

The audiovisual paradox: When older people are invisible yet over-represented in stereotypes

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A screen that does not reflect society

The French and European audiovisual landscape seems trapped in a paradox. Whilst older people represent a growing proportion of the population and of consumer spending, they remain largely invisible on screen or, when they do appear, are confined to stereotypical roles. A study by the LSE (London School of Economics) reveals that people aged over 60 account for just 4 per cent of those appearing in media campaigns – a figure that stands in stark contrast to their demographic and economic weight. This disconnect between reality and fiction is not insignificant: it shapes our view of ageing and contributes to widespread ageism.

The double whammy: invisibility and stereotyping

A common European observation

This under-representation is a structural phenomenon, observed across the continent. A study of television advertising in Serbia in 2023 confirmed a “notable under-representation” of people aged over 65. Furthermore, it highlights a phenomenon of “positive stereotyping”, where older people are often confined to roles such as “Golden Agers” (happy and wise pensioners), “Perfect Grandparents” or “Mentors” – figures which, whilst flattering, do not reflect the diversity of life experiences. This is a form of role assignment that prevents us from seeing the person as a whole.

The views of those most affected:

A qualitative study carried out in Portugal in 2026, entitled **The Unwanted Superpower of Invisibility**, gives a voice to consumers aged over 65. Their testimonies are unequivocal:

- A negative perception: Participants express a generally negative view of advertising, which they often actively avoid.
- A sense of invisibility: They often feel ignored by brands, as advertising aimed at them is perceived as being associated with misleading practices.
- A rejection of stereotypes: The majority agree that the portrayal of older people is “biased, negative and stereotypical” – an image with which they do not identify.

Beyond the feeling of invisibility, this portrayal, which is disconnected from reality, reinforces a sense of not belonging and of social exclusion. These studies highlight a crucial lack of authenticity.

The taboo surrounding sexuality and intimacy

The absence is even more glaring when it comes to older people's emotional and sexual lives. The media, whether in advertising or fiction, perpetuates a powerful taboo: that of desire after the age of 50. Ageing bodies are rarely shown as bodies capable of desire. Products related to intimacy (lubricants, sex toys) are virtually invisible in advertising, when they are not relegated to a medical or embarrassing context, as if pleasure at this age were shameful or inappropriate.

Yet, as the Portuguese study highlights, more inclusive and authentic communication would not only benefit older people, it would also represent a major economic opportunity for brands and content creators.

"Greywashing": when inclusion is a mirage

A new phenomenon is attracting researchers' attention: "greywashing". It refers to a communication strategy where brands display images of older people to project an inclusive image, without their internal practices (team diversity, product design) matching this. This discrepancy is perceived as cynical by older audiences, who see it as an attempt to appeal to them without truly respecting them.

The lack of older people in creative professions is singled out as a major cause of this disconnect. In Europe, it is estimated that professionals aged over 50 account for just 7 per cent of the workforce in the advertising sector, even though they make up a third of the working population. How can we tell authentic stories about ageing without the necessary diversity of perspectives?

Towards change: the boldness of inclusive campaigns

Despite this, initiatives are beginning to emerge. The European +LONGE research project, led by LIACOM (Portugal), has shown that older people are receptive to messages that represent them authentically. An exhibition entitled "This Advertising Is Not for Old People" was created to raise awareness of these issues amongst the public and professionals, by challenging stereotypes and proposing creative alternatives.

The banking sector, for example, is beginning to adapt its social media communication strategies to better engage the older demographic, the driving force behind the "Silver Economy". However, barriers remain, particularly in terms of digital inclusion.

Conclusion

The media reflects a society that struggles to accept diversity across the age spectrum. By rendering older people invisible or stereotyping them, particularly in their emotional and sexual lives, it contributes to the construction of an ageist narrative. Recent studies show that this strategy is not only discriminatory but also economically counterproductive. Older people, who represent an increasingly influential market, do not recognise themselves in these images. The stakes are high for content creators and advertisers: they must move away from clichés, incorporate greater diversity into their teams, and dare to portray complex realities, including those relating to sexuality and desire.