



# Ageist Britain?

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# We're not ageist, are we?

At SunLife, we celebrate life after 50. In this report, we're shining a light on the issue of casual ageism and the impact it has.

It asks the question: why do we discriminate against older age? After all, some of our friends and family are probably already in this group - and it's one we all want to join one day.

Hello. I'm Carol Vorderman. I'm 58 years old and my 50s have been the best decade of my life.

I've learned how to fly a plane, hung out at airshows around the world and now have advanced pilot qualifications.

I'm also preparing for my round the world solo flight, to become the 11th woman in history ever to do so.

I decided to re-engage with work and now have a regular BBC radio show, am presenting TV shows, launched a new range of books including a new book about engineering, have a Fellows' flat in my old college in Cambridge and indulge my brain as never before, because I can.

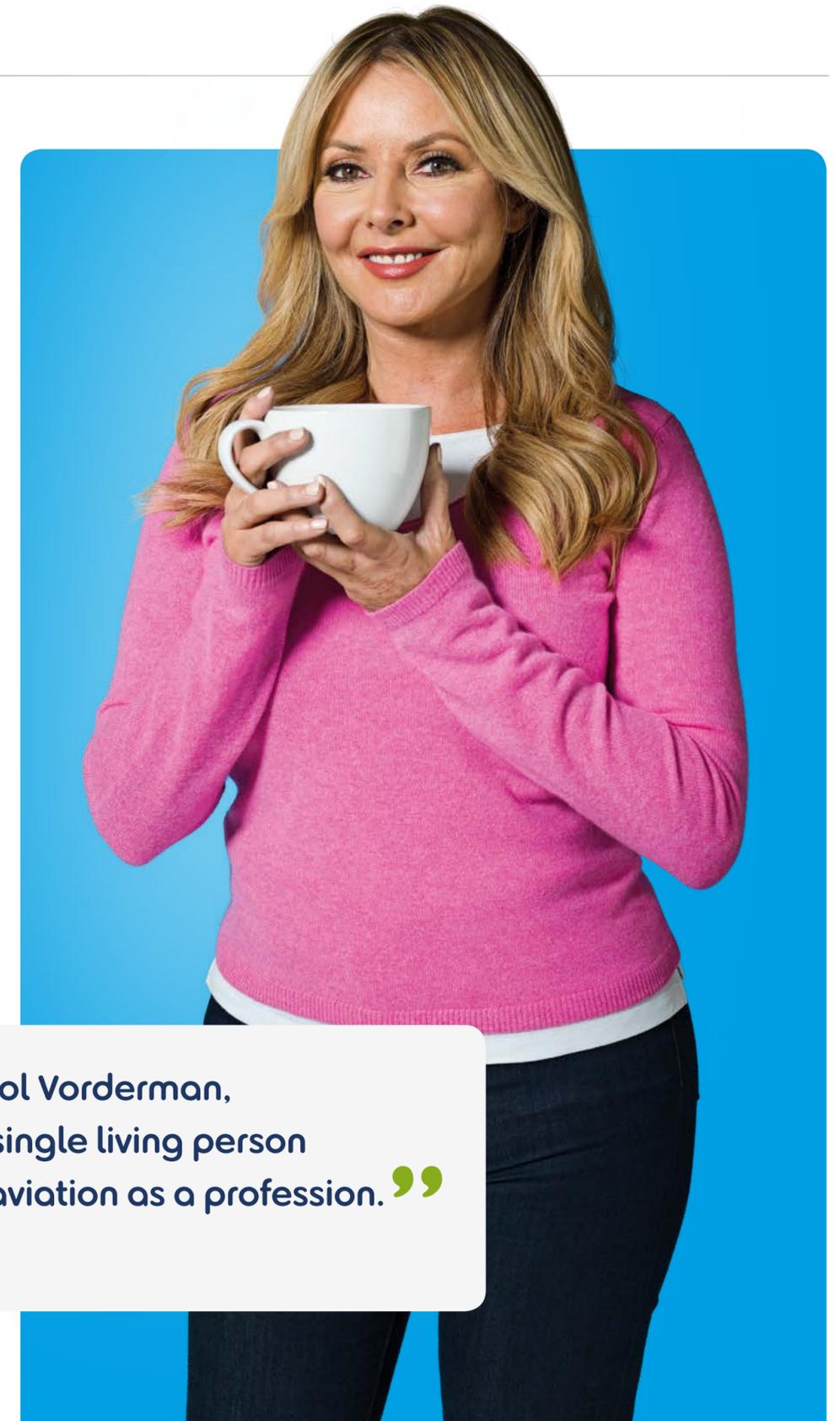
And I also spent this decade as a fitness fan, hiking as often as I can in the Brecon Beacons, I trek and bounce around and stretch and do things that make me happy, without a care in the world.

I do a lot of voluntary work, including as the first female Honorary Group Captain in the Royal Air Force, as an ambassador for the RAF Air Cadets. I work with NASA greats to encourage and educate the young into considering space and aviation as an option. I'm the official Ambassador for the All Party Parliamentary Group for General Aviation and work with MPs and ministers to do my utmost to encourage young people.

“ The ambassador for the all-party group is Carol Vorderman, who has probably done more than any other single living person to try to encourage young women to take up aviation as a profession. ”

Roger Gale, Conservative, North Thanet

Continued...



I was also privileged enough to meet some truly inspirational people. Both as part of the Pride of Britain Awards and through my work with NASA and their amazing astronauts.

Oh and I've partied hard, caused more mischief and belly laughed (until I thought I'd actually die laughing) more than ever before in my life.

My children are grown up, I know what I like, I know who I like, I waste no time or energy on things I don't want to do, and I revel in all the amazing people in the world who inspire me, and laugh with me and who I love. No pretence, and no excuses.

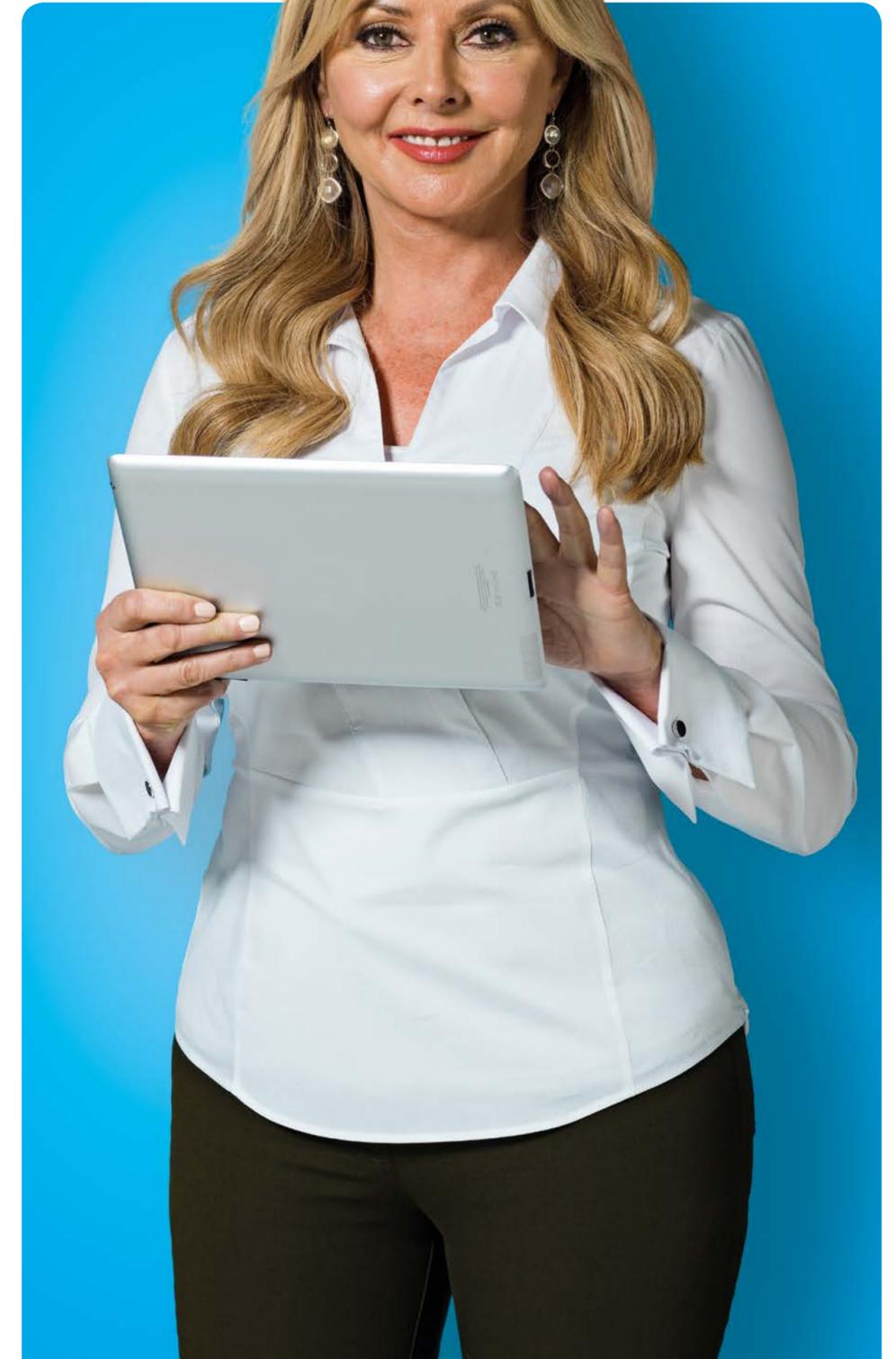
I think the years to come might be even better. When we cross 50, there seems to be an assumption that we slow down and start taking things easy. Yet if you asked most people over 50, slowing down or taking things easy is the last thing on their minds.

The problem is we're so bombarded with 'casually ageist' phrases and behaviours that we start to think that life after 50 must be worse – that it's 'downhill all the way'. But it's not true. Life after 50 is different, but it can be great different. So perhaps it's about time we retired our casual ageism – and embraced life after 50.

Later in the report we reveal some of the great steps that have already been taken by organisations in the UK to stamp out causal ageism. And hopefully, it's not too long before others follow suit.

Here's to a great chapter in life.

Carol Vorderman, MBE





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# What's this report about?

## Our research focuses on three areas:

- **Consumer research of 4,000 UK adults** to understand how and when people experience ageism, how many of us admit to being ageist, and if people feel progress is being made to stamp it out.
- **Analysis of the use of ageist phrases** across blogs and Twitter.
- **A review of some of the UK's biggest brands'** representation of the over 50s in marketing communications.

We're shining a light on the issue of casual ageism and the impact it has on all of us. We want to encourage people to reconsider the language they use, and to challenge outdated perceptions of what it means to be over 50. By doing this we hope to finally retire casual ageism in the UK.

## So how prevalent is casual ageism across UK society?

Try typing phrases like 'old fart', 'bitter old man' and 'old hag' into Twitter and you'll see they're used thousands of times a week.

Casual ageism is part of our everyday language. It's so ingrained that many ageist remarks are often overlooked, missed or simply accepted. Many sentiments are subtle and can even be well-intentioned. But the truth is that 'ageist' language, however casual, can have a huge impact on our perception of life after 50 and the way we treat people we meet.

But the truth is that ageist language, however casual, perpetuates the myth that life after 50 must be worse than before it.

# Key findings from this report

1. Over a third of Brits (34%) admit that they have at some time discriminated against people because of their age.
2. Our list of casually ageist phrases are used thousands of times a week on social media.
3. Almost half of Brits in their thirties (48%) admitted to having been ageist at some point.
4. More than two thirds (68%) of over 50s say the ageism apparent in everyday life has made them feel less valued.
5. 40% Brits have experienced ageism:
  - Almost 1 in 3 Brits have experienced age discrimination at work
  - 1 in 10 on public transport
  - 1 in 7 while shopping
6. Southampton is the most ageist city in the UK, with 46% of residents admitting to being ageist. Bristol the least ageist in the UK, with only 20% admitting to being ageist.
7. 'Old fart', 'little old lady', 'bitter old man' and 'old hag' are the most used ageist phrases on social media.
8. 'Old fart' is used on social media almost 23,000 times a year and 'old hag' is considered to be the most offensive term.
9. Better representation in advertising, and greater awareness of the impact of ageist language and derogatory terms were the main ways Brits believe we can combat ageism.
10. A fifth don't believe the UK is a good place for over 50s to live and 31% say they believe ageism is a bigger problem today than three years ago.



# So why is casual ageism an issue?

Research has proven that ageism can have real life consequences, promoting exclusion and affecting physical and mental health.

The Royal Society for Public Health (RSPH)\* and Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation's (UK Branch) study highlights the growing body of research pointing to the real-life consequences that negative attitudes to ageing have on individual health outcomes. These include memory loss, breakdown of physical function, and an increased risk of dementia.

It also indicates that people who develop a negative attitude towards ageing live, on average, 7.5 years less than those maintaining a more positive attitude. Given that ageing affects us all, it's hard to understand why society continues to promote these attitudes and behaviours.

We begin to absorb ageist stereotypes at a young age. It seeps through the films and TV shows we watch and stories we read. Once we reach what we think is 'old age' we begin to apply these attitudes and misconceptions to ourselves – both physically and mentally.

This is because 'When negative age stereotypes are encountered by individuals before they are directed at themselves, there is unlikely to be a felt need to mount defences against them; hence, susceptibility is maximized.'<sup>\*2</sup>

This is what makes ageism significant. Membership is not fixed but inevitably acquired over time. Yet despite this, society always presents ageing as something we do not have a choice in. When in reality, we have the freedom to decide how we want to live in older age.

Whether we know it or not, we're subtly reinforcing the message that ageing is a condition that takes away our freedom.

\*<https://www.rsph.org.uk/uploads/assets/uploaded/010d3159-0d36-4707-ae54e29047c8e3a.pdf>

<sup>\*2</sup> Levy, B., Slade, Martin D., Kasl, S. V., Kunkel, S. R., (2002), Longevity increased by positive self-perceptions of ageing, Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 83, no.2, 261-270)

# The scale of the problem

- 10% of people over 50 claimed to have personally experienced ageism in the last month.
- More than two thirds (68%) of over 50s say the ageism apparent in everyday life has made them feel less valued.
- In the UK, over a third of people (34%) admit that they have at some time discriminated against people because of their age. This rises to 43% among under 50s and falls to 24% among over 50s..
- 3% of us admit to being ageist on a regular basis.



**1 in 10**  
suffered ageism  
on public transport



almost **1 in 3**  
suffered ageism  
at work



**1 in 7**  
suffered ageism  
while shopping

# Busting the myths: Why life over 50 is great

In 2016 as part of our Big 50 project, we interviewed 50,004 men and women over 50 across the UK – making it the biggest piece of over 50s research ever. So we really can say that we know over 50s better than anyone.

We went into the project with the hypothesis that today's 50 is not our parents' 50. With vastly improved life expectancy and health, we are fitter, more energetic, younger at heart and better prepared to meet the challenges facing us.

The scale of our research means we can now pull apart our findings, showing that life after 50 is in fact better in a lot of ways than life before it.



have visited a new European country since turning 50



have visited a new country outside Europe

Over 50s feel on average almost



10 years mentally younger

than their current age (9.9 years)

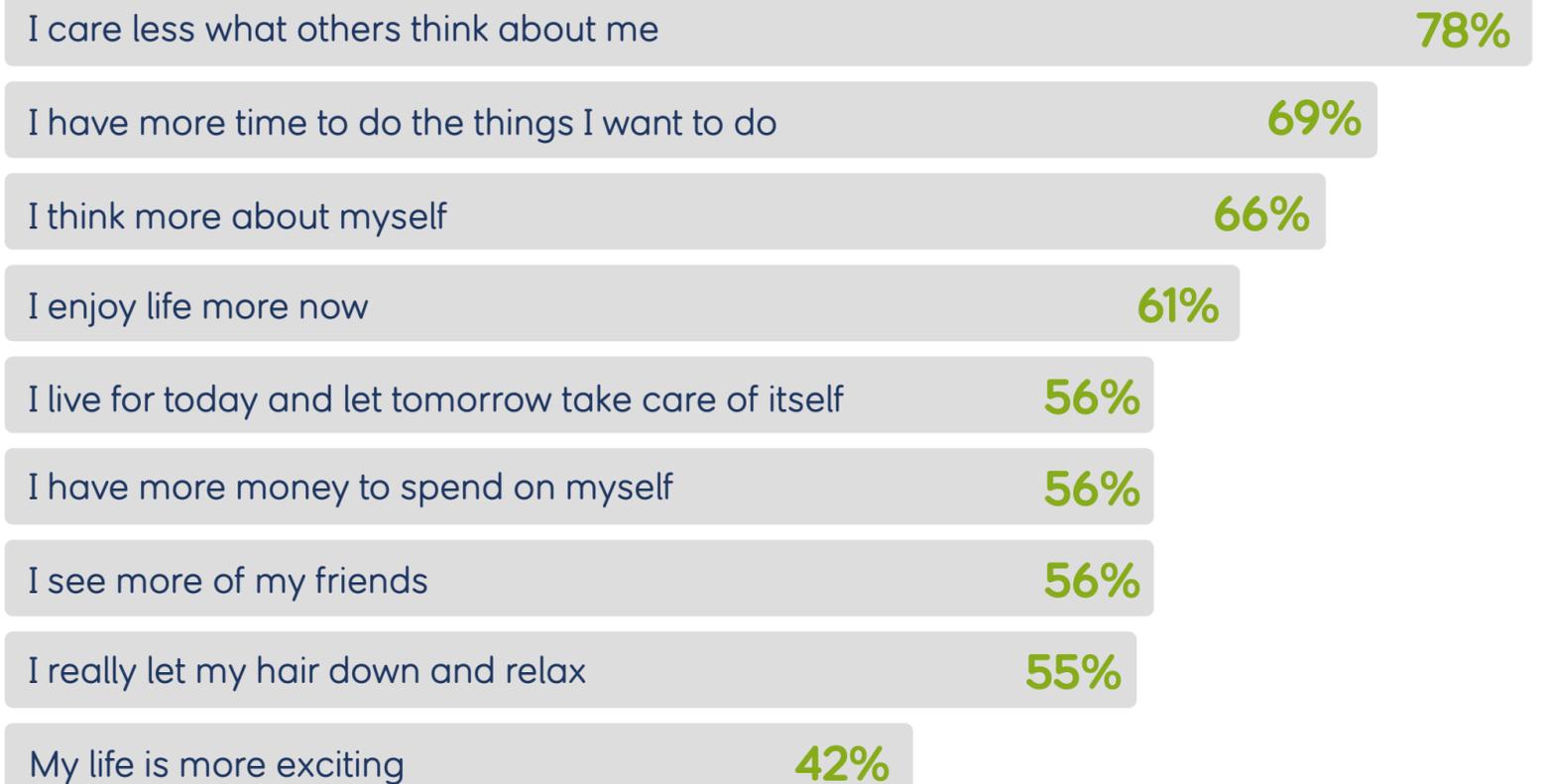
Over 50s feel on average almost



4 years physically younger

than their current age (3.9 years)

## Since turning 50:



\*Source: Stats taken from SunLife's 2016 Big 50 research as part of the Welcome to Life After 50 campaign.

# Ageist phrases

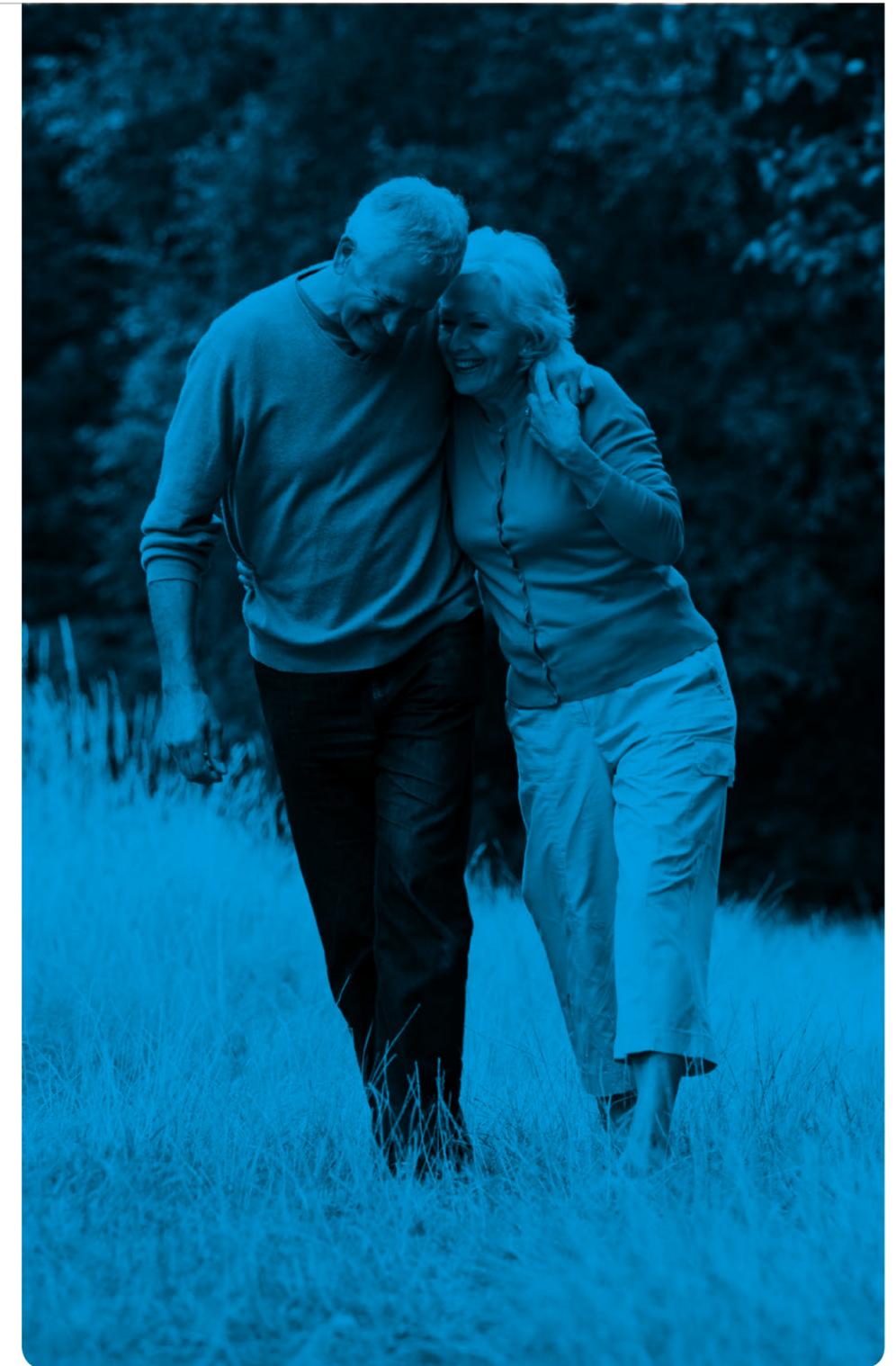
So, what exactly is an ageist word or phrase? As you'll see, some probably aren't intended to be ageist but at heart they project a negative perception of people and life over fifty.

## Common terms that are clearly ageist:

- Past it
- Over the hill
- Mutton dressed as lamb
- Decrepit old man / woman
- Drive like an old woman
- Little old lady
- Grumpy old man
- Old fogey
- Codger
- Senile
- Out of touch
- Having a senior moment
- Old goat
- Old bird
- Stop being such an old woman
- Silly old fool
- You can't teach an old dog new tricks

The clearly ageist terms all place age in a very negative light. Take the term, 'you can't teach an old dog new tricks'; it's simply not true that we become unable to pick up new skills or perspectives as we cross 50. Similarly, consider 'mutton dressed as lamb', this suggests that you must dress a certain way as you grow older.

The fact is, whether used intentionally or not, all these words and phrases perpetuate negative images of older life and diminish the value of people over 50.





# Ageist phrases

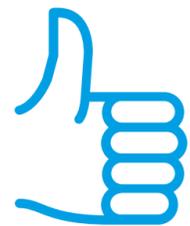
## Common terms that we think aren't ageist, but are:

- You look good, for your age
- He/she looks good for his/her age
- Gentlemen/ladies of a certain age
- Men/women of a certain age
- Mutton dressed as lamb
- Decrepit old man/woman
- Drives like an old man/woman
- Drive like an old man/woman
- Little old man/lady
- Grumpy old man/woman
- He's/she's/you're senile
- A senior moment
- Anti-ageing/anti age
- Bitter old man/woman
- Cranky old man/woman/person
- He's/she's/you're ancient
- He's/she's over the hill
- He's/she's/you're past it
- Miserable old man/woman
- Old fart
- Old fuddy-duddy
- Old hag

Take the term 'you look good for your age' – on the surface it seems really positive, but it is a classic backhanded compliment. The implication is that you can't look good when you're older.

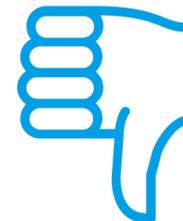
**125,684** casually ageist terms  
are used each year **on social media**

**'old fart'**  
is used  
**436 times a week**



**The phrase 'anti-ageing' has the UK divided**

A FIFTH (21%) SAY THEY THINK THE PHRASE  
'ANTI-AGEING' HAS POSITIVE CONNOTATIONS COMPARED  
TO 16% WHO THINK IT HAS NEGATIVE CONNOTATIONS



**90%**

OF BRITONS,  
ARE OFFENDED BY THE LIST OF  
CASUALLY AGEIST TERMS

**When asked which ageist phrase  
bothered them the most...**

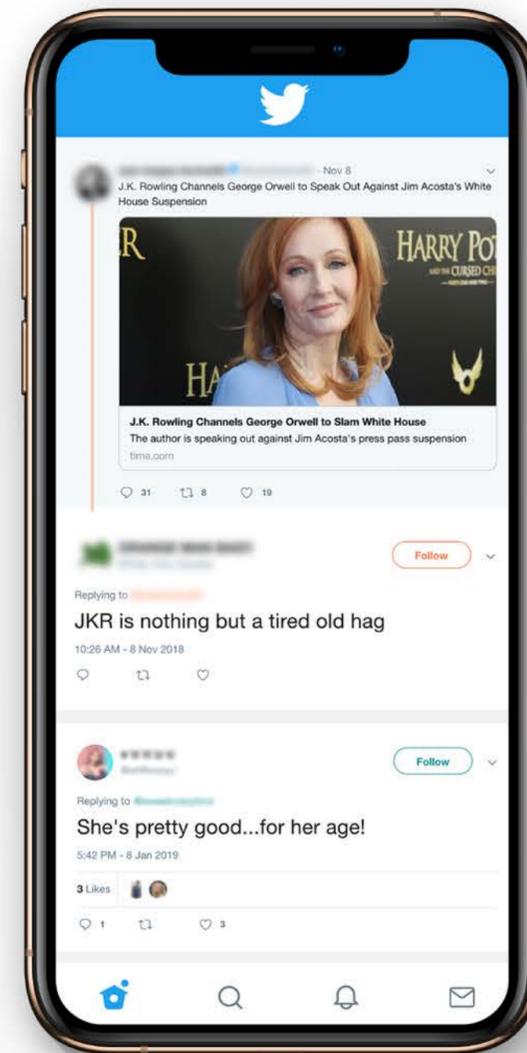
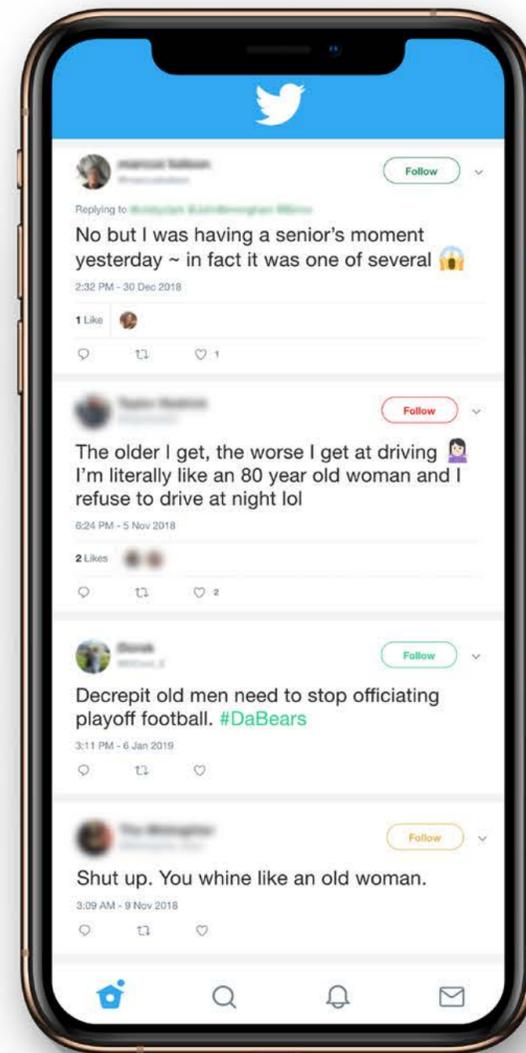
'Old hag' was selected as the most  
offensive term – 21% selecting it as their  
top choice, followed by 'senile' (18%),  
decrepit old man/woman (14%) and  
mutton dressed as lamb (14%).



ON TWITTER AND BLOGS,  
THE AGEIST TERMS MENTIONED MOST OFTEN WERE:

<p><b>'old fart'</b> 436 times a week</p>	<p><b>'little old lady/man'</b> 308 times a week</p>
<p><b>'bitter old man/woman'</b> 253 times a week</p>	<p><b>'old hag'</b> 183 times a week</p>
<p><b>'grumpy old man/woman'</b> 168 times a week</p>	<p><b>'ladies/gentlemen of a certain age'</b> 140 times a week</p>

# Casual ageism on social media



# How does it make people feel?

“ Retirement means my life is full of joy. I do what I want, when I want, and spend a lot of time with my family. ”

“ I’m not old. I’m the fittest, healthiest and happiest I’ve ever been. ”

“ Comments about your age can knock your confidence. Even if you know it’s not true, the language makes you conscious of this aspect of yourself. ”

“ Being made to feel that you are too old to join in something socially is no fun – I thrive on life and enjoy living it to the full. ”

“ I hate being dubbed ‘old’. I don’t feel it, nor do I think I look or act it. Even when it’s not meant in a nasty way – I do take it personally. ”

- When we use these negative terms, we start believing we are worse when we are older ('normalising' and 'internalising').

- Intended compliments like “*you look good, for your age*” are only perceived as positive because of ageism.

- By reframing how we speak about getting older, we can redefine ageing as a time of opportunity and growth.

# How many of us admit to being ageist?

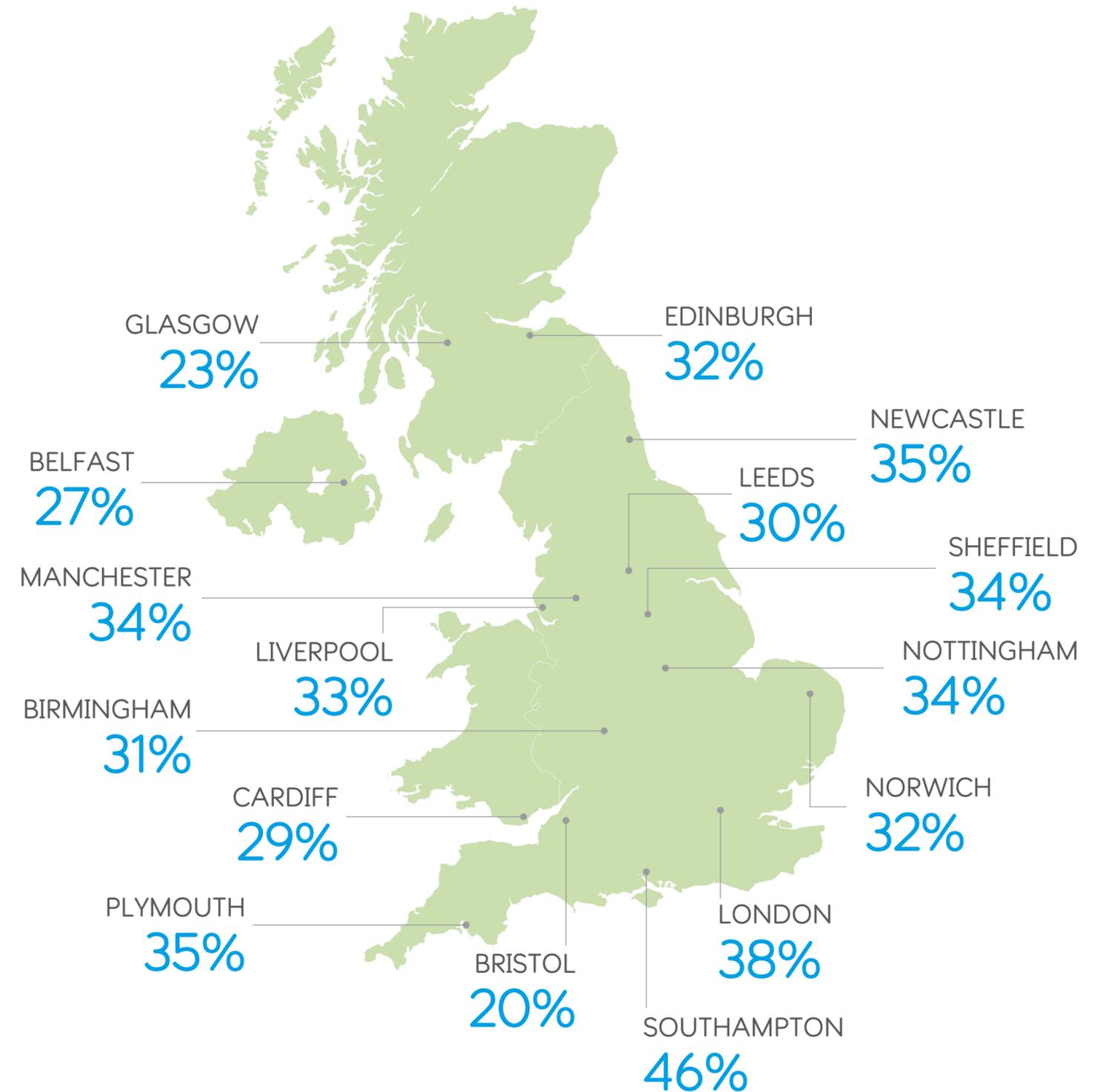
We're most likely to be ageist in our thirties

**48%** of 30-something Brits say they've been ageist

**9%** admit to being ageist on a regular basis

What's more, someone in their twenties is more than twice as likely to discriminate based on age compared to someone in their 70s (46% compared to 20%).

It's happening everywhere... all over the UK, people admit they've discriminated against someone on the basis of age. 46% of Southampton residents admit to being ageist compared to just 20% of Bristolians.



# If we're doing it, do we know?

Our research found that half the time (51%), those affected by ageism believe that the actions were unintended.

This also increases with age. Around two thirds (64%) of those aged over 70 believe people are unaware of their ageist behaviour towards them – and weren't deliberately trying to cause offence.

But even if we're doing it unconsciously, ageism can still have a negative impact.

More than two thirds (67%) of people across the UK are left feeling 'less valued' as a result of ageist behaviour. People are also left feeling unhappy (63%) and self-conscious (57%).

People in their 50s and 60s feel more alienated (53%) than those in their 40s (45%) because of ageism.

AS A RESULT OF AGEIST BEHAVIOUR DIRECTED AT THEM, PEOPLE IN THEIR 60S ARE MOST LIKELY TO FEEL...

'less valued'  
73%

'unhappy'  
62%

'alienated'  
53%

'self-conscious'  
52%

'image conscious'  
40%

# Life as an **over 50** in the UK

We asked 955 over 50s to tell us what it's like living in the UK. We found that many feel the portrayal of over 50s in the media is an outdated stereotype that doesn't represent them.

We want to celebrate life after 50 and recognise that for many people, those can be the best years of your life.

- 67% believe the UK is a good place to live for over 50s but 22% don't.
- Men feel more positive about being over 50 and living in the UK than women (70% v 63%).
- People living in London feel the least positive about the prospects of being over 50 with 13% of respondents saying that Britain was not a good place to live for over 50s.
- More people think ageism is becoming more of a problem (47%) than less of a problem (2%) in the last three years. But 18% don't think it has ever been a problem.
- Over 50s are more likely to feel that the problem is getting worse (36%) than Under 50's (27%). West Midlands (42%) and Yorkshire & Humberside (41%), and South East (40%) are the regions where there are the most people who think the problem is getting worse.



# Who is taking a stand and how

To take a closer look at age discrimination and what it really means to the public, we asked 2000 people what they thought about ageism in the media and how they think it's dealt with.

With 955 of those asked aged 50 and over, this gives us an idea of how those affected really see the issue of ageism in the media.

- 51% of over 50s say they hadn't seen any examples in the last 12 months of companies/personalities taking a stand against ageism.
- Yet 24% say that they had seen evidence of companies or personalities taking strides to combat ageism. Respondents in the North West (34%) of England were most likely to see this type of activity and those in Wales were least likely to come across these examples (17%).
- When asked if there were any specific examples of companies that stood out in taking a stand against ageism in the last 12 months, L'Oréal campaigns had the highest recall with many specifically mentioning the campaign with Helen Mirren.
- Respondents also claimed to have seen examples from M&S, Boots, B&Q and Dove.

# Examples of best practice brands



“So forget the idea of fading into the background, a new Golden Age is dawning.”

Copy from L'Oréal website

## L'ORÉAL®

- L'Oreal's 'Age Perfect' range is specifically crafted for mature skin and the campaign consistently uses positive terminology around ageing.
- In the May 2019 edition of British Vogue, L'Oréal created a supplement which they described as a 'ground breaking celebration of ageless style & beauty'.
- The issue features content written and created by women over 50 for women over 50.

## BARCLAYS

- Diversity in ages features across the Barclays website and in brand campaigns.
- The offering of tea and teach sessions as part of the Digital Eagles initiative.

## N°7

- 'Face the Future' skincare range targeted at over 50s.
- Use of Nadine Baggot as an ambassador, age 55.

## Dove

- Dove has a range for 'mature skin' which isn't specifically labelled for over 50s.
- The Mature Skin range uses support language such as 'maintain your skin's natural youthfulness'.
- 'Keep your skin looking its best and help it stay resilient' – it's all about making the most of what you have.
- Their advertising campaigns feature a diverse range of ages to suit all skin types and demographics.

## B&Q

- B&Q are actively championing older staff.
- They see that a more age-diverse workforce brings a wealth of skills and experience to their teams, which really enhances the services they offer their customers.
- The retailer has been operating without a default retirement age for over 20 years and aims to provide age-neutral benefits to all employees.



### **What's been done so far?**

While ageism is certainly present in the UK today, we have made some progress over the years to counteract it.

The Equality Act 2010 protects people against ageist discrimination, in the workplace and beyond. It covers areas of direct and indirect discrimination coupled with harassment and victimisation.

However discrimination under any circumstances is allowed if it can be 'objectively justified'. This simply means that the employer or service provider must be able to prove good reason for discrimination around age e.g. a certain level of fitness.

### **Ageism could be classed as a hate crime.**

In 2018, the government announced that ageism could be classed as a hate crime, in the same way offences motivated by hostility based on race, religion, sexual orientation or disability are.

### **Increasing opportunities for younger and older people to mix and meet.**

There are more and more clubs and events designed to bring older and younger people together. Not only is it proving to be hugely enjoyable for everyone, it's also proven to bring health benefits. This was recognised in the new National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidelines on independence and wellbeing in older people.

### **The top 3 most popular ways people think we can combat ageism are:**

- If more brands used different models of all ages for their advertising campaigns (37%)
- If the issues associated with ageism had the same level of attention as racism and sexism (33%)
- If people were more aware of the use of ageist language and avoided derogatory terms (33%)

To change the way we think about ageing, we need to change the way we talk about ageing. Until we consciously make a step to change the way we talk and look at life after 50, ageism will only become more pervasive.

We should celebrate our age and experience. These products should focus on us feeling good and allowing us to live our life exactly how we want to.

Ultimately, we're all going to grow older and the truth is we're never as old as our years. We're as old as we feel.

So, let's start paying closer attention to the language we use and hear. And when you see or hear ageism in action, call it out and question the person. Get to them think about their behaviour and language.

If we all take these steps, we can take huge strides towards finally retiring ageism. So join us and let's [#retireageism](#) together.



## Methodology

A list of 40 ageist terms was developed using desk research. Phrases were chosen which were believed to be derogatory, regardless of the context. Please see the list below.

1. You look good, for your age
2. He looks good for his age
3. She looks good for her age
4. Ladies of a certain age
5. Gentlemen of a certain age
6. Women of a certain age
7. Men of a certain age
8. Mutton dressed as lamb
9. Decrepit old man
10. Decrepit old woman
11. Drives like an old man
12. Drives like an old woman
13. Drive like an old man
14. Little old lady
15. Little old man
16. Grumpy old man
17. Grumpy old woman
18. He's senile
19. She's senile
20. You're senile
21. A senior moment
22. Anti-ageing/ anti age
23. Bitter old man
24. Bitter old woman
25. Cranky old man
26. Cranky old person
27. Cranky old woman
28. He's ancient
29. She's ancient
30. You're ancient
31. He's over the hill
32. She's over the hill
33. He's past it
34. She's past it
35. You're past it
36. Miserable old man
37. Miserable old woman
38. Old fart
39. Old fuddy-duddy
40. Old hag

## CONCLUSIONS AND METHODOLOGY

### Consumer research

A nationally representative survey of UK adults (n = 4,006) was carried out August – September 2018 and May 2019. Research was conducted by Opinium and analysed by Citypress.

### Social listening

Social media was searched using media analysis tool Crimson Hexagon. The tool searches public posts on Twitter, blogs, forums, Reddit, Tumblr. UK mentions were picked up over a 7-day period from 6th May – 12th May 2019. Results were analysed by Citypress.

In these magazines, researchers looked for examples of ageism in their articles, interviews and adverts. These examples focused on instances where the magazines described or implied that ageing is negative.

Researchers also searched for the report's ageist terms in the national newspapers The Sun, The Daily Express and the Daily Mail. Instances when these terms were in articles published online in the last 12 months were included in the report.

AGEIST TERM	TOTAL	TWITTER	BLOGS & FORUMS
ANTI-AGEING	677	498	179
OLD FART	436	365	71
LITTLE OLD LADY/MAN	308	171	137
BITTER OLD MAN/WOMAN	253	212	41
OLD HAG	183	151	32
GRUMPY OLD MAN/WOMAN	168	129	39
LADIES/GENTLEMEN OF A CERTAIN AGE	140	98	42
CRANKY OLD MAN/WOMAN	61	19	42
HE'S/SHE'S PAST IT	51	31	20
A SENIOR MOMENT	50	24	26
HE/SHE LOOKS GOOD FOR HER AGE	25	19	6
MUTTON DRESSED AS LAMB	19	13	6
HE'S/SHE'S ANCIENT	13	7	6
MISERABLE OLD MAN/WOMAN	9	8	1
HE'S/SHE'S SENILE	9	9	0
HE'S/SHE'S OVER THE HILL	7	6	1
OLD FUDDY-DUDDY	5	3	2
DRIVES LIKE AN OLD MAN/WOMAN	2	1	1
DECREPIT OLD MAN/WOMAN	1	1	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>2417</b>	<b>1765</b>	<b>652</b>