 per cent by 2040. Yet despite this demographic shift, marketing efforts have consistently neglected this audience. Brands are failing to align their advertising investment to the demographic reality in both the size and the relative spending power of this growing group of older consumers. Older adults are heavily underrepresented in advertisements, accounting for just four per cent of people featured in media campaigns.

Myths behind age exclusion

Three key myths underpin the neglect of older adults in advertising:

- (False) assumptions about technophobia or lack of online engagement among older consumers

- Belief that 50+ audiences are "youth-centric" and equally responsive to the same messaging as younger consumers

- Belief that older consumers are too savings-oriented and uninterested in the marketplace

These myths have been able to persist due to the lack of age diversity in advertising and media professions themselves. In the UK, the average age for creative workers is 35 years old. Despite

professionals aged 50+ representing one third of the working population overall, they make up just seven per cent of advertising professionals and creatives. This has left brands vulnerable to missed opportunities and contributed to a lack of authentic representation of older adults in advertising.

When older adults are featured, it is often to perpetuate ageist stereotypes—portraying them as incapable, obsolete, or "doddery but dear". A 2024 LinkedIn campaign showed older parents struggling to explain their children's IT jobs with the tagline: *"Your mum thinks cloud sales is a weather forecast"*.

Last year's Kia Super Bowl commercial featured a young figure skater performing for her housebound grandfather, and while the ad can be seen as a tale of family bonding rather than anything overtly ageist, the premise still rests on the older character's incapacity.

Meanwhile, major beauty brands like L'Oréal and Nivea often portray older celebrities and models as sleek, youthful ambassadors for anti-aging products. The unreasonable standards set by these ads through lighting and post-production techniques have previously led to ads being banned. The message, however, is clear: ageing is something to be fought, avoided or airbrushed rather than embraced.

New attitudes, same old behaviours

More recently, brands have begun to row back on their "neglect" of older consumers, particularly for premium products. The late Dame Maggie Smith fronted Loewe's 2024 spring pre-collection campaign at 88 years of age. Last year's BMW Super Bowl campaign starred Christopher Walken (81), while a previous campaign paired Arnold Schwarzenegger (77) and Salma Hayek (58) as Greek gods, lampooning retirement stereotypes.

At 78, actor Brian Cox stepped into a role usually reserved for athletes at their peak, as the face of major sportswear brand ASICS. At the same time, activists and celebrities such as Jamie Lee Curtis and Helen Mirren—the face of L'Oréal's "Age Perfect" and campaigner against the caveat "you look good… for your age"—are fighting "anti-age" language and labelling.

There are signs that within this shift, not all that glitters is silver. Purpose-driven marketing, aimed to develop deeper connections with consumers based on values and social issues, has become more central to brand strategies. It has also blurred the lines between product and the social values that the company claims to uphold. Ben & Jerry's ice cream *"made of something better"*, Patagonia's *"don't buy this jacket"* or Whole Foods' *"grow up strong and harmless"* are popular examples.

Yet the practice is not without risk. Brands can become vulnerable when public sentiment moves on or they fail to live up to the values they promote. Brands that had previously promoted their DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion) credentials are abruptly rolling back commitments amid US government pushback.

For nearly 40 years, consumer protection organisations have called out "greenwashing"—the practice of making outsized claims about sustainability while maintaining questionable environmental records. BP, for example, faces legal complaints for "misleading" advertising regarding its low-carbon commitments. PepsiCo and Coca-Cola also stand accused of misrepresenting the recyclability and environmental impact of their packaging.

Like environmental protection, age inclusion is a purpose that resonates with many consumers— after all, aging is a universal experience. In December last year, L'Oréal featured a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times* to promote its "For All Generations" employment initiative, boasting that it employs "more than 13,000 employees over the age of 50".

At first glance, this seems like a commendable effort to promote age inclusivity in the workplace, and the campaign has received substantial praise from anti-ageism advocates. But a closer look reveals a troubling gap between messaging and reality. L'Oréal has 90,000 employees globally, which means that the 13,000 employees over the age of 50 make up around 15 per cent of their workforce.

Yet, in the US and Europe—regions that account for a sizable proportion of the company's global workforce and profits—workers aged 50+ represent more than one third of the workforce (35 per cent in the US, and 34 per cent in Europe). If L'Oréal were achieving "better than average" employment of older workers, they would boast more than 30,000 employees over the age of 50, not a mere 13,000.

This highlights the gap between what the brand says and what it achieves. This "graywashing' promotes age-friendly credentials that are not backed up by employment figures. It feels especially egregious when the brand's "anti-age" labels and products have traditionally formed its *raison d'être*, placing pressure on women of all ages to conceal their aging from others.

The path forward

Brands currently have an opportunity to engage authentically with a powerful and growing segment of consumers aged 50 and over. But, as for any other segment, this requires genuine understanding. To avoid "graywashing" and build purposeful connections, consumer brands and advertising agencies should:

1. **Acknowledge underrepresentation transparently.** Had L'Oréal framed its initiative as a step forward—saying, for instance, "13,000 employees over the age of 50 and counting"—it could have closed the gap between the message and the reality.

2. **Ensure proportional representation of 50+ talent in decision-making roles.** Intergenerational teams for products as well as marketing allows brands to benefit from real (rather than speculative) perspectives.

3. **Design products and services that meet the needs of older consumers,** instead of selling them false promises.

4. **Depict older adults authentically in campaigns,** celebrating the multiple and intersectional ways that age manifests.

Creating authentic, purpose-driven connections with older consumers can help brands tap into an under-served, lucrative market and help create a society that values people of all ages.

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About the author

Daniel Jolles

Daniel Jolles (PhD) is a behavioural scientist for The Inclusion Initiative at LSE. In his research, he focuses on applying behavioural science to questions of workplace ageing to help organisations create productive, multigenerational and inclusive workforces.
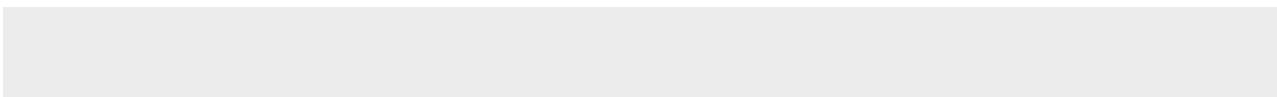
Claudia Vaccarone

Claudia Vaccarone is a media and inclusion strategist who has spent two decades reshaping how stories are told and unpacking biased representation. From satellites to streaming, newsrooms to boardrooms, she blends data, culture, and advocacy to help global organisations craft content that reflects the world as it truly is.

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