



Exposing the Unconscious AGE BIAS in Media

Brainsights, a neuroscience research firm, reveals the cross-generational biases of Canadian consumers – and how marketers can best speak to a forgotten generation.

Addressing the age bias in advertising

There's an age bias in media.

In the agencies that create brand advertising, those who are 50+ are hugely underrepresented.

According to a recent IPA Excellence paper authored by Olivia Stubbings
JUST 6% OF ADVERTISING AGENCY EMPLOYEES ARE 50+¹
this is compared to



Marketing departments seem to obsess over youth, poring over reports on how to market to Millennials and their successors, Gen Z.

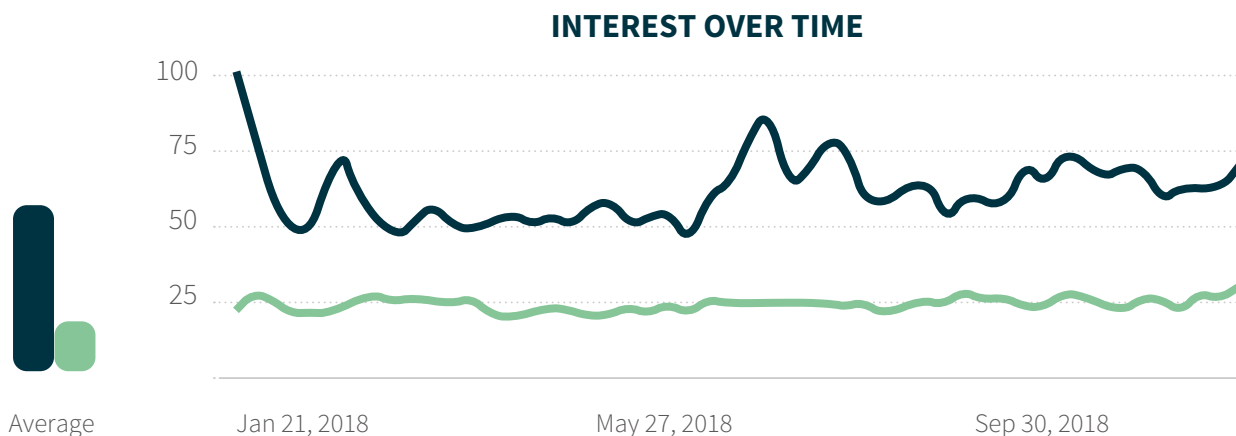
A 2016 survey of advertising, marketing, media and PR industry employees shed light on age-based discrimination in UK marketing, with 79% of respondents agreeing with the statement

"I think the industry I work in comes across as ageist."

Media and technology platforms, meanwhile tailor to the generation du jour – Vox and Vice for Millennials; Snap for Gen Z. Both Google and Facebook started on university campuses at the turn of the 21st century.

Interest and coverage of the two generations has diverged in recent years. A quick look at Google trends shows at times a 5x difference in interest (as measured by searches) for Millennials versus Boomers from Canadians.

(see graph – Millennials in blue, Boomers in green)



And according to Cisions, a press analytics company, there were more than three times as much coverage in the press of Millennials in 2018 as there was of Boomers worldwide². It would seem as though the Baby Boomers are quickly becoming a forgotten generation.

That would be a shame, on both a moral and economic level. While the media world publicly tackles its inherent gender and racial biases – from #MeToo to Procter and Gamble's many bias-busting ads, to the increased awareness of the representation of people of colour in media – age stereotypes are stubbornly pervasive.

For those who believe in inclusive societies, this is morally wrong – older people deserve the same treatment as youth.

It's also economically irresponsible – Boomers control a substantial amount of wealth, and they are a growing segment. According to StatsCan, there are 11 million people in Canada who are 55 years of age or older, and 42% of all homeowners in Canada are 55+. That amounts to about \$1 trillion in home equity wealth alone³. As of the 2016 census, there are more Canadians over the age of 65 than under 14. By not appealing to this generation of consumers, brands are missing out on a huge business opportunity.

Happily, some marketers are trying to resolve this. As the Wall Street Journal reports, the AARP (formerly the American Association of Retired Persons) recently announced a partnership with Cindy Gallop, a former ad executive and advocate of anti-age discrimination, to tackle ageist stereotypes in media and advertising.

As Karen Chong, AARP's director of influencer engagement states, **"if you look at stock photos that are used to show the 50 plus, they tend to look confused or are shown as not being able to do something. These kind of images and messaging 'reinforce the stereotypes."** The AARP aims to resolve this through better representation of older people in advertising and media.

But as the Marketoonist so effectively captures in his cartoons about modern marketing, the age biases in advertising and media are entrenched.

And, just recently, Saturday Night Live ran a host of skits pitting Boomers against Millennials.

Now, who are the Boomers?

"Well, their parents came home from World War 2 and they had a lot of sex and they had a lot of kids, and their kids grew up in a prosperous town where America was the only super power left.

Then they played all the music and they did all the drugs, then they had all the sex, and they all went to college and they got all the jobs and they made all the money and they bought all the houses and they won't ever die."

- Saturday Night Live song about Boomers, January 19th, 2019

In an industry dominated by youth, it's clear that initiatives like the AARP's face an uphill climb.

So, how can marketers bust the age bias? And how can individuals take action?

In partnership with HomeEquity Bank and Zulu Alpha Kilo, Brainsights analyzed the unconscious brain activity of more than 300 Canadians, split equally between Boomers (those aged 55 or older) and those younger than 55.

We screened 117 pieces of video content for this audience, which included ads targeted to Boomers, movie trailers, news clips and famous holiday ads, while their brain waves were recorded every 2 milliseconds using electroencephalography (EEG). This device measures levels of attention, emotional resonance, and memorability; what Brainsights refers to as, attention, connection and encoding.



ATTENTION



CONNECTION



ENCODING

Each piece of content was coded with a set of characteristics describing that content, including pace, the themes explored, the presence of celebrity, etc. Some content was screened specifically for Boomers, and some content was shown across generations. This allowed us to determine what drove response at the unconscious level of Boomers, and how this differed – or not – from other generations.

Our research reveals four key actions for both marketers and the general public alike that can help to better understand Boomers and bust the age bias.

Ditch the Old Age Stereotypes

1

Selective Parenthood Memories

3

Nostalgia as the Antidote to Flux

2

Deliver Information in Digestible Chunks

4



ACTION 1

"Can you see the real me?"

Ditch the Old Age Stereotypes

Ditch the Old Age Stereotypes

Old age stereotypes alienate Boomers.

Images of helplessness, frailty, fumbling through the latter part of life – these are typical in the media, but couldn't be further than the Boomer experience. Boomers are living longer and healthier lives than ever before. Many of them want to work much further into their lives than previous generations. They're educated, capable and enthusiastic.

And they respond to content that shows this – with lifts of +7% attention, +11% connection and +10% encoding to memory versus Boomer benchmarks.

Take for instance one HomeEquity Bank spot that shows Kurt Browning, a famous figure skater, doing tricks on the ice while talking to his sons and the camera about a bank product. While slightly younger (aged 52) than the target he's speaking to, the Boomer audience is nevertheless enthralled by the two minute spot, committing 10% more Attention, and 6% more encoding to memory than average, and showing 12% more emotional connection⁴.

Another HomeEquity Bank spot, on the other hand, showed customers sharing their experiences of a specific product in a testimonial fashion. These customers were frail, and spoke of how this product 'saved them'. The audience withdrew, with below benchmark Attention (-5%) and Encoding (-6%), and significantly less emotional resonance (-10%).

Research suggests that even words like 'elderly', 'senior' and 'old-aged' are stigmatizing and could stereotype older adults in a negative manner⁵.

Age-based identities are social constructs – ideas created and reinforced by society and through media that set expectations for how differently-aged people should behave. Through this social construct lens, becoming an older adult will come with an expectation of age-related behaviours to which people are expected to conform⁶.

But 55+ audiences don't see themselves as old and frail. They're cunning, wise and energetic, with much life left in them. That's why spots like HomeEquity Bank's Sprinkler and Bell Media's Marilyn Denis spot for Folgers coffee perform so well.

Sprinkler shows a home-owning couple deterring the visit of a persistent realtor through remote lawn sprinkler activation, a cheeky and mischievous story that elicits huge emotional responses from Boomers (+26% connection) alongside strong lifts in attention and encoding (+11% both).

The Folgers spot shows Marilyn Denis energetically embracing her busy day with the help of Folgers coffee in her mug, which shows lifts in attention (+6%) and connection (+8%) and strong lifts in encoding to memory (+28%).

What Marketers Can Do



Brands seeking to connect with Boomers must better understand the unconscious biases of this segment, and represent them as they see themselves.

What the General Public Can Do



In seeing Boomers as they (unconsciously) see themselves - as a life to be celebrated, not saved; as a sage friend, not a spent force - we can do our own part in tackling our unconscious biases relating to age.



ACTION 2

*“Can I sail through the changin’ ocean tides?
Can I handle the seasons of my life?”*

**Nostalgia as the antidote
to flux**

Nostalgia as the antidote to flux

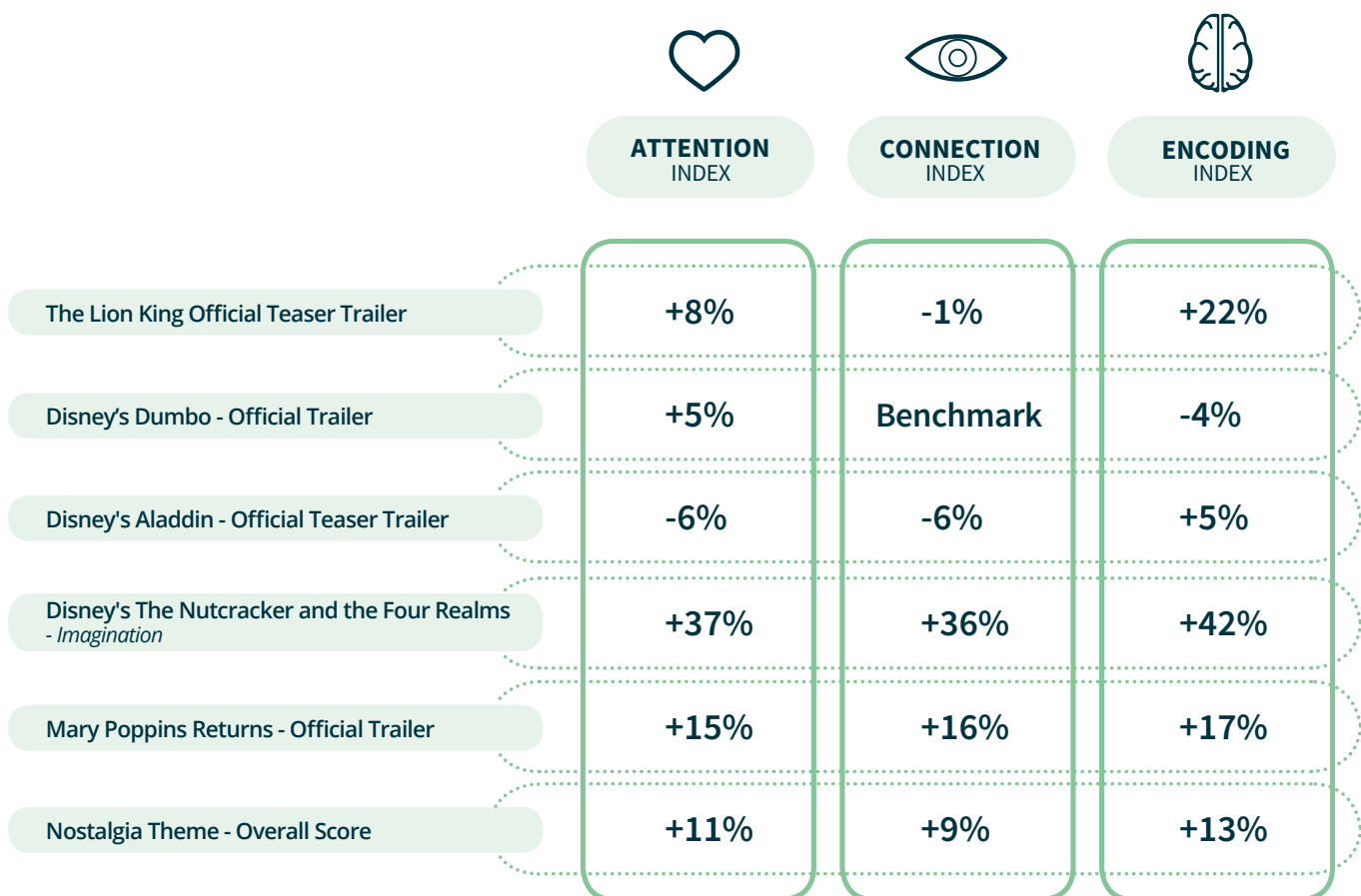
With their 1970s-inspired photo filters, and propensity for wearing vintage rock t-shirts, Millennials are often the first to come to mind if you thought of appealing to a segment with nostalgia.

But Nostalgia is a powerful theme for Boomers, too.

We screened six pieces of content tagged with 'Nostalgia' for Boomers; five of these were movie trailers reprising old classics.

Ads tagged with Nostalgia as a theme worked well overall for the 55+ segment – driving 11% greater Attention, 9% greater emotional connection, and 13% greater memorability than the average⁸.

However, there's a large spread in terms of performance (See chart).



What separates Mary Poppins and the Nutcracker is their generation-specific interest, with the former film a reprise of the 1964 classic, and the latter a film adaptation of a long-time ballet (another interest of participants) that was first televised in the late 1950s. Contrast this with modern remakes of 1990s Disney films (The Lion King, Aladdin), and their performance around benchmark for many metrics.

The counter-point to this seems to be the performance of Dumbo, which is also an older Disney film. But also perhaps too old – its 1941 release year pre-dating the film-watching years of our participants.

As *The Economist* has recently wrote, **“people are drawn to nostalgia as a source of reassurance and self-esteem”**.

For Boomers – as for Millennials – these are uncertain times; periods in life where reassurance and self-esteem are needed.

For younger generations, there’s an anxiety about reaching life’s goals (or not), and a desire to anchor to the familiar in a period of personal change and growth.

For Boomers, it’s an anxiety that may be related to economic or job insecurity⁹, the unknown of approaching the sunset years of one’s life and, as a result, a new need, to find their place in a changing world.

In this way, if we look hard enough, one might see that there’s actually a shared experience between Boomers and Millennials – a desire for a time when we knew who we were and what our place in the world was.

What Marketers Can Do



Brands that understand and tap into this need, whether through nostalgic messaging and/or reprising classic products from the Boomer generation can succeed.

What the General Public Can Do



Understand and empathize with why nostalgia is such a powerful force for Boomers. It’s stemming from a deeply-felt anxiety, which happens to be shared across generations and relates to needing certainty and familiarity in periods of flux.



ACTION 3

“You who are on the road must have a code that you can live by. And so become yourself because the past is just a good-bye. Teach your children well.”

Selective Parenthood Memories

Selective Parenthood Memories

The theme of parenthood shows potential for engaging Boomers, provided marketers can strike the right tone. That tone is generally one of positivity and/or constructive feedback.

Research by Stanford psychologist Laura L Carstensen found that older generations were more likely to recall positive images than negative images. Furthermore, Carstensen found that older adults prefer to focus on positive content whereas younger adults showed no preference between positive and negative¹⁰.

That preference for positive content plays out in the brain in response to experiences of parenthood.

Content that's overly emotional, or deals with the struggle of parenthood doesn't land well at an overall level. The Sick Kids vs DadStrong and Sick Kids vs MomStrong are two such examples that hover, on average, below benchmark for this group.

Themes of parenthood that communicate moments of personal development, learning and growth, on the other hand, show strong promise.

For example, a Whirlpool spot showing a mother teaching her teenaged son to cook, backed by an adapted piano-version of *You are my sunshine*, performs well. There's a transfer of life knowledge that happens here that leads to strong double digit lifts across Attention (+27%), Connection (+42%) and Encoding (+31%).

At this stage of life for Boomers, looking back and reflecting on life is natural. There's an element of nostalgia to this ritual, but it's more about **legacy** and what is left for future generations. For parents, there are fewer legacies more personal and prominent than the knowledge you pass on to your children.

This type of communication doesn't need to be as warm and fuzzy as a spot backed by a version of *You are my sunshine*. We've seen more of a cheeky, tough love approach work as well. In HomeEquity Bank's Move In ad, the tone is unexpected and mischievous, which we know works from our anti-old age stereotypes insights. It does so here as well, driving above average Attention, Connection and Encoding.

The ad opens on an uneasy conversation of downsizing between a daughter and her Boomer-aged parents, with the unspoken intention of the daughter and her husband moving into the parents' house. The parents suggest moving in with the daughter and her husband, shacking up in their one-bedroom condo. Horrified, the younger couple backtrack before the parents crack up in the 'gotcha' moment. It's a humorous take, but also an implicit lesson to be learned about working hard to achieve what her parents have and not taking handouts.

What Marketers Can Do

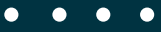


Where Boomer parents are a target for marketers, focusing on legacy and moments of learning between parent and child can unlock the unconscious minds that lead to increased and sustained engagement.

What the General Public Can Do



In popular culture today, Boomers are painted as selfish, and the root cause of Millennial problems (see SNL on page). But while Boomers may have benefited from unique conditions in history, - making them an easy target - they have an inherent desire to leave the world in a better place, and do so through the transfer of meaning to their children.



ACTION 4

"Tell it to me slowly, tell you what I really want to know."

**Deliver
information in
digestible chunks**



Deliver information in digestible chunks

Boomers need information to be presented to them in chunks and given more time to process the information and communication. As people age, stimuli can put a greater demand on cognitive resources, which means individuals will tend to require more cognitive resources to process information as they age.

This is the result of changes that happen in executive function processes resulting from normal and healthy aging. Executive function is an umbrella term that encompasses the set of higher-order processes (such as inhibitory control, working memory and attentional flexibility) that govern goal-directed action and adaptive responses to novel, complex or ambiguous situations¹¹.

Take for example, HomeEquity Bank's spots featuring Kurt Browning and his sons. We discussed the response earlier of Boomers to the 2-minute spot. The response of non-Boomers to the spot was not nearly as good – with all scores below average (-9% Attention, -13% Connection and -4% Encoding). Contrast this to the 60-second version of this ad, which we also analyzed. This one had more or less the same information, just condensed for time. In other words, information in the spot was delivered faster. For the Boomer audience, this led to a drop in all ACE scores, for the 55+, average attention (-6% pts), connection (-10% pts) and encoding (-4% pts) during the 60s viewing of Kurt and Sons versus the 120s viewing. For <55, the reverse happened, with lifts of 16%/19%/12% across ACE scores for the 60s viewing versus the 120s viewing. Delivering information in accessible and digestible chunks can drive double-digit lifts across Attention, Connection and Encoding for the 55+ audience.

For the under 55 audience, the reverse effect was observed – +5% Attention, +6% Connection and + 8% Encoding versus benchmarks for this audience, representing doubledigit differences in unconscious cognitive response to the pace of information delivery.

We observed this phenomenon across ads: where information was speedily delivered, Boomers struggled to maintain tune-in. However, where it was delivered in accessible and digestible chunks, the response was positive.

And this can take various forms. Take another example, looking at two different news clips – one from *The Guardian* (The disturbing truth about teaching in America) and one from *The Economist* (The world's most liveable cities). The difference in response to the two clips was substantial – a 14-point difference in both Attention and Connection, and a 17-point difference in Encoding. Some of this is surely the topic of the segment overall – Boomers no doubt express interest in understanding where the best quality of life is to be found. But some of this difference can also be explained by the way in which the news is delivered. *The Economist* uses more data visualization and graphics on screen to curate attention and reinforce points that are being made in the audio track. *The Guardian* piece, on the other hand, often used visuals that didn't line up to the story being told.

What Marketers Can Do



Marketers seeking to engage Boomers must understand the healthy aging process of the brain in order to craft the most impactful messages without overwhelming their audience. This requires curating information in a way that directs audience attention and setting a pace of information delivery that is manageable and digestible.

What the General Public Can Do



Be patient. Recognize that any miscomprehension an older adult may have in processing information may be the result of healthy brain aging processes, and that one day, sooner than you know, you'll be there too.

Conclusion

Capitalizing on the opportunity of the Boomer generation requires a deep understanding of how Boomers see themselves. Surfacing the unconscious biases of Boomers as it relates to media representation of this generation helps to further our understanding of how marketers should be addressing this generation.

Through measuring the unconscious brain response of consumers across the boomer generation to a swathe of popular content, we revealed **four key themes and styles that marketers can explore:**



Generation-tailored nostalgia, in order to combat the anxiety and uncertainty of this stage of life.



Cheeky, mischievous, adventurous and capable – themes that counter the old-age stereotypes prevalent in mainstream media.



Legacy and teaching younger generations, for example through themes of parenthood, to communicate a desire to leave behind a positive contribution to those Boomers care about.



Delivery of information in digestible and manageable chunks to ensure maximum impact in communication to tailor to biological and neurological differences of an aging brain.

For the general public, the findings are equally vital, with key actions to address societal age biases. **It boils down to understanding and empathizing, and the insights can be found in the lyrics of this generation's music:**

*"Oh, mirror in the sky, what is love?
Can the child within my heart rise above?
Can I sail through the changin' ocean tides?
Can I handle the seasons of my life?"*

*Well, I've been 'fraid of changin'
'Cause I've built my life around you
But time makes you bolder
Even children get older
And I'm gettin' older, too"*

Song lyrics by Fleetwood Mac "Landslide"

If we can see older generations as humans, complete with the anxieties and hopes that we all have, with the added circumspection that comes with entering one's latter years, we can better understand and communicate with this audience, and build room for them in our society.

About Brainsights

Brainsights uses neuroscience measurement to surface the unconscious biases of people in response to communications, media and content. Leading brands and media companies use Brainsights' proprietary measurement and insights platform to understand the real drivers of their customers' decision-making in order to create better products, content and communication that grow their business.

About Kevin Keane

Kevin is the founder and CEO of Brainsights.

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Song lyrics courtesy of

- The Who "The Real Me"
- Fleetwood Mac "Landslide"
- Crosby, Stills Nash and Young "Teach your children"
- The Zombies "Time of the Season"