Attitudes of Aging – Qualitative Approach

Final Report

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**Background/Objectives**

*AARP The Magazine* commissioned research regarding the attitudes of aging to support an article in an upcoming 2013 issue.

The content addressed in this report is based on the qualitative research.

The qualitative research was initiated to help direct the quantitative portion of this research by better understanding:

- How adults age 45+ feel about aging
- What defines age? Is it the way one looks or the way one feels
- The impact of the prejudices of aging (ageism)
- The influence of society’s opinions on their perception of aging
- The impact of life events on their perceptions of aging
- How social connectedness and technology impact their perceptions of aging
Research Day
The study consisted of two three hour sessions, conducted in Lancaster, PA on December 3rd. Each session was comprised of approximately 45 participants from ages 45 and older (90 total), with a representation of Hispanics.

Both three hour sessions consisted of six simultaneous focus groups. Each group had its own moderator and consisted of 7 to 8 participants with a mix of ages and genders. One group was totally comprised of Hispanic/Latinos and was conducted in Spanish.

The sessions consisted of a three part agenda:

- **Part 1: Story-telling and role play.** Development of metaphors, need/would like statements
- **Part 2: Full group report out**
- **Part 3: Deep dive.** Prioritization of thoughts and a deeper understanding of the issue. This session closed with each participant writing a short quotable ‘letter to the editor’ about the problems they see as being associated with ageism.

The Research Day was managed and conducted by Innovation Focus.
Executive Summary
Executive Summary

• Aging is universal and not exclusive...everyone gets old.

• ‘Old’ is not defined as a number. It is defined by one’s state of mind and physical capabilities. As long as a person can do what they need and want to do, then they are not ‘old.’ Health issues are what make people feel substantially older.

• Interestingly, while participants said that age is all about the way they feel, ‘looking good’ was just as important and becomes more important as one gets older, especially for women and those still in the work force.

• Wisdom, experience and respect come with age. No matter the participants’ age, those the same age were seen as ‘mature’ and ‘full of life’. Those that were older then them as ‘wise’, ‘experienced’, and ‘respected’.

• When pairing the positive and negative words associated with aging, they become statements that seem contradictory but in reality express a possible truth, such as ‘a respected burden’, ‘a peppy old fart’, or ‘experienced and uninformed’.

• ‘Ageism’ is not a word that is commonly used. The behaviors and perceptions associated with ageism are seen and felt by those 45 and older, and most prevalently felt in the workplace. However, the degree to which the threat of ageism is felt is dependent on how prepared one is financially. Those more prepared feel it less.

• ‘Ageist’ behaviors are demonstrated towards those that are not your same age, whether younger or older. Participants were open about their own ageist attitudes towards those older as well as younger then them.

• Humor about aging is an acceptable practice. It’s seen as inclusive since everyone gets old and will ultimately get to experience the same things.

• While ‘ageism’ is seen to exist, there is a mixed view on whether it is seen as ‘acceptable’.
Executive Summary (cont.)

• The world treats people differently as they age. Sixty seemed to be the threshold when people felt they were being treated differently.

• Media portrayal of older adults in negative roles reinforces the perception that older adults need to be treated differently.

• While there are issues with ‘ageism’, participants had a general feeling that things are better than a generation ago. However, greater generational disconnect is perceived to exist today, predominantly based on technology.

• Death of a parent is expected and does not make one feel old. However, death of someone the same age is not expected and does make one feel old.

• The key that keeps one feeling young is the connectedness to social networks, both traditional and online.
Hispanic/Latino Views on Aging

• Hispanics now living in America expect to live longer than when living in their own country because the healthcare in America is better.

• Since the Hispanic familial system is seen as not being as strong in America, Hispanics worry that the traditional roles (Matriarchal/Patriarchal) of the Hispanic elderly may not be as strong an option leaving them to wonder if they will be seen as more of a burden than a leader.

• Clear linguistic traditions with regards to age exist in the Hispanic community. The emphasis of respect is very important as one gets older.

• Hispanics see it as a point of pride, personal strength and integrity for older adults to deny any negative effects of aging.

• Discrimination of Hispanics is felt to be a combination of ageism and racism. Though the language barrier is the same as it has always been, participants felt that it was more difficult for them now than it was 10 years ago.
Detailed Findings
How adults age 45 and older feel about aging
Old as it relates to one’s age is a relative measure

- Relative in that no matter the age (e.g., 45, 65, 75), participants did not see themselves as old.
- Relative in that ‘old’ is a state of mind not a number.
- Relative in that aging is something that happens while you are living life.

I can’t get old. I need to work. My family depends on me. The bills keep coming in and going up.

Old is what others are.

Age is a matter of attitude no matter what state you are in.

I was too busy with my granddaughters to get old.

Who has time to worry about aging or anything else for that matter. I am taking care of mom and the grandkids.

Age is only a number.
More positive words are associated with people that are older than you. Wisdom, experience and respect are a result of aging.

Younger

Inexperienced

Disrespectful

Not Yet

Busy

Lucky

Intelligent

Vibrant

Punks

Unfortunate

Wonderful

Explorers

What would you call someone who is __________ than you?

Sentiment: 54% positive, 46% negative

Same Age

Mature

Full Of Life

Respectful

Old

Looking Good

Fulfilled

Thoughtful

Down Hill

Sentiment: 59% positive, 41% negative

Older

Wise

Senior

Experienced

Respected

Lucky

Slower

Interesting

Amazing

Antique

Mature

Depends

Full Of Memories

Sentiment: 71% positive, 29% negative

This word collage represents the adjectives used by respondents. The size of the word indicates the number of times it was mentioned.
Old age arrives at the point that you cannot do what you need or want to do

A person is old when...

Believe They Are Old

Don’t Enjoy Life

See Others As Old

Gives Up

Never

Unhealthy

Poor health makes me look older than I actually am.

We don’t really feel the effects of aging until we can’t do something.

This word collage represents the adjectives used by respondents. The size of the word indicates the number of times it was mentioned.
Words associated with aging become an essential paradox in the perception of aging.

Positive Words Associated with Aging

Negative Words Associated with Aging

When combined, the above creates a paradox in the perception of aging:

- Incompetent Wisdom
- A respected burden
- An inflexible free spirit
- Experienced and uninformed
  - A peppy old fart
  - A sickly Peter Pan
- Generous defensiveness
  - Joyless and helpful
- Opinionated and content

This word collage represents the adjectives used by respondents. The size of the word indicates the number of times it was mentioned.
What defines age? Is it the way one looks or the way one feels?
Introspectively, age is the way people feel not what others think

“But in aging, as in many things, attitude can make all the difference. Research has shown that how people feel inside, and their expectations of their capabilities, can have a greater impact on health, happiness and even longevity than the date on their birth certificates.”

“How old do you feel inside? The key to staying healthy and living longer is deciding you’re not old and decrepit”, Alexia Elejalde-Ruiz, Tribune Newspapers, October 12, 2011

• Almost all participants say that they are happy with who they are and the way they look and that they don’t care what others around them think.

• They see it as “a rite of passage just like going from a teen into a young adult.” Older is something that is universally embraced and just thought of as another part of life. “Not everybody is a woman, not everybody is a specific race, but everybody gets older.”

The way you feel is what matters the most, not what others around you think.

It is not the gray hair and wrinkles that make us show our age. It is how we feel and how we live.

I look like a grandma when I am on the street. It doesn’t feel like me, but that is what others see.
However, looking good is important at any age. It’s just more important as one gets older, and especially for women

- Female participants state that they have spent more money and time managing how they look at all ages; however, they seem to spend more as they get older.
- As our female participants have gotten older, they have become particularly concerned that they might ‘look their age.’
- They perceive that society judges them more harshly as they get older…and even harsher for those not keeping up their physical appearance as well as those that overdo it by having too much fun with how they look and what they wear.

Importance of Appearing Ageless

Spend Money to Manage Looks

Spend Time to Manage Looks

Gender Differences

Out of the corner of my eye, in the window reflection, I saw this older man following close behind. It was me!

It’s like being in middle school where we are comparing ourselves again – physically, mentally, financially.

Older people want to dress as if they were younger but it is more important to dress appropriately than younger.

All eyes are on me when I enter the room because of my age. You have to look younger to fit in.
Acting, dressing and buying products designed for people younger is prevalent, and even more so for women.

I like the young energy.

I act and dress the way that I want now that I have the time, and I’m having a blast.

When I am consciously trying to act younger I am just trying to be true to myself.

Acting young gives you good energy.

Young activities help you feel young – like dancing.

You just want to embrace the whole world when you are young.

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**Agreement Scale (n=90, directional)**

**Do you act and dress younger, older, or your age?**

- 54% (Male 41%, Female 65%)

**Do you buy products designed for younger, older, or your age?**

- 51% (Male 43%, Female 58%)
The impact of the prejudices of aging (ageism)
‘Ageism’ is not a word used by participants but the behaviors and perceptions associated with ageism exist and are felt

• ‘Ageism’ is not a known word to most. However, after some conversation, they clearly understood what it was, had experienced and practiced it in different settings, and agreed that it does exist and is a significant factor in their lives.

• ‘Ageist’ behaviors described consisted of…
  • Expectations by others that you should step aside or retire just because of your age.
  • Exclusion from social circles based on generation and age differences
  • A willingness to unapologetically take age into account when hiring or managing personnel
  • Special deference given because of age such as giving up of a seat, being called dear, increasing voice volume
  • Seen as technologically challenged
  • Treating health issues as age issues
  • Self imposed limitations (unwillingness to do or try new things, dress the way you want) because of age

Ageism is about the possibility of losing your rights…your car keys.

Pass off older people for problems (service calls), but act like they love you when they want to sell you something.

It is like you shouldn’t have long hair or a short skirt. I’m in the best shape of my life and I can’t show it off!

The doctor treats health issues as age issues now that I am older.

I can imagine an oncoming intergenerational warfare that’s made worse by folks like me who won’t exit their jobs to make room for the kids who need income to support folks like me. Whew!

‘Ageism’ is not a word used by participants but the behaviors and perceptions associated with ageism exist and are felt
Ageism is most prevalently felt in the workplace

- When asked for examples of prejudices based on age, the workplace was the leading contender.
- There is a real belief that workplace prejudice exists and is aggressive, and laws do not protect against covert ‘ageism’.
- Misdirecting about your age, hiding your age, and not mentioning physical limitations are seen as a necessary part of being in the American workforce. Some feel that their position is at risk and consider misdirection to be a requirement of the job.
- Age-based bullying is seen as the acute form of workplace prejudices against older workers.

At work they didn’t know how old I was and I wanted to keep it that way.

As I get older, getting respect at work is having my younger co-workers expectations lower than my capabilities.

One female participant reported watching another woman at her office picking on an older co-worker in a hundred mean little ways. She retires and now our participant is the oldest in the office and has isolated herself as protection.

One 69 year old female described a job interview process that was going well until she stood up and her hip popped. “It was over right then.

One 55 year old construction worker hides his Tylenol at work and soaks in a hot tub for an hour every night to work the soreness out. He feels that he cannot have a bad day at work. They won’t lay him off, they just won’t pick him for the next job.

I worked in a department store – told me I was too old for new training, that ‘it was for the younger employees’.

As I get older, getting respect at work is having my younger co-workers expectations lower than my capabilities.
The degree to which the threat of ageism is felt is dependent on how prepared one is financially

- Those that felt financially prepared were less concerned about age-based prejudices and what others thought of them.
- Financially prepared respondents focused more on their future possibilities versus what was occurring in the here and now.

A 51 year old female thinks that she might get a new job. She doesn’t have to but after 25 years as an engineering manager in aerospace she is ready to try new things.

A retired 54 year old male went back to school to be a personal trainer and to give something back to the community.

We (the older half of the population) are a gold mine. They should be falling over us to be their customers.
‘Ageism’ is not just about the old

• Participants were quite open about their own ageist attitudes towards persons older than them as well as younger than them. Most could relay one or more instances when they have based their opinions and actions towards others solely based on that person’s age.

• It was easy for them to be dismissive of younger adults with words like…

  - People make judgments on what appropriate behavior is at certain ages. I make those judgments too.
  - What’s the world going to come to when they are in charge.
  - Scare for my future if the younger generation is in charge.
  - They are too inexperienced.
  - Lazy and spoiled.
  - They are too young to understand.
  - Unable to communicate.
Humor is used to make light of being old and that is seen as okay, after all everyone gets old

• Humor was seen as part of the solution, not part of the problem.

• None reported being wounded by humor in the same way they were by the undue deference of being called Sir, Ma’am, Sweetie or Dear.

• Humor about age is okay. It’s inclusive. After all everyone gets old. It is not perceived as being as harmful as that based on gender and ethnicity.

• And nothing is more inclusive then a member of the protected group leading the way.

I’m writing a play about the funny things that happen to us when we are older. Really, you just have to laugh.

If you can’t make fun of yourself, who can you make fun of?
The influence of society’s opinions on perception of aging
Does society see ‘ageism’ as an acceptable prejudice? ...not exactly

- Participants had a mixed view on whether ageism was seen as ‘acceptable’.
- They were convinced that it existed, but only about half at least somewhat agreed that it was ‘accepted’.

![Agree/Disagree Scale](image)
However, the world treats people differently as they age

- Sixty seemed to be the social and personal threshold when participants generally agreed that they were being treated in a certain manner.

- ‘Age’ starts to be used as an ‘excuse’ around the age of 60.
  - The most prevalent examples presented were around medical issues such as vision and hearing.

- Additionally, ‘age’ limits available options.
  - Society’s expected role for us as we age is that we become the extended caregivers of the next generation.

The world treats me differently than it did 10 years ago because of my age.

The doctor treats health issues as age issues now that I am older.

Fifty was something of a joke. At 60 you start to see subtle changes in the way people react to you and even in the questions they ask at the Doctor’s office.

We moved here into the same neighborhood as my daughter so that we could help. She is a single mom. Then the girls grew up and left for college. Now I feel so isolated.
Media portrayal of those that are older majorly impacts society’s perception of ‘old’

• Participants’ felt that media portrayed the elderly in a negative role (i.e., frail, medical problems, helpless). The build up of the negative stereotyping along with the visual cues starts the cascade of negative behavior towards those that are older.

• The pressure that is felt about getting older is more about exterior appearances in a youth driven society.

...even Dr. Oz. seems to only have younger women (under 50) on his show.
While there are issues with ‘ageism’, most participants had a general feeling that it is getting better...certainly better than a generation ago

• Some express that the state of ‘better’ is because extended life spans have extended life stages.
  
  • Childhood is now stretching into adulthood with more and more kids coming back home to live after college.
  
  • The adulthood years are stretching based on the expected care giving of aging parents as well as grandchildren.

  I feel less pressure to ‘act my age’ than my parents probably did at my age.

• ‘Better’ is also seen in the choices that now exist.

  I have better options in clothing, products, and activities than my parents probably did at my age.
The impact of life events on perceptions of aging
While death of a parent was the predominant recent life event, it was health issues that made respondents feel substantially older.

Most recent major life event

Event that made you feel substantially older
However, death of a parent makes them think more about their mortality

• An overwhelming number of participants saw the passing of a parent as a ‘kick in the butt’ to do more, accomplish more, enjoy more before the same happens to them. It really didn’t make them feel old, just introspective.

When a parent passes, it takes you to another level of being an adult.

When my parents passed, it was a reminder of my mortality.
And, death of friends (peers) or siblings make them feel older

• Respondents expected to lose a parent. They didn’t expect to lose a peer or sibling.
• Losing someone in the same age cohort made them realize that they were getting older.

Losing my sister was much more impactful than losing my parents.
The death of my brother made me feel old.
How social connectedness and technology impact perceptions of aging
Greater generational disconnect is perceived to exist today than in the past...predominantly based on technology

• Respondents described some form of technology as the reason for their feeling older.

• They felt that many times each day they are reminded that their hard won communications technology is out of date as new versions are constantly being released. It’s a constant reminder that they are getting older.

• Early adopters are seen as mentors at work and in the community. Late adopters find themselves struggling to keep up and are quickly put into a dependent role.

I live on the internet. It is the leveling factor. One can be any age they wish to be online.

Remember Snuggies? It was the first time I had really tried to order online. I ordered one and then decided to order a second. While trying to do that I accidentally doubled the order to 4. Now I tried to cancel the order which doubled it to 8. I signed out in fear that I might double it again and end up with 16. Everybody got snuggies for Christmas.

Technology creates a bigger gap. You can’t just go to an exercise class for technology and build your muscles.
Having a broad social network benefits the aging process

• Participants report that social networks keep them active while they age.

• Connectness to social networks, both traditional and online, give a sense of wellbeing while aging.

• Having a cohort group lessens the impact of aging. Women respondents reported that they are better able to cope socially in older years because they participate in more social activities with friends.
Hispanic Group Views
Hispanic Views on Aging

• Our Hispanic respondents indicated that they expected to live longer because of the health care system in the US and that there was more for them to do (more activity choices) in America.

• The down side of living longer is that the familial system is not as strong as in many of the Hispanic cultures. This, in turn, suggests that the traditional Matriarchal/Patriarchal Hispanic roles may not be as strong an option for future generations of Hispanics.

• The Hispanic community has a clear linguistic tradition with regards to age. Younger people should always speak to their elders with an attitude of respect. It is almost never appropriate for a younger person to refer to an elder as ‘tú’ because that is disrespectful.

• Having fought all their lives for their place in this world (for work, for family) our Hispanic respondents see it as a point of pride, personal strength, and integrity for older adults to deny any negative effects of aging and affirm their ability to live and act as they always have.
  • Productivity is proof of value
  • You must keep working because no position in life is ever really safe (family or economic)

• In the Hispanic groups, there were numerous examples of discrimination both in work and in life, but they felt that it is a combination of ageism and racism. One idea of note: Though the language barrier is the same as it has always been, participants felt that it was more difficult for them now than it was 10 years ago. That where they would’ve been given a pass 10 years ago for their lack of acculturation, they are not now that they’re older.