

Media Image Landscape:

Age Representation in Online Images



Images are a powerful way to connect with consumers. Visuals register on a subconscious level, holding potential to convey information, spark emotions, and influence ways of thinking about the world. Representation of older people is important because it affects the attitudes, expectations, and behaviors of older and younger people alike. Since visual media has been shown to reflect societal norms,¹ it is encouraging that recent research has identified a transition in some media toward more positive visual representation of older people.² However, the current study shows there is considerable room for improvement.

Negative portrayal of adults 50-plus is more common than negative portrayal of younger adults.

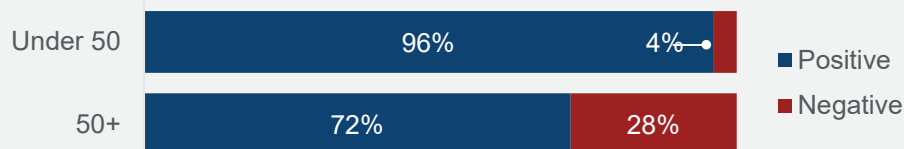
Marketers often target younger consumers. However, even when targeting middle-age and older consumers (those age 50-plus), images skew younger. In addition to under-representation, when adults age 50 and older are shown, they are more likely to be portrayed negatively than those under age 50.

An analysis of online media images finds that **adults ages 50 and older are under-represented.**



While **46%** of the U.S. adult population is **age 50-plus**, **only 15%** of images containing adults include people this age.

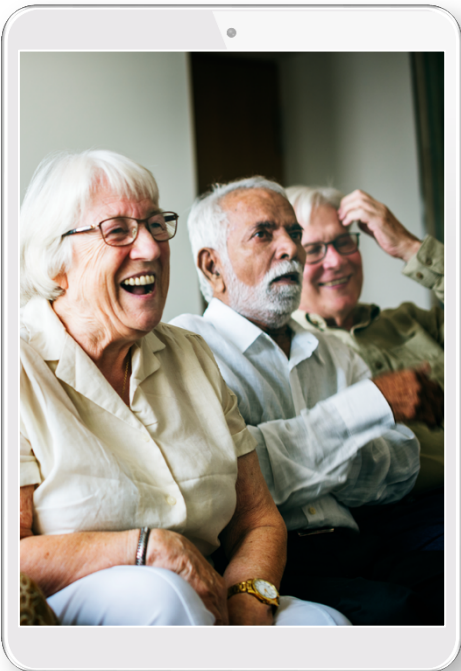
Overall Portrayal (2018)



1. Loos, Eugène, & Ivan, Loredana. (2018). Visual ageism in the media. In L. Ayalon & C. Tesch-Römer, (eds.), *International Perspectives on Aging: Vol 19. Contemporary perspectives on ageism* (pp. 164). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-73820-8_11
 2. Loos, Eugène, & Ivan, Loredana. (2018). Visual ageism in the media. In L. Ayalon & C. Tesch-Römer, (eds.), *International Perspectives on Aging: Vol 19. Contemporary perspectives on ageism* (pp. 163). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-73820-8_11

Images suggest homogeneity of adults 50-plus and exaggerate stereotypical and outdated physical appearance characteristics.

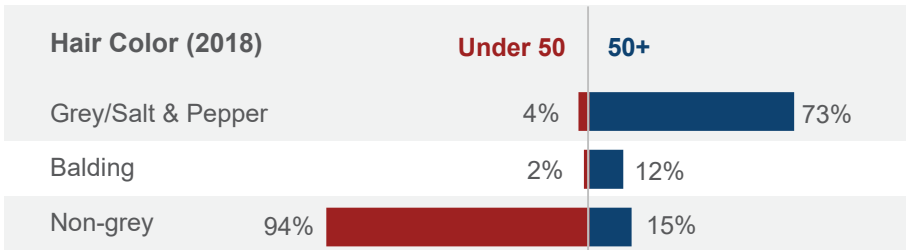
While a myriad of vibrant personalities come across in images of adults under age 50, the representation of people 50-plus starts to homogenize. Subjects start to look similar to each other; they are dressed similarly and portrayed in similar situations. At age 65-plus, the homogenization is even more extreme.



Images containing adults age 50-plus over-represent those with grey hair. While data show that 31% of adults age 50-plus have colored their hair in the past six months,³ only 15% of images are shown with non-grey hair. This use of stereotypical imagery may be an attempt to signal that the intended audience is midlife to older adults.



Similarly, the vast majority of images of adults 50-plus show people with wrinkles (73%) or age spots (12%), while few (15%) show people with clear skin.



Adults over age 50 are presented as dependent and disconnected.



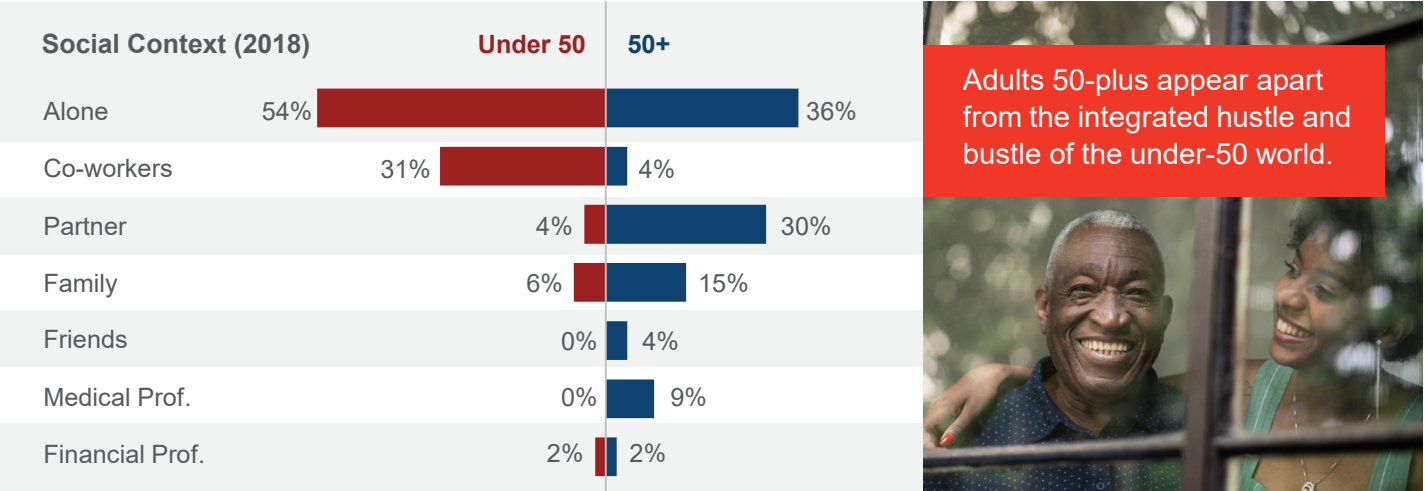
Although research shows that people 50-plus are fully engaged in their communities, seven in ten images of adults over 50 show them removed from the rest of the world – alone, with a partner, or with a medical professional. Images that contain adults under 50 portray them as much more engaged with the world. They are featured with coworkers, in nonfamily groups, and actively participating in what’s going on around them. In contrast, adults over 50 appear more cloistered.

In addition to being shown as disconnected, adults over 50 are most often shown as dependent and seated with others who are “taking care” of them – a partner, counselor, medical professional, etc. In contrast, those under age 50 are most often standing with peers (coworkers, nonfamily friends, etc.) or giving speeches.

3. According to MRI Survey of the American Consumer, Doublebase 2018. Courtesy of MRI-Simmons, 31% of adults age 50+ had hair color/highlight services in the past six months or used hair coloring products at home in the past six months.

One in three images show people 50-plus at home, compared with only one in ten images of people under 50. Moreover, though it is not common to see four or five generations in the workplace, only 4% of images of people 50-plus show them with coworkers.

The 50-plus appear apart from the integrated hustle and bustle of the under-50 world. At best, they are portrayed in a removed location where someone younger can visit (e.g., at home).

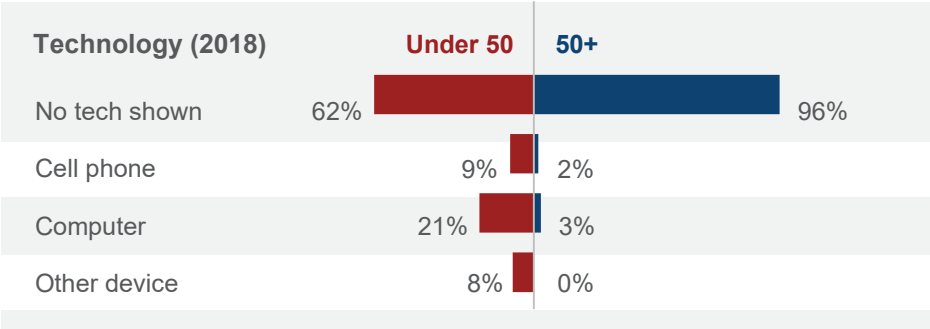


Adults over age 50 are rarely shown with technology.

People 50-plus will spend upwards of \$84B on tech products by 2030,⁴ but just 5% of images of people 50-plus show technology. When mid-life and older adults are pictured with technology, the image typically shows a younger person teaching an older person how to use it, or the younger person is using the technology as they guide the older adults. The under-50 are portrayed as independent whereas the 50-plus are depicted in dependent situations where they are leaning on someone for help. For example, a younger person using a computer as they offer financial advice to someone older. Given these stereotypes, it is not surprising that images showing adults 50-plus are more likely to lack technology than images containing younger adults (96% vs. 62%). In fact, when adults age 50-plus appear to be enjoying themselves, there is usually no technology in sight.



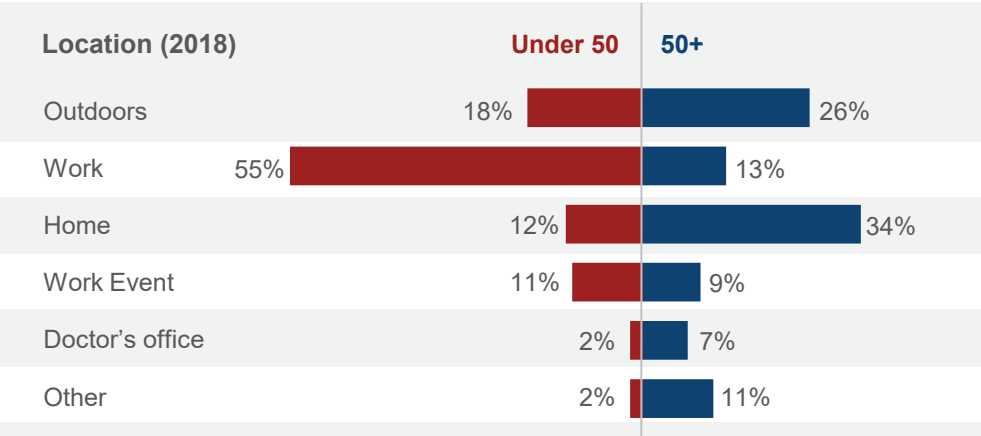
People 50-plus will spend upwards of **\$84B on tech products** by 2030,⁴ but just **5% of images of people 50+ show technology.**



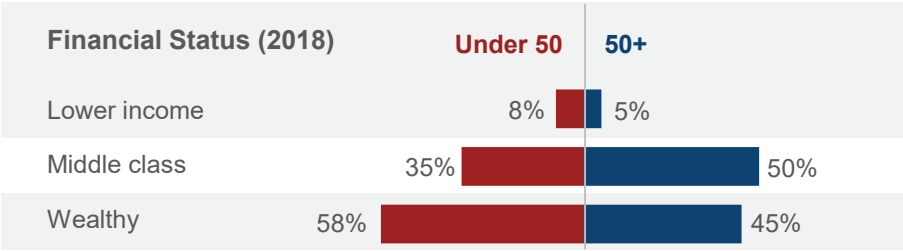
4. Kakulla, Brittne Nelson. 2019 Tech Trends and the 50+. Washington, DC: AARP Research, January 2019. <https://doi.org/10.26419/res.00269.001>

Images of the 50-plus portray the opposite of their actual work and financial status.

Although one in three people in the U.S. labor force is age 50-plus, only 13% of images show a mid-life or older adult in a work setting, a stark contrast to the 55% of images of people under 50 shown in a work setting. Images related to work events (e.g., trade shows, conferences) show more parity among age groups, but people age 50-plus in these images are generally portrayed as C-suite level rather than mid- or entry-level employees.



Data demonstrates adults ages 50-plus have greater net worth than younger adults.⁵ However, images are more likely to show adults under age 50 as affluent compared with adults 50 and older.



Older adults are infrequently shown in work settings.

The prevalence of topics addressed in images differs for those containing older and younger adults. While adults of both groups are shown in a financial-planning context, the remaining most frequent topics differ – and even when shown in a financial-planning context the difference between the under-50 and 50-plus is dramatic.

The older adults are often portrayed as confused and dependent on others. Images that contain younger adults most often pertain to work life, healthcare, and technology. Images with older adults show them most often in their living situation, with family, and in a medical context. The greatest difference in representation between those under 50 and age 50-plus are in work, followed by family relationships, technology, and then living situations.



5. 51% of adults age 50+ have net worth of at least \$100k compared with 40% of adults ages 18-49. Source: Scarborough USA+ 2019 Release 1 Total (Jan 2018-May 2019).

Difference in representation between ages

	Under 50	50+	Difference
Financial planning	24%	22%	2%
Technology	11%	2%	9%
Work life	29%	2%	27%
Living situations	3%	12%	-9%
Recreation	1%	0%	1%
Medical conditions	6%	12%	-6%
Travel	7%	5%	2%
Healthy Living	5%	5%	1%
Healthcare	13%	7%	6%
Continuing Education	0%	3%	-3%
Gardening	0%	1%	-1%
Volunteering	0%	5%	-5%
Family relationships	1%	17%	-16%
Caregiving/Long-term services and supports	0%	7%	-7%

Implications

Visual portrayals and stock photography build and reinforce stereotypes. The current landscape of online images does not accurately reflect the 50-plus population. This portrayal may exacerbate ageism in the workplace by rarely showing adults age 50-plus at work or with technology but rather as isolated or dependent on others for assistance. Images are often intended as heartwarming, showing younger people helping the 50-plus, but this portrayal has unintended consequences.

This media scan suggests that visual representations need to reflect greater diversity and authenticity. Specifically, more images are needed that portray older adults as independent and actively engaged in their communities. In addition, more images are needed that show the 50-plus in work settings and using technology with confidence.

Methodology

A random sample of 1,116 images were drawn from over 2.7 million images downloaded from professional and semiprofessional domains and social distributions for brands and thought leaders, defined as having at least one million followers. The media sources consisted of public digital and social content on news sites, blogs, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter in 2018. Natural language processing technology was used to find images using topical guides chosen to be reflective of online images. The topics were selected based on the hypothesis that adults age 50-plus were likely to be over or under-represented in them (continuing education, family, finances, healthy living, medical, recreation, technology, travel, volunteering, and workplace). The study was executed by Social Context, Inc. for more detailed information on the methodology, please refer to the full description online.



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