Growing Old Disgracefully

A look at ageing in the UK: how older people see and experience the world, their perceptions of others and themselves, and why brands are seriously missing out when it comes to the over-55s.

Introduction: Why the Real Britain Series?

OMD UK exists to help our clients make better decisions, faster to unlock extraordinary growth. As such, the agency has fully committed to delivering deep and fresh understanding of audiences and culture to our own business, clients, and industry. The result of this is

The Real Britain Series; a research anthology of which we are extremely proud.

The work is published in volumes, twice-yearly, and has three broad objectives that sit across all output;
1. Shine a light on marginalised, mis- or under-represented audiences
2. Create fresh insight that is applicable and actionable to our work and for our clients
3. Improve our allyship as employers, to make OMD UK a more inclusive place of work.
The Real Britain Series to-date and in the future

We are now a year into TRBS having launched, and Growing Old Disgracefully represents the third report in our series. We launched with Designing for Disability Inclusion in June 2022, following with The Truth About Youth in November 2022. If you’d like to hear more about these volumes of TRBS, please click here to get in touch with Laura.

We will be continuing post-G.O.D. with Decoding the Diasporas, part 1. This is an exploration and celebration of Black culture in the UK, with a particular focus on understanding the role that the African and Caribbean diaspora plays in people’s lives. Diasporas then becomes a mini-series within TRBS in its own right, as we move on to look at Asian and Arabic diasporas, eventually building a rich, in-depth library of ethnic minority groups in the UK that celebrates our cultural diversity and its roots across the world. Following this, we are keen to take an in-depth look at the role of class within the UK and how this intersects with other marginalised characteristics in society.

Our research journey towards better understanding

Our methodologies for TRBS are centred around rigour, richness and representation. We always “over-sample” against minority audiences, to shine a light on historically unheard voices.
We wanted to ensure that our audience age range captured 3 big dynamics that affect our approach to them in communications:

**The 55+ industry blackhole**: the vast majority of briefs related to this group start and finish with “55+”, so we took this as our age starting point.

**Capturing those still in work**: as our population ages, and retirement ages increase, we wanted to avoid a study on retirees only, which would give an unrepresentative view of ageing in the UK.

**Baby Boomers**: typically Boomers are 58 – 78. This research felt important because of the negative stereotypes ascribed to this cohort, so to capture the majority of them felt absolutely crucial if we were to discover fresh insight to share about them.

**Our methodology**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expert Opinions</th>
<th>55+s</th>
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<tr>
<td>Literature review</td>
<td>4 focus groups: 19, 55 - 78 year olds</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trend resources</td>
<td>1. Intersectional: Disability, Gender Identity, Sexual Orientation, Ethnicity</td>
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<td>Proprietary &amp; industry tools</td>
<td>2. Women</td>
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<td>Expert Interview</td>
<td>3. Ethnic Minority: Black, South-East Asian, East Asian and mixed Ethnicity</td>
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<td>Eleanor Mills, Founder of Noon, Journalist &amp; Author</td>
<td>4. LGBTQIA: Trans &amp; gay men and women</td>
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<tr>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>5200 sample</td>
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<tr>
<td>1000 nat rep</td>
<td>200 boost for Black, Asian and LGBTQIA</td>
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<tr>
<td>3600 Boomer Boost</td>
<td>200 boost for Black, Asian and LGBTQIA Boomers</td>
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**Why 55+s this time around?**

There are multiple reasons why considering audiences beyond the usual Gen Z / Millennials is an action we need to take industry-wide.

**A mandate for inclusion**

“...the one “minority” everyone ends up joining and almost nobody is in a hurry to do so. Some of the old don’t feel old, others don’t want to be reminded that they’re old and plenty of young consumers don’t want to think about getting old.”

Age discrimination is a battle we may well all be thrust into, regardless of wealth, ethnic background, disability or sexual orientation should we be lucky enough to grow older, yet it is a group our industry tends to avoid despite compelling evidence as to why this is simply bad for business.

1ITV, Wise Up! 2023
We live in an ageing population: in the years between 2016 and 2066 alone there will be a 72% increase in 65+s. To ignore this growing size of people is clearly going to be bad for the long-term future of businesses.

What is even more incredible though, is that the volume opportunity around 55+s isn’t just a forward-facing phenomenon. This group is a goldmine right now. They hold a disproportionate amount of wealth in relation to their population share, and yet we continue to fetishise the young, who are, to many ‘the consumer of the future’ despite us living longer, healthier lives, accumulating wealth as we go.

A cohort with an unfairly disgraceful reputation

55+s have the power to make or break brands and culture when they act as one: they tipped the balance towards a Conservative government and Brexit.

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Population estimates, Principal population projections, 2016-based, Office for National Statistics
It seems that the power and the political state of the nation is pretty much in their hands. Logic would dictate, then, that consumer brands would be pursuing them obsessively. But our culture, supported by nearly all types of media, fetishises the young. Beauty standards and cultural trends are pointed away from older people. Even ‘vintage fashion and music’ has been appropriated by the young who have claimed it as their own.

Beyond that, perceptions of this group – broadly referred to as Baby Boomers – aren’t just ignored; they’re often actively discarded or excluded. Boomers themselves are very reluctant to be seen as such.

To group this cohort into one homogenous group, though, is reductive and is a great example of how binary thinking can trip us up. We are committed to sharing this research to help our clients and our agency more accurately represent, portray and support older generations after all, as Isabelle Bale mentions in her essay³

³https://ipa.co.uk/knowledge/ipa-blog/we-must-embrace-the-non-binary-world-or-be-forever-doomed-to-certainty/

“We don’t want to be the old, out-of-touch boomer.
Arnie, 21st May 23

They fucked up the planet for the rest of us and now we have to deal with the cost of looking after them while their legacy makes life unaffordable, driven by populist politics and overflowing with environmental catastrophe.
Male, 42, white.

And when we asked other generations of their perceptions of this age group, the responses we got ranged from unimpressed to borderline vitriolic.

“When groups are ignored by culture-creating forces such as ours, they are quickly othered and dehumanised. As Meg-John Barker writes in ‘Life Isn’t Binary’, “When we divide the world into us/them, we do not only start to dehumanise the other, as we can see in every form of slavery and genocide, we begin to also “dehumanise ourselves.”
It’s not very surprising, therefore, that our survey respondents felt significantly less represented in and targeted by mainstream media, and this was felt even more keenly by those who had additional minority characteristics\(^5\).

\(^5\)G8 TGI 2023 April (Mar 2022-Feb 2023)  
\(^6\)G.O.D. Survey, Base: 2546
An industry tension

This sentiment becomes even less surprising when the age composition of the communications industry is considered. It is very much a young person’s game: the average age of an industry is just 32, with a mere 6% of agency employees aged over 50. Meanwhile, 65% of TV impacts come from this age group, despite women, in particular “being pretty absent from culture unless you’re being sold a cruise or tena incontinence pads”.

The three insight areas we found most interesting

1. Health, wealth and leisure

A closer look at the G.O.D group’s finances and health. Are they truly growing old disgracefully or is the reality different?

2. Bruised but hopeful

Building understanding of the experiences within this cohort, and how they have shaped their perspectives and hopes for the future.

3. Grow through what you go through

A special deep dive on intersectional 55+s: those who are contending with older age as well as other marginalised characteristics, with a particular focus on the LGBTQ+ community.
1. Health, wealth and leisure

Health and wealth are two fundamentals for an easier life: one allows you to move through the world unencumbered by an ableist society and wealth allows you to access what you want, when you want to have it.

It would seem that our 55+s have it pretty good. They are a fortunate bunch in that they missed the World Wars that generations before them endured, and a large chunk have avoided the financial strife that is impacting the generations that have come after; and, in the middle, they were able to have a childhood free of the pressures of social media. Perhaps they’ve hit the generational jackpot.

In comparison to our nationally representative sample, our 55+s felt significantly more positive about their mental and physical health, as well as their finances. Giving us an early indication that 55+s and privilege go hand-in-hand.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>55+ than nat rep</th>
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<tr>
<td>their physical health</td>
<td>+11%</td>
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<tr>
<td>their mental health</td>
<td>+9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>their housing situation</td>
<td>+6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>their financial situation</td>
<td>+1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>more likely to say they’re financially comfortable</td>
<td>25%</td>
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*Source: Please indicate how you feel about each of the following aspects of your personal life? base = 5386
Health

This surface-level positivity belies what seems to be really going on with 55+s in the UK: a series case of the stiff upper lip. Firstly, 37% of our respondents\(^9\) declared that their day-to-day activities were limited by their health, which makes them legally disabled (vs. the national average of around 20%). Secondly, it is widely understood that older generations are less likely to declare problems with their mental health\(^10\). This may be because you need to be seen to be ‘getting on with it’ or problems at this age are deemed to be ‘normal’; simply part of the ageing process.

Wealth

Despite our research showing that we should perhaps take our 55+s’ positivity with a pinch of salt, it’s inarguable that this group are contributing to society in significant and meaningful ways. Only 38% of them were retired, nearly 1/5 of them were self-employed and half of them still felt they were developing professionally, and of those working 66% of them enjoyed their jobs. Incredibly, nearly all of them were offering support to friends and family in some way: either financially or emotionally.

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\(^9\)Source: Please indicate how you feel about each of the following aspects of your personal life? base = 5386

\(^{10}\)Are your day-to-day activities limited because of a health condition, impairment, disability, or neurodiversity, which has lasted, or is expected to last, at least 12 months?


https://hbr.org/2019/10/research-people-want-their-employers-to-talk-about-mental-health
Many are active and energetic.

"I don’t feel old. I wake up in the morning and say to myself ‘don’t let the old lady in’. When I think of my parents’ generation, I think of them as being old because they dressed in an old style. I dress very much like my young daughters do.

Maureen, Black/Caribbean, 62 years

Many are embarking on new adventures and challenges, all very much in line with the UK general population or even more so in some cases, showcasing that they are very much refusing to let their age hold them back.

This group are, in general, better off than most other generations, but they are comfortable rather than rolling in it, and as we look more deeply into marginalised groups of this age, the picture is distinctly less rosy.12

12O. Which ONE of the following best describes your financial situation?
Base: Nat Rep (base = 1103), G.O.D Group (base = 3082)
Less opportunity for disgraceful aging

What does this mean in reality? This group think they’re at a disadvantage vs. their parents’ generations;

“People can’t afford to go on holiday or do things that our parents did when they retired.”

Lucy,
East Asian, 60 years

They too are having to cut back in many areas of their lives, and in the case of in-home energy consumption, even more than average (83% vs. 79%).

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13Q: Which of these, if any have you done as a result of your household’s financial situation? base = 25/6
Leisure

With their financial positions less solid than in years past, their ability to spend freely on their chosen leisure pursuits has too been affected. There have been significant roll backs on activities that require financial outlay.

What this does result in, though, is even more time to spend with their favourite media channels, which are very much rooted in traditional, broadcast environments.

Their media diet is evolving, though, as this time-rich group take advantage of the variety and depth that streaming services have to offer, supplementing their love of linear TV. This also prompts other channels, like traditional print and providers like The Mail, to reflect these changes too.

*Source: TPT22HTC IPA Touchpoints 2022 SuperHub (W2 2021 + w1 2022 with TGI)*
What does this mean for us?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>An audience opportunity to consider for all our brands</th>
<th>There should be space for established, hard-working channels on our plans</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A clear growth audience for high-end brands for 55+ tranche who are financially comfortable</td>
<td>Creating or associating with content that reflects a wide range of interests and learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>A more price-sensitive cohort are emerging in squeezed times, which means brands with value-led propositions have a great opportunity to build loyalty and penetration</td>
<td>As streaming expands their TV repertoire, targeting and content opportunities in this space feel like a must-have extension of a 55+ TV plan</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Supporting education around health for 55+ for relevant brands to bring them more in line with other generations</td>
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Source: Barb
We’ve already shown that our G.O.D. cohort don’t have it quite as easy as popular culture would have us think. What is absolutely true is that 55+s with intersectional characteristics – that is if they belong to more than one minority group – have had a seriously rough ride to where we are today.

There has been exponential societal change in the UK over their lifetimes, and whilst it seems that we live in a much more accepting culture today than in years past, an incredibly high amount of our respondents had experienced trauma of some kind.

55+s from ethnic minorities, in particular, shared some shocking anecdotes;¹⁵

“I’ve been acting in the UK for over 30 years and I can count on my hand the number of times I’ve been asked to speak in my normal accent and not have to put on a Chinese accent of some description.”

Michelle, East Asian/Chinese

61% of older Black 55+s experienced discrimination

34% of older Asian 55+s experienced discrimination

13% vs white

¹⁵Q: When I see people who look like me in mainstream media (such as TV programmes and movies) they are portrayed accurately

Q: Have you experienced any of the following? LGBTQ+ base = 351, Black base = 170, Asian = 182
Older women have suffered in a sexist, patriarchal society their whole lives

We spent a great deal of time talking to women, in a women-only setting, “and” it is clear that they have internalised the gendered society in which they’ve grown up. They spoke about their appearances and contribution to the world in bleak, self-flagellating terms. Their sacrifice for the families seems to have not been counter-balanced with their own needs. This suffering came through in a number of ways:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Professionally</th>
<th>Emotionally</th>
<th>Financially</th>
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<tr>
<td>“I took an early retirement to care for my parents about 6 years ago. I want to go back into the workforce. Unfortunately, because of my age I’m not able to find a job.”</td>
<td>I looked after my mum until she passed away... my daughter was present during that period and she saw how much it took out of me.</td>
<td>42% of older women are struggling vs 35% of men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presana, Female, 65, South Asian (Indian)</td>
<td>Valerie, Female, 63, Black/Caribbean</td>
<td>Only 17% of women felt accurately represented in the mainstream media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I was told I wouldn’t be able to progress in my company because I’d reached 30 because they thought it was too old. Males seem to be able to keep progressing until they retire.”</td>
<td>“All I have is the state pension which is not very much. Looking to my personal future I’m not going to have lots of money to do things.”</td>
<td>Gill, 60, White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valerie, Female, 63, Black/Caribbean</td>
<td>Gill, 60, White</td>
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“...It’s very sad. People like Madonna who change their faces to look younger and won’t just grow old as they are. But that’s society and the media expecting you to be eternally young.”

Gill, Female, 60, White

55+s concerns aren’t limited to worrying about themselves

49% of our respondents were grandparents, and of those 97% of them said that they enjoyed caring for their grandchildren. Whilst there were many comments about how happy caring for their family made them, their worry for that generation also came through as clearly.

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*Source: G.O.D. focus group (women)
Q: how would you describe you financial situation, base = 2546
Q: how strongly do you agree with the statement “I feel accurately represented in mainstream media”*
They are my passport to immortality.
69, female

I get all the joy & none of the headaches. It really is the best job in the world.
72, female

When I look back on growing up and it just seemed a bit more carefree, you didn’t put so much pressure on yourself on how you looked, what grades you got on your GCSEs.
Sharon, female, 56, British
They care about Gen Z and this generation’s future

When we asked our groups and our survey respondents what their perception of young adults was, they described them in exactly the same terms that Gen Z would likely describe themselves:

Tech savvy  Open-Minded
Socially conscious  Non-traditional

Alongside these perceptions, comes the hope that this generation can right the wrongs of those who have come before them. When speaking to our 55+s, the sense was that, on the whole their shift to make systemic change in the UK had ended, and it was now the turn of younger people to take the reins, in areas like the NHS and economy, but, interestingly, the environment too.19

"I think of them as being strong, resilient, not afraid to stand up, shout out against inequalities. I think of hope out of despair. For me (they are) inspirational."
Male, 42, white.

Source: G.O.D. focus group (women) / Q: Are you a grandparent, base = 2946
19Q: Please rate young people on a scale, 1 - 7, base = 2946
G.O.D. Focus group: Pan-55
19Source: G.O.D. focus group (pan 58+)
Which of the following issue concerns you the MOST? Base = 2946
This generation is more open, dealing with stuff like mental health, abuse, all of those issues that were swept under the carpet and I think that is quite positive in many ways.

Carlin, Male, 59, LGBTQ+

My hopes are around the younger generation being brave enough to fix some of the ridiculous things we’ve done in this world around global warming and hopefully being able to rewrite all the wrongs.

Maureen, Female, 62, Black/Caribbean

What does this mean for us?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Representation &amp; Portrayal</th>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Professional Development</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion as active and contributing members of society</td>
<td>Highlight, facilitate and celebrate cross-generational connection</td>
<td>A specific focus on age positivity in the workplace and a clear drive to bring more of them into our industry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accurate, diverse and frequent visual representation of 55+s to dispel ‘Boomer’ stereotypes</td>
<td>Encouraging involvement in causes, through content and partnerships aimed at their generation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tell stories from groups who’ve been excluded from the cultural narrative to date</td>
<td>Energetic engagement through sensitive targeting, talent, editorial, content and tone</td>
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55+s Top concerns

- NHS: 2/3
- Cost of Living: 41%
- Climate Change: 22%
3. Grow through what you go through

A generation ‘forged in fire’

As evidenced in the previous section, those over-55s from marginalised communities will have experienced greater instances of trauma, episodes which, while upsetting, will have served positively to toughen their resilience. Eleonor Mills from research consultancy Noon, speaks to the numerous character-building ordeals faced by middle-aged women which, she suggests, made them ‘forged in fire’, their skin toughened and resolve galvanised by multiple instances of challenge. They have, one might conclude, grown through what they’ve gone through.

This is certainly true of mature adults in marginalised groups. Members of ethnic communities growing up in the 60s and 70s will have witnessed the worrying rise of the National Front and violent collisions, like the Battle of Lewisham in August 1977, as black communities fought back against the burgeoning extreme right. This certainly served to stoke their defiance.

Disabled people in the 1970s became similarly radicalised in response to the failures of the British welfare system and they, alongside homosexuals and ethnic communities, also defiantly self-identified as a minority group.

Another group that has clearly been made stronger by the adversity they faced are mature adults from the LGBTQ+ community. Their positivity and fighting spirit shone through in our focus group with them, so we felt this cohort deserved a spotlight; but it’s important to note that much of what we observed about this cohort is true for all over-55s in marginalised communities.

‘Reinforcements are coming’: A strong affinity with Gen Z

The mature members of the LGBTQ+ community with whom we engaged spoke very highly of the younger generation, admiring them for their searching minds, hunger for knowledge and converting that insight into affirmative activism. They see a lot of their younger selves in that campaigning fervour:

“They take information from so many sources, and they are being activists. I admire them greatly for that.”

Rachel, 56, lesbian (she/her)

“They remind me of when I was growing up where I found the millennials a bit too serious.”

Frank, 63, gay (he/him)
One focus group member, a member of the trans community, announced excitedly that, in Gen Z, ‘reinforcements are coming’, and another felt strongly that forming an alliance between older and younger generations might well create ‘a big chance to facilitate change’. But there’s a tech disconnect that hampers that dialogue: Gen Z are digital natives and only 24% of our over-55s panel felt that they were tech savvy. Where then might the conversation take place?

Like Gen Z, our mature LGBTQ+ cohort exhibit a selfless concern for issues beyond their own experience. While the economic crunch is impacting them as much as the next man, woman or non-binary individual, they are 16% less likely to cite the cost-of-living crisis as the issue that concerns them most.

While many have no children of their own, they are much more likely to want action to safeguard the planet for future generations and are 23% more likely to cite the NHS as the issue that concerns them most – not for their own access to it, but for fair trans health care.

There is a genuine, and quite moving, sense of selflessness in the issues that most concern mature LGBTQ+ adults.
Fired up by decades of struggle

This selfless, campaigning zeal was most likely born out of the hardships they faced in their formative years.

4-in-5 of our 55-76-year-old cohort were born and had their formative years before 1967, the year of the publication of the Sexual Offences Act which decriminalised homosexuality. This meant that over 80% of them, when realising their sexual identities and preferences, would also have been self-identifying as a criminal.

60% of them would have been aged 16-32 in the activist 70s, witnessing and maybe even participating in the Stonewall Riot-fuelled launch of the Gay Liberation Front in 1970 and the first UK Pride Rally in 1972 (a real, angry demo, not the glow-stick flag-waving of the modern Pride March).

And all our 55-76-year-old LGBTQ+ cohort would have been aged between 18-39 – at their sexual peak – in 1986, the year that the AIDS epidemic surfaced in the UK and the Government’s bleak ‘Don’t Die of Ignorance’ campaign was pervasive. Quite a time to be queer and alive. Certainly character-building.

‘It’s not the age, it’s the mileage’

But in spite of these challenges our mature LGBTQ+ cohorts are fizzing with confidence and resilience:

58% feel they have a ‘strong influence on society’ (vs. 50% Nat Rep and 42% LGBTQ+ Nat Rep)

“We are vibrant, we are still creating, we may not have the energy, it may take us longer, but there are artists and creatives amongst us.”

Paula, 61, lesbian/genderqueer (she/her)

They feel they have a ‘strong influence on society’, celebrate the vibrancy and creativity of their older community, and embrace the ‘wisdom of experience’, quoting Harrison Ford of all people – ‘It’s not the age, it’s the mileage’ – asking to be judged not on the time spent, but on the journey travelled and the wisdom that journey has accrued.

It’s not the age, it’s the mileage.

Rachel, 56, lesbian (she/her)

I do like the wisdom of experience.

Frank, 63, gay (he/him)
But there are vulnerabilities

While our mature LGBTQ+ cohorts refuse to be badged by age, they do recognise that others see and judge them through that lens. That’s not all bad: one of our gay male focus group members spoke of the fetishisation of age in the gay community, with younger males attracted to the ‘daddy’ dynamic – though the potential issues here around objectification are plain to discern.

Even worse is the abject ageism that can rear its ugly head on the scene, as raised by one focus group member:

“I think it is quite frightening, just going out there to try and have a bit of fun and people constantly reminding you that you're old. I don't know that I yet believe I'm old. I believe I'm older, but don't think I'm too old to be doing anything that I've still got a heartbeat to do.”

Yvonne, 64, lesbian (she/her)

Another vulnerability felt by this group is cultural invisibility: only 1-in-5 claim to ‘see and hear people in adverts that look and sound like me’ and just 16% believe advertising accurately represents diversity within their generation. As a result, many in this cohort feel unseen.

(The focus group gave special mention to Emily McDonald’s Looking Back with Pride – a totemic example of how you can represent mature LGBTQ+ individuals sensitively and with hugely entertaining results: Looking Back With Pride on Vimeo)

All too often, isolation is seen by older LGBTQ+ people as the price they have had to pay for their sexuality.

This cultural invisibility is exacerbating an already worrying sense of isolation among this older community, 42% of whom have experienced the end of a close romantic relationship, and a quarter of whom have experienced significant or ongoing loneliness (compared to 15% of all 55-76-year-olds).

So prevalent is this issue that several charities have been set up, like Re-engage, to befriend older LGBTQ+ community members with younger community members. This is critical given that 44% of LGBTQ+ adults over-55 have experienced mental health issues (compared to just 28% of their mainstream counterparts).
What does this mean for us?

There is a wonderful opportunity for a brand to create a platform for those that have the wisdom of experience – that were ‘forged in fire’ – to mentor the next generation of firebrands. In doing so it will:

Help reverse community judgement, dispelling the notion that older LGBTQ+ cohorts are past their prime

Increase visibility of older LGBTQ+ community members who have such rich and life-affirming stories and ideas to share

Move them from isolation to contribution – and, heeding financial impact, liquidity (let’s fuel the creator economy!)

Boost your own brand appeal – because purpose sells, particularly to your next generation of consumers, Gen Z, 86% of whom prefer to buy from brands that service their own demands for universal equity.

Health, wealth and leisure?

Bruised but hopeful

Grow through what you go through

Overall, a lot of 55+s have it better than most, but they are concerned about their current situations and what the future holds for them.

Having lived through extraordinary societal change and personal hardships, many look to the young to fix society’s ills whilst recognising the burden they’ve inherited.

Resilient, charismatic and hopeful, the mature LGBTQ+ers show the benefits of holding on to personal truth and community spirit from a young age.