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Navigating Ageism: The Role of Professional Identity among Older Professionals in the Marketing Industry

Abstract

This study examines how older marketing professionals interpret, negotiate, and respond to ageism within a rapidly evolving, youth-oriented industry. Although previous research has documented the persistence of age-related stereotypes, such as presumed declines in adaptability, digital competence, or creativity, less is known about how older marketers themselves make sense of these assumptions in their daily work and how their professional identity shapes these interpretations. Addressing this gap, the study explores the lived experiences of eight marketing managers aged 40 and above, each with more than 20 years of industry experience, to understand how age-based expectations, cultural norms, and organisational practices influence their careers.

Using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis guided by Braun and Clarke's framework, the findings reveal that ageism in marketing tends to manifest subtly rather than overtly. Participants rarely identified explicit discrimination; instead, they described normalised pressures to maintain a youthful appearance, keep pace with technological change, and avoid roles socially coded as "young," such as digital content creation or social media management. These dynamics were closely linked to broader cultural narratives within marketing, where youthfulness is symbolically associated with innovation, trend awareness, and digital fluency.

Social identity theory provides an important lens for understanding these patterns. A strong professional identity that is built on expertise, accumulated achievements, and commitment, appeared to buffer participants against some negative effects of ageism by supporting confidence and legitimacy. However, the same identity processes also contributed to the invisibility of ageism: participants often reframed discriminatory assumptions as natural elements of the profession rather than as bias, thus unintentionally reinforcing organisational norms.

The study contributes to theoretical discussions by showing how individual meaning-making interacts with structural and symbolic forms of ageism, shaping both experiences and interpretations of workplace bias. From a managerial perspective, the findings highlight the importance of recognising age diversity, challenging age-coded assumptions about competence, and fostering open dialogue about age norms within organisations. The study's limitations, including a small, homogeneous sample of leaders in marketing management point to future research directions, such as examining non-leadership roles and applying intersectional approaches to understand how age interacts with gender and appearance norms in marketing.

Keywords: Ageism, Marketing Professionals, Social Identity theory, Workplace Stereotypes

Introduction and objective

Ageism has become an increasingly salient form of workplace inequality, particularly in industries characterised by rapid technological change and a youth-oriented professional culture. Marketing is one such field, where innovation cycles, digital platform proficiency, and shifting consumption behaviours create strong expectations for employees to remain "current" and adaptable (Barker, 2019). While ageism affects workers across sectors, its manifestations in marketing remain insufficiently understood, especially from the perspective of experienced professionals who must continually negotiate their relevance within younger teams and trend-driven organisational environments.

Although prior research documents age-related stereotypes, such as assumptions of reduced technological competence, lower adaptability, or diminished motivation among older workers (Ng & Feldman, 2012; Posthuma & Campion, 2009), much less is known about how older marketing professionals interpret and navigate these stereotypes in their daily work. Existing studies on ageism within advertising and marketing (e.g., Barker, 2019; Windels et al., 2024) primarily focus on structural industry patterns, hiring biases, or younger-centred creative cultures. What remains underexplored is how professional identity shapes older marketers' experiences - whether it protects against ageism, renders discriminatory practices invisible, or influences how individuals rationalise or normalise age-based assumptions.

This study addresses this gap by examining how marketing professionals aged 40+ with over two decades of industry experience perceive ageism, make sense of workplace expectations, and maintain their professional identity within a rapidly evolving field. It aims to highlight not only overt forms of age-related bias but also subtle, internalised, and normalised dynamics that may go unnoticed by both employees and organisations. By focusing on identity, meaning making, and lived experience, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of ageism in marketing and provides groundwork for future studies that include additional dimensions such as gender or career stage.

Theoretical framework

Research on ageism consistently shows that stereotypes about older workers remain deeply embedded in organisational cultures, often shaping expectations long before any observable performance differences emerge. However, empirical findings challenge much of what is commonly assumed about ageing and work behaviour. For example, despite the widespread belief that younger employees are more motivated or technologically capable, meta-analytical evidence suggests that age is positively associated with motivation and engagement (Ng & Feldman, 2012). Similarly, long-standing assumptions that older workers resist change, distrust colleagues, or struggle with work–life balance lack empirical support. These misconceptions persist not because they describe actual performance differences, but because they are culturally reinforced and taken for granted within organisations.

One stereotype with partial empirical support concerns participation in training and self-development, where older employees show a slightly lower likelihood of engaging in formal career advancement activities (Posthuma & Campion, 2009). Yet even this relationship is weak, and scholars argue that opportunity structures, such as organisational investment, perceived career prospects, or managerial attitudes, play a substantial role in shaping developmental engagement (Picchio, 2015; Murphy & DeNisi, 2022). Thus, attributing skill gaps or limited training participation solely to age risks overlooking structural influences.

Within marketing, these stereotypes intersect with the rapid technological evolution of the field, strengthening assumptions that digital proficiency or trend awareness naturally declines with age. The literature suggests that such assumptions can push older professionals out of roles coded as "youthful," such as digital or social media marketing (Batinovic et al., 2023). At the same time, marketing work actively reproduces age stereotypes through representational practices: older consumers often appear in limited or negative portrayals in advertising (Eisend, 2022), reinforcing broader cultural narratives about ageing and competence. This circular relationship between industry practice and internal workplace culture mirrors broader patterns of social stereotyping.

To understand how older marketers interpret and respond to these expectations, social identity theory provides a useful analytical lens. Identity processes shape how individuals perceive themselves and how they interpret feedback or bias from others. A strong professional identity, rooted in long-term expertise, accumulated achievements, and internalised norms of competence can buffer the effects of stereotyping by offering an alternative source of recognition and self-worth (Ajzen & Cote, 2008; Waterman, et al., 2023). Conversely, individuals whose identity is less anchored in professional mastery may interpret the same situations as exclusion or discrimination. This dynamic helps explain why some older workers normalise subtle age bias as "part of the job," while others experience it as a threat to belonging.

Recent scholarships also highlight the role of personal values in shaping attitudes towards ageing. According to Schwartz's theory of basic human values, orientations such as security, conformity, or benevolence influence how individuals perceive members of different age groups, potentially mitigating or exacerbating ageist beliefs (Fong & Wang, 2023). When team cultures emphasise norm adherence, deviations from age expectations, such as an older employee in a youth-dominated creative team, may be more readily perceived as misfits (Marcus, 2022). This suggests that ageism cannot be fully understood without considering group norms and identity processes.

Although this study focuses specifically on age, emerging discussions on intersectionality indicate that age-related experiences may vary significantly by gender, ethnicity, or career stage. For example, older women in marketing may face dual biases related to age and appearance norms, whereas older men may experience ageism differently. While intersectional analysis falls beyond the scope of this short paper, acknowledging it is important for positioning the study within contemporary theoretical debates and for identifying future directions.

Taken together, prior research reveals that stereotypes about older workers are largely unsupported, yet persist due to organisational norms, representational practices, and identity dynamics. What remains insufficiently explored, and where this study contributes, is how experienced marketing professionals themselves negotiate these stereotypes, how they interpret subtle or normalised forms of ageism, and how their professional identity shapes these interpretations within a rapidly evolving and youth-oriented industry.

Ageism in Marketing

Ageism manifests distinctively in marketing due to the industry's speed of innovation, reliance on digital technologies, and cultural valorisation of youth. Hiring patterns strongly favour younger professionals, with most agency employees concentrated between ages 25 and 44 and few older than 50 (Carrigan & Szmigin, 2000; Barker, 2019). These demographics reflect not only recruitment preferences but also assumptions that younger workers better understand youth markets, a belief often repeated despite lacking empirical support.

Marketing also contributes to ageism through its own representational practices, underrepresenting older adults and frequently associating them with technological incompetence (Graham, 2022). These portrayals reinforce workplace biases and position "youthfulness" as a desirable professional attribute. In this environment, roles such as social media management or digital content creation become symbolically youth-coded, contributing to the belief that they are less suitable for older employees.

At the same time, research shows that perceived technological limitations among older adults often reflect structural barriers rather than inherent inability. Studies on digital exclusion in Estonia and Finland demonstrate that older individuals are fully capable of adopting and effectively using digital tools when appropriate support structures are in place, challenging the persistent assumption that age correlates with technological incompetence (Leppiman et al. 2021). This evidence underscores that stereotypes within the marketing industry misrepresent actual skill potential and may unjustifiably restrict older professionals from certain roles.

Such assumptions shape identity processes: older marketers may experience pressure to prove relevance, actively avoid youth-coded roles, or normalise exclusionary expectations to preserve a positive professional identity. These patterns deepen the need to explore how identity interacts with ageism, particularly in a field that both constructs and is constructed by cultural narratives about age.

Study design and data collection

A qualitative research design was adopted to explore how older marketing professionals interpret age-related pressures. Qualitative methods enable the examination of nuanced experiences, meaning making, and identity work, elements central to understanding subtle forms of ageism.

Sampling and recruitment

Purposive and snowball sampling strategies were used to recruit marketing professionals aged 40+ with over 20 years of experience. Recruitment occurred via professional networks and industry contacts. Eight participants, all senior managers in Estonia, were selected as information-rich cases. While suitable for exploratory aims, the small and relatively homogeneous sample limits generalisability and does not reach full saturation.

Data collection and ethical considerations

Semi-structured interviews lasting 45–75 minutes were conducted in person or online. The interview guide was informed by previous research on ageism (Barker, 2019; Posthuma & Campion, 2009; Ng & Feldman, 2012) and covered topics such as career trajectories, technological expectations, experiences of age-related assumptions, and professional identity.

Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. Identifying details were removed to ensure confidentiality. Ethical approval was obtained; participants received full information about the study and provided informed consent. All procedures followed institutional guidelines.

Analytic approach

Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. After familiarisation, initial codes were generated manually using both deductive (literature-based) and inductive strategies. Codes were organised into broader themes, which were iteratively refined for

coherence. Although coding was conducted by one researcher, analytic rigour was strengthened through ongoing reflective notes and transparent documentation of coding decisions.

Social identity theory guided the interpretative phase, particularly in analysing how participants positioned themselves in relation to age-related stereotypes and how identity shaped responses to subtle or normalised ageism.

Results and discussion

Professional identity as a protective but obscuring mechanism

All participants expressed a strong sense of professional identity rooted in expertise, achievement, and commitment. This identity enabled them to maintain confidence despite age-related expectations. Consistent with social identity theory, many reframed ages pressure as a natural part of professional life rather than discrimination. However, this resilience also contributed to the invisibility of ageism by normalising bias and limiting recognition of structural inequities.

Normalised age pressure and appearance norms

Participants described expectations to maintain a youthful appearance as part of marketing's visual culture: *"...appearance is very important in how one is age-discriminated or perceived, whether we like it or not, ... Our first encounter is visual. And that is significant, and with age, this pressure is inevitably present."* These expectations shaped how they believed they were perceived yet were seldom interpreted as discriminatory. This suggests that ageism in marketing may operate as an embodied norm, reinforcing the need for future research into intersectional dimensions, particularly age × gender dynamics. Emerging research shows that appearance-related expectations often fall more heavily on women, indicating that ageism may manifest differently across genders. In marketing, an industry where visual presentation is closely tied to professional legitimacy, these intersecting identity pressures may intensify age-related vulnerability and further obscure the recognition of bias.

Technological stereotypes and age-coded roles

Consistent with earlier literature, assumptions about older workers' technological competence remained pervasive. Participants noted that digital and social media roles were widely seen as "better suited for young people," a perception they sometimes reproduced themselves. This internalisation of stereotypes can lead to role segregation, where older employees self-select out of youth-coded tasks to protect their professional identity.

Identity-based interpretation of negative experiences

Participants often downplayed potentially discriminatory incidents, attributing them to personal fit or legitimate organisational needs. This reflects identity-consistent interpretation: maintaining a positive professional self-concept may discourage recognising systemic ageism. The result is a cycle in which bias persists unchallenged, and organisations receive little direct feedback about its presence.

Challenging stereotypes through individual variation

Although stereotypes were widespread, participants emphasised individual differences in adaptability, motivation, and technological learning. Their narratives supported the empirical finding that age is a poor predictor of performance. However, stereotypes persisted at an organisational level despite contradictory day-to-day experience.

Theoretical and managerial implications

These findings expand theoretical understandings of ageism by illustrating how identity processes shape the interpretation of bias. Professional identity serves as a psychological buffer, allowing older marketers to preserve self-esteem, but can obscure structural discrimination by reframing age-related expectations as normal. This highlights the need to integrate identity theories with structural analyses when examining workplace ageism.

From a managerial perspective, organisations cannot rely on employee complaints or formal reports to identify ageism, as the subtle norms that shape age-related expectations frequently go unrecognised, even by those who experience them. This underscores the need for a proactive organisational stance in which leaders critically examine hiring practices, role allocations, and the implicit assumptions that link youth with digital competence or creative relevance. Reducing age-based bias requires decoupling age from perceived competence by ensuring that training opportunities are accessible to all employees and by challenging routine assumptions about technological skills. Age diversity should be incorporated into broader diversity, equity, and inclusion strategies rather than treated as a peripheral concern. Creating space for open dialogue about age-related norms can help make subtle forms of bias visible and facilitate shared reflection. Moreover, managers should consider the intersectional nature of ageism, particularly how appearance expectations and gendered norms may intensify age-related pressure for some groups. Finally, intentionally designing mixed-age teams can help reduce stereotype activation, strengthen collaboration, and support a more inclusive organisational culture that values employees across the life course.

Meaningful change requires confronting longstanding cultural narratives about age and rethinking both role design and organisational attitudes.

Limitations and further research

This study's small, homogeneous sample limits the diversity of perspectives and does not reach full data saturation. As all participants occupied leadership roles, their interpretations may differ from older specialists or junior employees who experience less autonomy. Future research should examine ageism across career stages to determine whether leadership attainment reflects personal preference, structural bias, or accumulated opportunity.

The study did not systematically address intersectionality, though appearance-related comments indicate potential gendered dynamics deserving further investigation. Methodologically, the use of a single coder and manual analysis constrains reliability; future research could strengthen rigour through multi-coder approaches, software-assisted analysis, or longitudinal designs.

Alternative theoretical frameworks, such as stereotype threat, organisational justice, or critical age studies, may uncover additional dynamics not captured through an identity-focused lens.

Overall, this study provides an initial exploration of how older marketing professionals interpret ageism, highlighting the need for more comprehensive and intersectional research on ageing in contemporary organisations. To deepen the understanding of this issue, future research should focus on older marketers who have not held leadership roles throughout their careers. This investigation could reveal whether their career trajectories were the result of conscious choices or influenced by age-related biases, thus providing valuable insights into the broader dynamics of ageism in the marketing profession.

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