



reframing ageing

Exploring the changing conversation around ageing and what it means for culture, representation and people (of all ages)...

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**elder
person:**

Defined as aged 60 years or over
(Economic and Social Commission for
Asia and the Pacific, EPAC)

introduction

Ageing is a complex topic, and of course perceived differently across the world. But we can't ignore the blunt impact of negative attitudes to age.

Ageism when applied to older people can mean being widely mocked, patronised and demonised. And it can also lead to gross mistreatment, bias, assumptions and even poorer social and health outcomes.

A recent study conducted by the Australian Human Rights Commission revealed that ageism has become the most accepted form of prejudice, with 63% of them having experienced it over the last five years

"Being 50-plus in the workforce in Australia in 2022 is like being gay in the 1970s... It's something you can't be open about if you want to get a job and keep it."
— ABC News



Ageist attitudes have the potential to alienate customers. Positive stories of later-life triumphs are thin on the ground. Common brand and media representations of ageing across the globe are problematic, with the treatment of those aged 50 and over leaning into limited tropes, and generally lacking any depth across the board.

Where are the narratives that come with the '100 Year Life' or 'the Great Unretirement' and the '60 Year Career' being told? And that's just for starters...

In this report we wanted to look at attitudes to ageing and how to reflect the ways that longer lifespans will have revolutionary - and exciting - implications for our lives, our families, our careers and our future.

We talk to our KIN members - Crowd DNA's global network of creators and connectors - for insight, and take a hard look at how brands can stay at the forefront of the new elder customer and their culture.

It's time to reframe our attitudes to ageing...



chapter one:

life stops at fifty

ageist stereotypes of elderly people as past their sell-by date

The cultural narratives and representations of ageing have seen older people being handed the invisibility cloak.

These are the four 'I's:

irrelevance **infantilization**

inferiority **invisibility**

"The worst is when people think, 'Oh, she doesn't look like she did in her 20s, so she can't physically do the same things'"

— Actress Michelle Yeo, 60, speaking shortly after she won a best actress Oscar, 2022

irrelevance

As people reach old age, they can face a decline in relevance, status, power and authority, especially compared to millennials and Gen Z. A World Health Organization report on ageing (2021) concluded: "Half the world's population is ageist against older people."

Studies have found that the beliefs about becoming irrelevant are highly prevalent for the older generation, pushing them to stay social and avoid the loneliness often linked with ageing.

"Because we associate both ill health and loss of social power with ageing, those are the things that are probably more frightening than ageing itself."

— Elizabeth, Australia, KIN

And mainstream culture plays on this fear of 'fading out'...

we see:

- Powerful senior characters being threatened by the younger ones (eg Meryl Streep's aggressive boss in *The Devil Wears Prada*), signifying fear of irrelevance
- Later-life not taken up as narratives. As author Mary Sharatt says: "Why have so many authors, past and present, refused to let their heroines age?"
- Study conducted by SBS, alongside the doc *What Does Australia Really Think About Old People*, revealed that 50% of senior Aussies fear getting old due to entrenched stigma and prejudice.



inferiority

Older people can be considered 'less' than younger people in many aspects, often focused on their ability to work. This may mean struggling to get a job or promoted, or downward mobility. Either way, this overlooks competence and what they truly need for their own betterment.

"In Singapore, the pressure to not fail or be seen as incapable is relatively more intense compared to other markets, which comes down to the fact that we are a meritocratic society so we reward people based on their good work. So a lot of older people here are still employed (to continue being productive) even though I think at 60 or 70 they've done enough and should be spending more time with family."

— Matt, Singapore, KIN

Productivity culture puts older people at risk of facing discrimination and obsolescence.



we see:

- Singapore has one of the world's most rapidly ageing populations but a recent study suggested that employees in their 40s or older remain discriminated against when it comes to salary and promotional opportunities
- The movie Plan 75 provides a critique to Japan's ageist social mores, depicting how over-75s are encouraged to euthanize themselves in order to save the country's economic crisis
- China's tech industry is notoriously known for favouring young workers, particularly those under 35, and being hostile to older ones with long hours and tight schedules.

infantilization

It's almost impossible to talk about ageing without addressing declining health.

Older people are often perceived as no longer in control over their lives and body - and this can only be exacerbated by the crisis in care. People fear living with frailty or dementia; to be thought of as a problem, a 'bed blocker'? They are deprived from a sense of autonomy: it's an infantilization.

Where is the support, products and marketing to help us to age

with dignity? To empower not infantilize.

"Everything focuses on diapers and medication with people over 55! Come on... most of us don't use that. Stop!"
— Forbes

Mainstream media centres on loss of control for older people, especially around aged care.

we see:

- The aged care crisis in Australia keeps getting worse, with the number of residential care homes decreasing from 949 to 830 between 2016 and 2021. Older Aussies are still faced with lack of equitable access, funding and government support to allow them to be empowered as they age
- 1 in 5 people over 70 in Australia had no one to spend Christmas with, suggesting how much older people are vulnerable to loneliness
- Mainstream culture's representations of older people in aged care distinctly portray them as helpless, incapable and prone to exploitation, further devaluing their worth and tangible need for support, eg. I Care A Lot (Amazon Prime) about a woman who scams older people.



invisibility

While Irrelevance, Inferiority, Infantilization undermine, older people also find themselves being faded out and becoming invisible.

Women are particularly faced with harsh treatment in pop culture that seems to punish them for no longer being in 'prime' condition or judged as attractive only in terms of how 'youthful' they still look.

"I had known for years, of course, that beyond a certain age women become invisible in public spaces. The famous erotic gaze is withdrawn. You are no longer, in the eyes of the public, a sexual being."

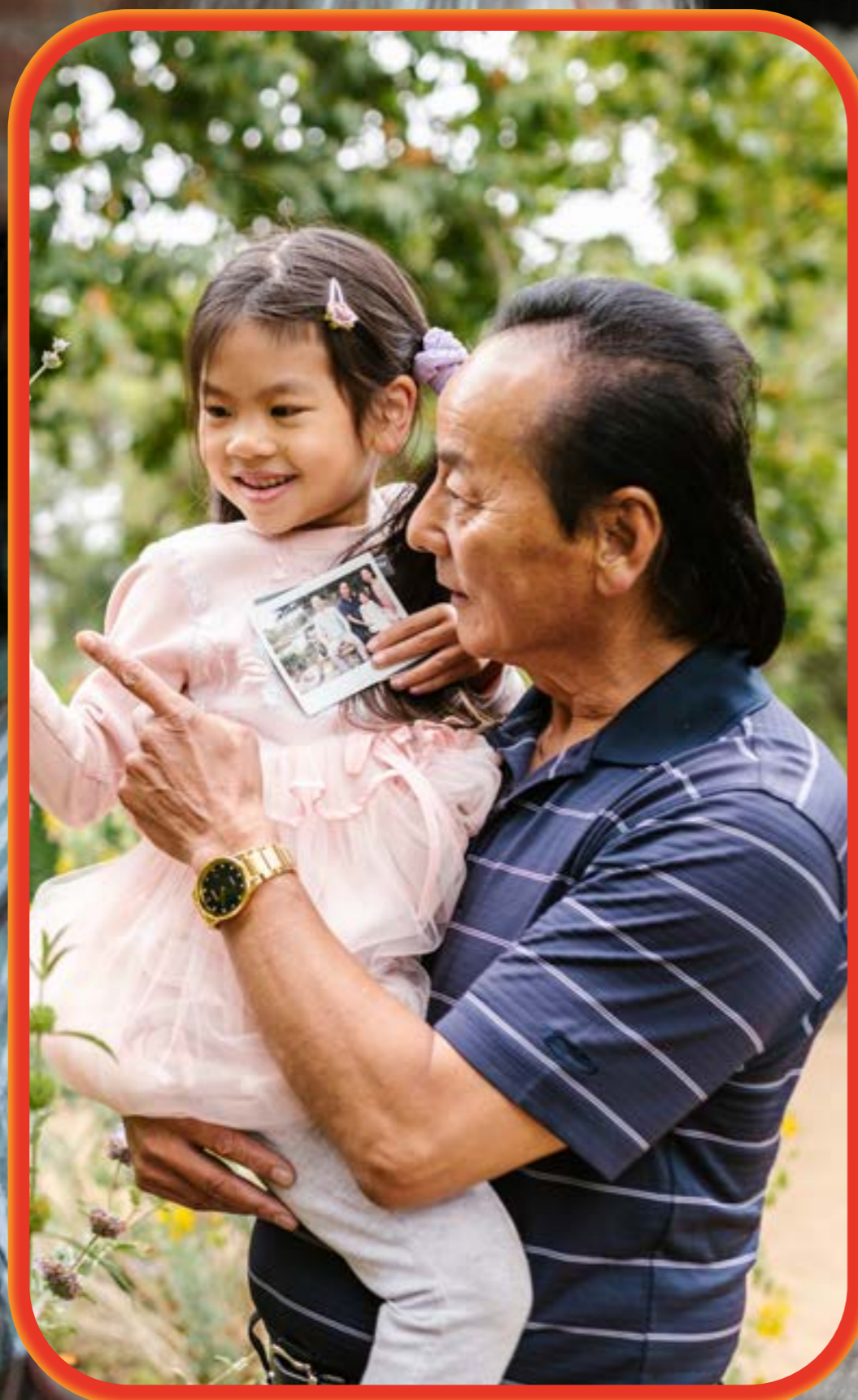
— Helen Garner, *The Insults of Age* (2015)

Reports show that men also face intense pressure to retain their masculine traits, and care for their appearance: but instead of attractiveness - which they relate to femininity - it's more in terms of activity and performance.

Older people disappear in mainstream media as they get over 50...

we see:

- Studies have shown that for over a decade female characters have always been younger than male ones - with the most recent suggesting that only 6% of movies in 2021 included female characters 60+, while 15% included male characters 60+
- Leonardo diCaprio sparked a conversation due to a pattern of dating women under 25: a spotlight on both women having a shelf-life, and that men should be attractive to younger women
- Ageism is common within the K-beauty industries due to their obsession with youth and anti-ageing products, leading to lack of representation of women over 40.



chapter two:

but things are changing...



While the picture we have painted may seem bleak, the reality is that things are changing.

Older people are becoming more vocal about who they are, smashing negative tropes and stereotypes of ageing in the process. As importantly, they are beginning to lead their own conversations about how they should be represented.

The narrative of ageing is being pushed in new, exciting directions - and opening up opportunities for brands to connect with older demographics.

“Some politicians, economists, and journalists are wringing their hands over what they call ‘the silver tsunami’, but they’re missing the point. The fact that so many people are getting to experience old age, and doing so in better health, is one of society’s greatest achievements. It’s also an extraordinary opportunity to rethink what it means to grow old.”

— Becca Levy, author of
Breaking The Age Code



so, what does it mean to reframe ageing



let's explore how narratives of ageing are evolving in three key stages

Dominant

In mainstream culture

Emergent

Fringe, but rising influence



rejecting



reassessing



reclaiming

rejecting ageing



Ageing has traditionally been associated with diminishing qualities and physical attractiveness; the fact that you no longer resemble yourself.

The direct opposite of this – rejecting ageing – is all about maintaining youthful traits and abilities and showing that you have very much ‘still got it’. For people who ‘reject’ age, it’s about embracing the phrase ‘age is just a number’ and recognising your years as something that don’t hold you back.

cultural cues:

- **Demonstrating ‘impossibility’:** eg Tom Cruise is known for performing his own dangerous stunts in movies that not even his younger co-stars could pull off
- **Remaining sexually attractive:** eg Hong Kong actor Tony Leung made his first Hollywood movie debut in Shang-Chi at the age of 59, playing a villain who falls in love with a younger woman
- **Promoting ideal appearance:** eg Nicole Kidman’s recent magazine cover sees her showing off fierce muscles in a crop top and mini skirt
- **Using language that celebrates celebs over 50 that don’t seem to age or who look consistently youthful:** eg ‘Paul Rudd doesn’t age’
- **Ageing in style:** eg Chinese ‘Glammas’ are senior influencers using TikTok to defy ageism by showcasing impeccable style.




what can we learn?

from rejecting ageing:

1 **Redefine the user image.**
Brands can increase product appeal and relevance to a broader demographic by including older on-brand talent.

2 **Expand media targeting.**
Brands can increase reach and drive media ROI by buying against a wider yet still relevant demographic (18-64).

3 **New product development.**
'Longevity science' (biohacking your daily life) is just one example of NPD that engenders positivity about growing older - we can live well for longer.



“People like Annie Leibovitz are still being creative and leading edge in their profession. You’re still being interesting and just taking the lead in things which is cool. And as they age, they just get better. We have lots of examples of older people continuing to lead the charge, which changes people’s view of what it means to be old - makes it possible to be different and eccentric.”
— Elizabeth, Australia, KIN

reassessing ageing



Narratives of ageing are also moving into a space where people are tired of trying to fit into ageing 'ideals'.

Instead, people are beginning to embrace who they are as they age, and retaining the control to choose how they want to look or behave without adhering to certain rules or the need for validation. Ageing in this space is about allowing people to be their most comfortable, imperfect and authentic selves. Ageing doesn't have to be perfect, and that's okay.

cultural cues:

- **Breaking ageing taboos:** eg 61 year old Indian sexual expert Seema Anand educates and breaks misconceptions around older people having sex
- **Depictions of midlife crisis:** exploring and normalising the traditionally 'unwanted' sides of ageing such as tragedy, mistakes and invisibility with playfulness, eg the dark comedy about later life, *Another Round*
- **Not attempting to be in an ideal shape and choosing to be comfortable in your own skin:** eg Celeste Barber's iconic recreation of celeb photos with a realistic spin
- **Language that challenges conventions and ideal expectations of ageing:** eg Rita Moreno's critique of Hollywood ageism
- **Portrayals of middle-aged female characters that are complex and imperfect:** eg the feisty but flawed female lead in *Mare of Easttown* (HBO).



what can we learn?

from reassessing ageing:

- 1 Indulgence is ageless.** Fun and youthful indulgences like ice cream are perfect for the 'just be yourself, at any age' brand narrative.
- 2 Imperfections make us unique.** Successful 'reassessing ageing' marketing focuses on rich characters and personalities, not their ages.
- 3 Rethink consumer insights.** Insights are often based on archetypal behaviour. Clichés and tropes must be challenged for brands to seize the 'ageless' opportunity.

"All these typical stereotypes that say that 'if you're older, you're less capable, less interesting', have been reversed, especially in Singapore. Older people now are going out on hikes, they're taking longer holidays, they're getting on technology and platforms like TikTok."

— Matt, Singapore, KIN

reclaiming ageing



Emergently, we're reaching a stage where people focus more on the deeper meaning of ageing as a life stage. Moving beyond traits and qualities that are typically seen on the surface, people are exploring the lived experiences of those that are older.

The narratives here are less binary and are maturing into a space where ageing is seen as an outlet of continual growth and self-fulfilment. This is about embracing and celebrating facets of life that can only occur through ageing. It provides people with a unique and valuable insight that can only occur through maturity.

Reclaiming ageing sees people reflect on life in a way that only they can do, helping them to grasp and redefine what it means to grow older.

cultural cues:

- **Representing all facets of later life:** eg Korean doc series *Oops! We Forgot Your Order* shows how seniors with dementia overcome challenges with joy and togetherness
- **History and personal narrative:** eg the book *Chinatown Pretty* documents how seniors in Chinatown tell stories about their lives and share their unique insight acquired over the years
- **Getting wiser with age:** eg Indian influencer Poonam Sapra uses Instagram to spread words of wisdom, becoming a role model for the younger generation
- **Still learning and creating:** eg Japanese nonagenarian Kimiko Nishimoto picked up a camera at 72 and became an influencer known for her delightful self-portraits
- **Growth in self-acceptance:** eg Brendan Fraser acknowledging his physical transformation throughout his career amid his recent 'comeback', and finding value in not looking like he used to.



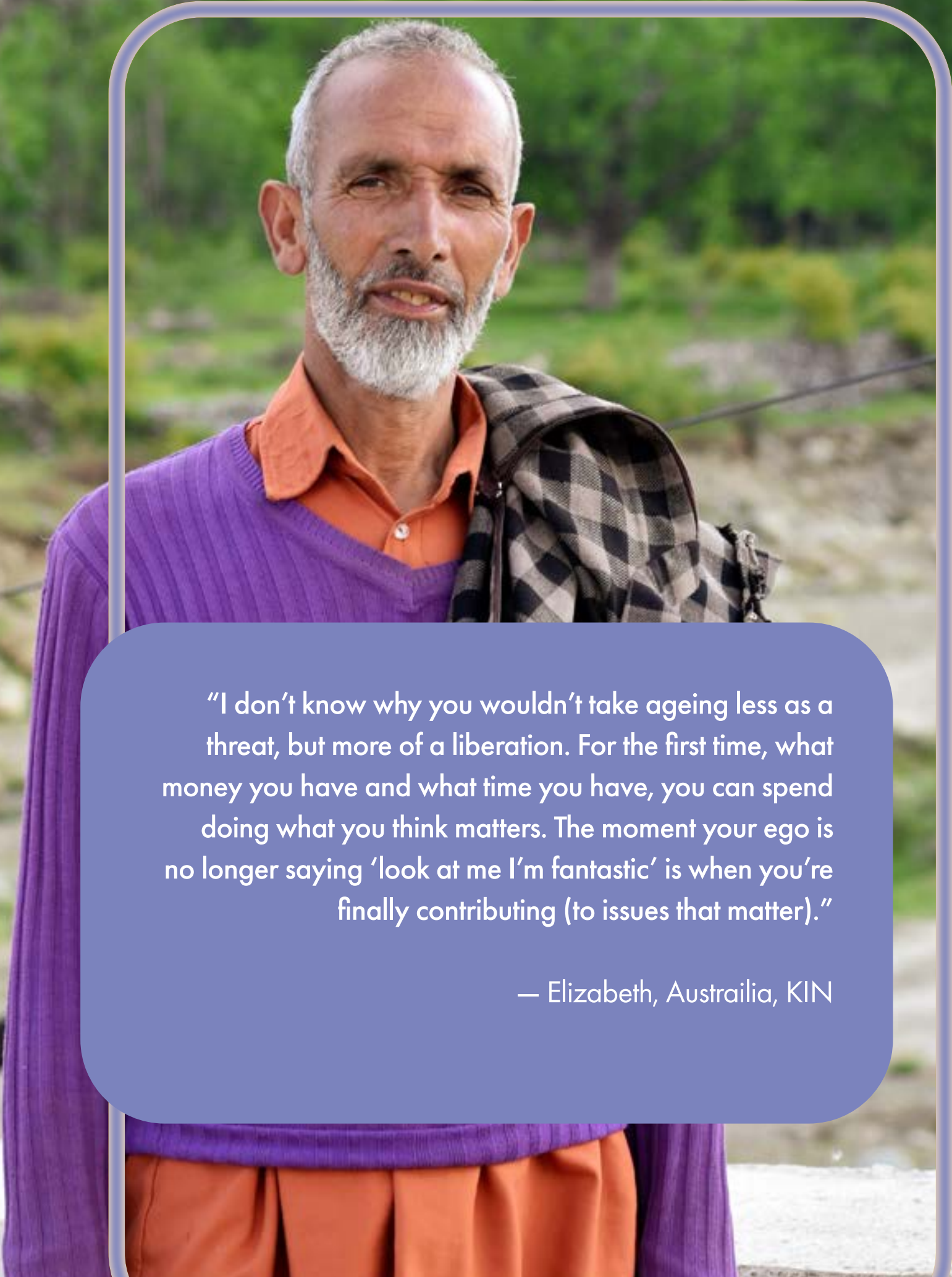
what can we learn?

from reclaiming ageing:

1 **Don't underestimate 'old money'.** As the world gets older (due to falling birth rates and improved care) older generations' buying power increases.

2 **Creativity is ageless.** Creativity is central to many brands' DNA. Now more than ever, it's clear real talent does not dim with age.

3 **Celebrate wisdom.** Famous US investor Ray Dalio is an example of how age brings wisdom. Brands can lean into the credibility of such personalities online to create youth-focused social content.



"I don't know why you wouldn't take ageing less as a threat, but more of a liberation. For the first time, what money you have and what time you have, you can spend doing what you think matters. The moment your ego is no longer saying 'look at me I'm fantastic' is when you're finally contributing (to issues that matter)."

— Elizabeth, Australia, KIN



**“The best way to look at ageing
is to see it as an opportunity
to leave what didn’t work
behind and step boldly into
a brand new future”**

- Oprah Winfrey

thanks for reading!

Crowd DNA is a cultural insights and strategy consultancy with offices in London, Amsterdam, New York, Singapore, Sydney, Stockholm and Los Angeles.

Formed in 2008, operating in 75+ markets, we bring together trends specialists, researchers, data analysts, strategists, writers, designers and film-makers, creating culturally charged commercial advantage for the world's most exciting brands.

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