# Reframing Aging Through Images:

## Recommendations from Research

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# Introduction

On average, the US population is living longer than ever before. However, as the population ages, older people continue to be confronted with ageist attitudes and harmful stereotypes that have negative effects on their health and wellbeing.[1]

**The way older people are portrayed matters.** Previous research on framing and aging indicates that framing–the choices we make about what we say, how we say it, what we emphasize, and what we leave unsaid–can affect perceptions of aging and older people.[2] In addition to the framing conveyed with words, *visual* framing–how older people are portrayed in images–plays an important role in the implicit messages that are sent through media, advertising, and other communications. Images can engage audiences by evoking emotions, facilitating memory, and transmitting cultural meaning.[3] **In other words, images–if used strategically–can be important tools for shaping attitudes about aging.**

Unfortunately, images of older people in media and advertising often perpetuate ageist stereotypes. Research shows that older adults who spend more time viewing media are more likely to report experiencing everyday ageism than those who view less media.[4] In addition to ageist portrayals, older people are often absent from media entirely. A recent study from AARP showed that people age 50 and older were significantly underrepresented in images appearing in online news and social media advertisements compared to their younger peers.[5] An earlier FrameWorks report on media depictions found that when older people are featured in the media, they are typically featured as one of two extremes: (1) negative images that represent older people as frail, experiencing poor cognitive and physical health, and in need of constant and expensive care, or (2) positive images that portray older people as active in the extreme and requiring no support.[6] Negative representations feed the public's already problematic perceptions of the aging process and stereotypes about older Americans. Ironically, the media's positive images of aging are just as unproductive, as they link "successful aging" to individual lifestyle and consumption choices.

This reality, while grim, also presents an important opportunity. **A more intentional use of images has the power to *reduce* the prevalence of ageism and *improve* public perceptions of aging and older people.**

In 2021, the FrameWorks Institute and AARP engaged in a yearlong, multi-method research study to better understand the effects of images on public perceptions of aging and older people. The findings from this research informed a set of recommendations for how to use images to counter negative stereotypes and advance a more complete picture of older people. These recommendations are outlined in detail in this strategic guide and are summarized below:

1. When depicting older people with limited mobility, use images in which they are participating in activities or engaged with others.
2. When showing older people using technology, show images that signal comfort and competence.
3. In most cases, avoid images of "super seniors." Use images of workplace settings to depict older people as active contributors to their communities.
4. Use images of older people in workplace settings to help people see them as active contributors to their communities.
5. Use images that depict older people in positive settings and engaged in positive activities.
6. When possible, select images based on your target audience.

When it comes to how we frame aging and older people, the stakes are high. The negative impacts of ageism are vast and well documented–from negative health outcomes, to fewer employment prospects, to poor treatment by families and caregivers. Companies that use ageist advertising and marketing are at risk of alienating older consumers, who spend 56 cents of every dollar in the United States.[7] And older people are projected to outnumber children by the year 2034.[8]

It is also important to remember that images are just one part of an effective framing strategy. Images work in tandem with text to create representations of aging and older people. Images can help amplify positive changes in attitudes but must always be considered together with text-based strategies.

The recommendations for using images outlined in this strategic guide can help advocates, communicators, and marketers tell a more positive, holistic story about aging–one that is rooted in the authentic experiences of older people.

# How We Conducted This Research

Building on earlier research about reframing aging,[9] FrameWorks and AARP researchers developed a set of empirically testable hypotheses about how images affect public perceptions of aging and older people.

**The overarching hypothesis of this research was that authentic images that counter negative stereotypes about older people can generate more positive attitudes about aging and older people.** A detailed set of hypotheses and an expanded explanation of research methods can be found in the Research Methods Supplement that accompanies this guide.

When we talk about attitudes toward aging, we have in mind the following set of related ideas:

- Is aging something to embrace or fight?
- Is aging a process of inevitable decline?
- Does aging increase or decrease our ability to cope with challenges?
- Does aging enable or limit life's possibilities?

When we talk about attitudes toward older people, we are referencing both explicit and implicit attitudes that people hold. Explicit attitudes are measured by asking people what they think about an issue (e.g., how much they agree with the idea that older people have a lot to contribute to society). Measures of implicit, or unconscious, attitudes do not rely on self-reported data. Implicit attitudes in this study are measured through an Implicit Association Test that "measures the strength of associations between concepts (e.g., Black people, people in the LGBTQ community) and evaluations (e.g., good, bad) or stereotypes (e.g., athletic, clumsy)."[10]

Measures of implicit bias can give us insight into whether people are unintentionally biased against older people and in favor of younger people, even if they might explicitly state that they have no preference. Prior research has found that both implicit and explicit attitudes can predict discriminatory behavior.[11,12] Importantly, research also suggests that people can hold simultaneous but different evaluations of the same concept.[13] This means that a person can hold positive explicit attitudes about older people while also holding negative implicit attitudes about them.

In developing hypotheses, FrameWorks and AARP identified 13 categories of images that might affect explicit or implicit attitudes about aging and older people: *intergenerational groups, same generation groups, workplace setting, community setting, household setting, limited mobility/engaged, limited mobility/disengaged, technologically competent, technologically incompetent, active, passive, alone,* and *"super senior"*. Category descriptions are below.

| Categories of Images | Descriptions |
|---|---|
| **Generational composition of groups**<br>• Intergenerational<br>• Same generation | • Intergenerational: Groups composed of individuals from older and younger generations engaging with one another<br>• Same generation: Groups composed of individuals from older generations only engaging with one another |
| **Setting**<br>• Workplace<br>• Community<br>• Household | • Workplace: Older people in workplace settings (not limited to offices), whether they are depicted in positions of authority or not<br>• Community: Older people portrayed as actively participating in community activities (e.g., at parks, restaurants, festivals)<br>• Household: Older people with friends or family at home |
| **Mobility and engagement**<br>• Limited mobility/engaged<br>• Limited mobility/disengaged | • Engaged: Older people showing a range of limited mobility statuses who are engaged with others or their surroundings<br>• Disengaged: Older people showing a range of limited mobility statuses who are not engaged with others or their surroundings |
| **Technological competence**<br>• Technologically competent<br>• Technologically incompetent | • Competent: Older people who seem comfortable using different kinds of technologies, not limited to phones, tablets, and laptops<br>• Incompetent: Older people who seem uncomfortable using technology; will typically depict an older adult being helped |
| **Level of activity**<br>• Active<br>• Passive | • Active: Older people engaged with others doing everyday things, including physical and mental forms of activity; the older adult is an active subject, not the object of action<br>• Passive: Older people disengaged from others who are involved in some type of activity |
| **Presence of others**<br>• Alone | • Alone: Older people by themselves, either sitting or engaged in an activity (e.g., reading) |
| **Stereotype**<br>• "Super senior" | • "Super senior": Images of older people engaged in extreme activities (e.g., skydiving, bodybuilding, surfing, etc.) |

Table 1. **Descriptions of image categories.**

To select the images to be used in this study, researchers tested and validated more than 100 images through a biometric study that used eye tracking and facial coding. Following the biometric study, researchers narrowed the number of images and conducted online interviews to determine if the image categories were salient to participants (e.g., whether people noticed the workplace or community setting of an image). Researchers also used the interviews to explore the effects of the categories on explicit attitudes about aging and older people. Based on these interviews, we refined the sets of images brought forward into the next stage of research: a pilot of the survey experiments. Detailed information about the methodology for the biometric study and the interviews can be found in the Research Methods Supplement that accompanies this guide.

Prior to testing our hypotheses through a series of survey experiments, we piloted the survey to determine the best way to present images in the experiment. The pilot did not consistently indicate stronger statistical effects of one image method over the other. We decided to display the images as a set. For example, when being exposed to the "alone" category of images, participants would see all three images of that category at the same time.

The full online survey experiment was fielded with a nationally representative sample of 3,166 US adults age 18 and older. Participants were exposed to one of 13 image categories or a control condition with no images. They were then asked a series of questions about their explicit attitudes toward aging and older people. A second survey experiment was then fielded with a separate nationally representative sample of 3,153 US adults age 18 and older to measure implicit attitudes after exposure to images. More information on the measurement of implicit attitudes is available in the Research Methods Supplement. By comparing the responses of participants in different experimental conditions, we were able to identify how images affect explicit and implicit attitudes on aging and older people.

The recommendations we present in this guide derive from this iterative process. While evidence presented is largely from the two surveys (experimental survey and implicit attitudes survey), the design of these surveys was shaped by the interviews. In addition, insights from the interviews were helpful in interpreting the survey experiment results.

# Recommendations: What to Do, What to Avoid, and Why

This section outlines six recommendations based on the research described above.

## Recommendation 1: When depicting older people with limited mobility, use images in which they are participating in activities or engaged with others.

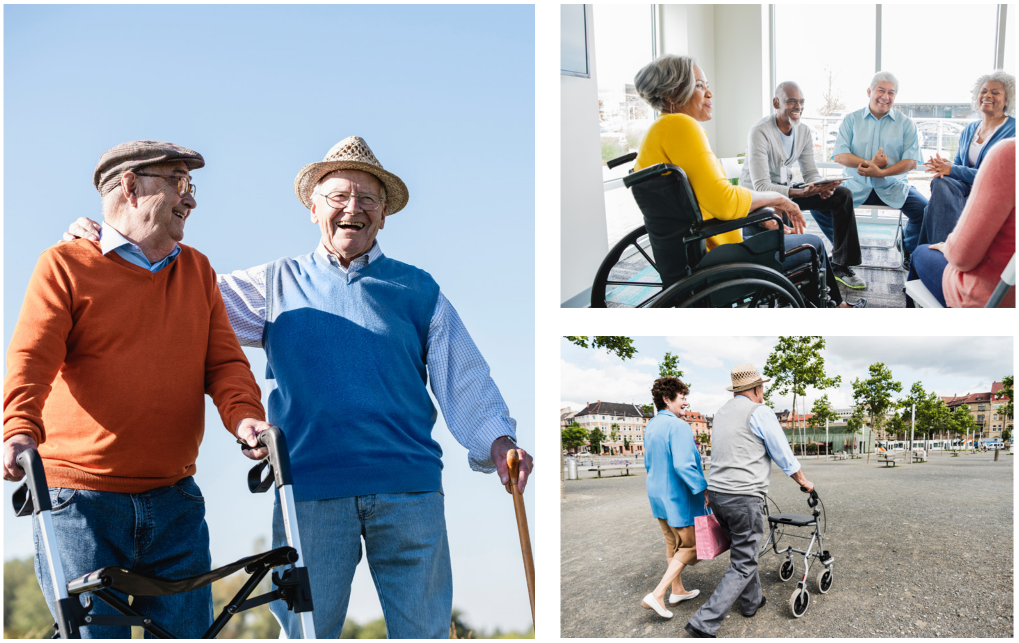
Older people may experience limited mobility in their daily lives. Advocates and communicators want to depict aging and older people realistically–and that includes depictions of limited mobility.

Yet images of older people with limited mobility can increase negative attitudes about aging. So how can advocates and other stakeholders show authentic images of older people–which include portrayals of limited mobility–without worsening negative attitudes about aging?

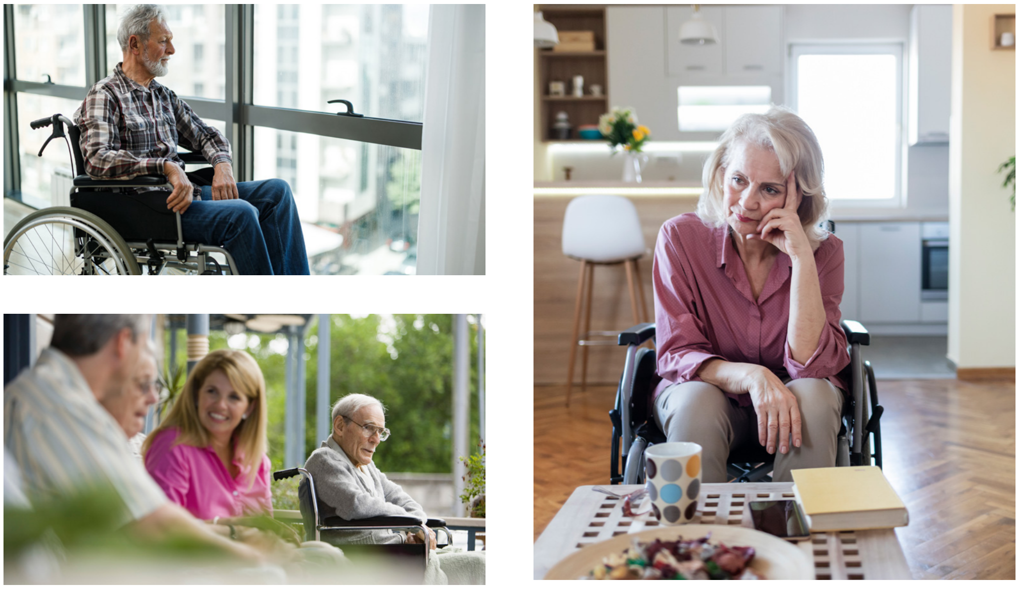
According to our research, images in which older people with limited mobility are active and engaged can help demonstrate that these individuals bring value to themselves, others, and society.

**The Experiment**

To understand the effects of different images on people's attitudes, we tested two categories of images related to mobility: *limited mobility/engaged* and *limited mobility/disengaged*. The *limited mobility/engaged* category (Set 1) showed older people with limited mobility who were engaging with others in conversations or activities, while the *limited mobility/disengaged* category (Set 2) showed images of similar subjects who were not engaging with their surroundings.



**Set 1. Limited Mobility/Engaged**



**Set 2. Limited Mobility/Disengaged**

### The Results

The *limited mobility/disengaged* category significantly increased negative explicit attitudes toward aging, increased agreement with most negative stereotypes about aging, and increased explicit attitudes of paternalism[14] when compared to the control (the group that did not see any images). By contrast, the *limited mobility/engaged* category significantly reduced negative explicit attitudes, decreased agreement with most negative stereotypes about aging, and reduced feelings of paternalism toward older people when compared to the *limited mobility/disengaged* category.

This finding also holds true in certain cases for implicit attitudes. *Limited mobility/engaged* images significantly reduced implicit bias against older people for participants age 50-64. *Limited mobility/disengaged* images significantly increased implicit bias against older people for participants age 65 and older.

### Implications

When portraying older people with limited mobility, use images in which they are actively engaged with others or their surroundings. Doing so has positive effects on both implicit and explicit attitudes toward older people.

## Recommendation 2: When showing older people using technology, show images that signal comfort and competence.

Though you wouldn't know it from the stereotypes that pervade our culture, older people are avid users of technology:

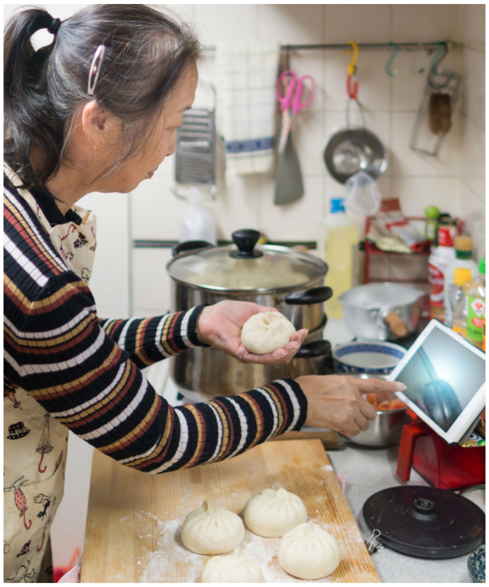
1. About 91 percent of people age 50 and older use a computer.
2. Approximately 94 percent of this group say technology helps them keep in touch with friends and family.
3. More than 80 percent of Americans age 50–64 have smartphones (about the same as the population at large).[15]

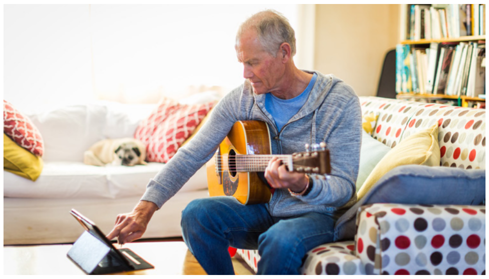
However, the myth of the technologically challenged older person still persists. Thus, it is critical to choose images that accurately depict older people's use of technology.

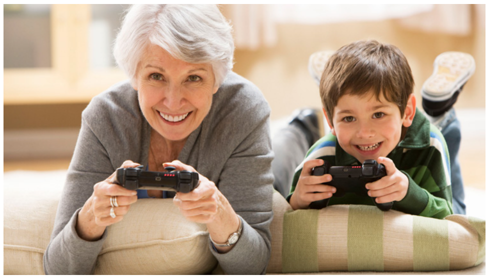
### The Experiment

We tested two categories of images depicting older people using technology: *technologically competent* and *technologically incompetent. The technologically competent* category (Set 3) showed older people who seem comfortable using technology without help. The *technologically incompetent* category (Set 4) showed older people who seem uncomfortable with technology or who need help to use it.

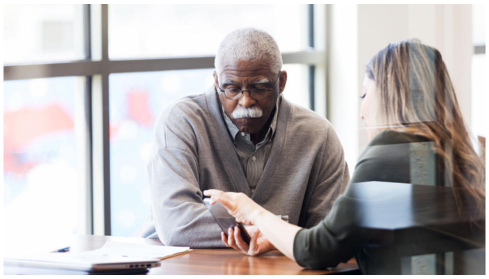
**Set 3.**
**Technologically Competent**

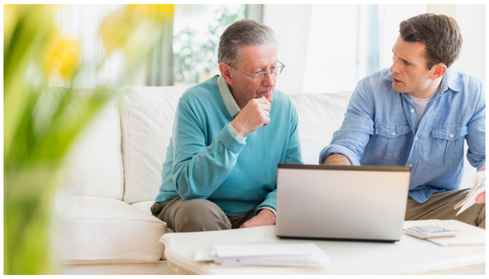


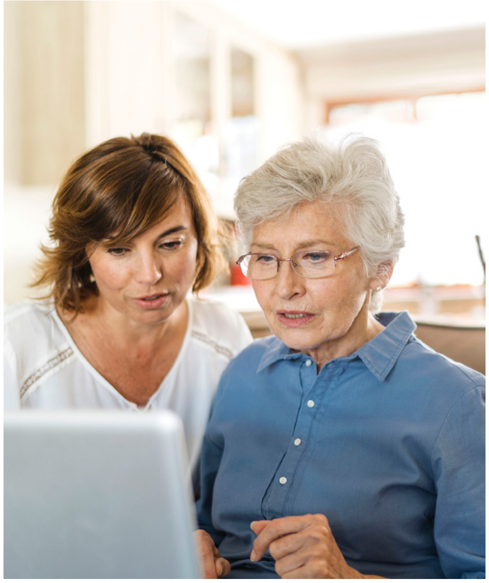




**Set 4.**
**Technologically Incompetent**







### The Results

When compared to the control, *technologically incompetent* images increased explicit agreement with negative stereotypes about older people's ability to live a full life, negative stereotypes about being old-fashioned, and paternalism. These images also reduced explicit agreement with the idea that there is diversity in the aging experience–in other words, that different people experience aging differently. By contrast, compared to the control, the *technologically competent* images did not increase agreement with stereotypes or negative attitudes toward aging. And when compared to the *technologically incompetent* category, the *technologically competent* category decreased explicit agreement with negative stereotypes about older people's ability to use technology. This indicates that images depicting older people effectively using technology can reduce the stereotypes about technology use that the *technologically incompetent* images most directly call to mind.

### Implications

When choosing images of older people using technology, choose images that clearly signal competence. Doing so can foster more accurate and positive attitudes toward older people and can help avoid perpetuating harmful and inaccurate stereotypes.

In our interviews, when viewing the technologically competent images, participants frequently used language of "connection," saying that older people can use technology to "connect" with friends and family and grow their personal interests or hobbies. This suggests that *technologically competent* images have the capacity to help people recognize that older people can independently and capably use technology.

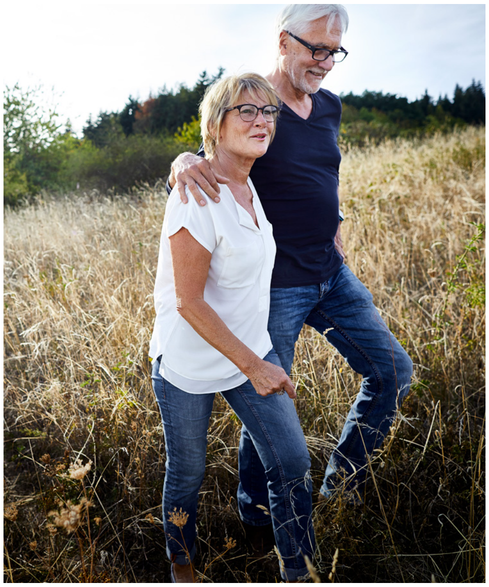
## Recommendation 3: In most cases, avoid images of "super seniors"

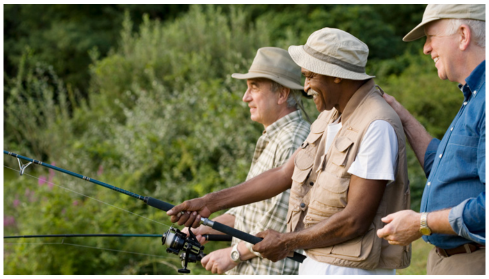
Anyone who communicates to or about older people has likely seen the "super senior"–images that depict older people engaging in "extreme" activities, such as skydiving or surfing. For advocates, the use of these images is often meant to challenge prevailing stereotypes about older people in hopes that doing so will lessen agreement with those stereotypes.

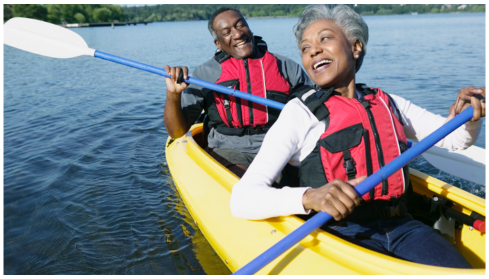
Our research suggests this is not true–in fact, the opposite happens.

### The Experiment

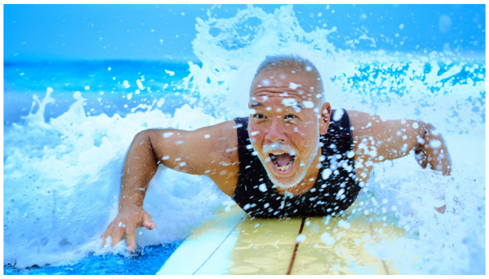
We tested two categories: *active* older adults and *"super senior"*. The active category (Set 5) was composed of images that depict older people being active but not in extreme or over-the-top ways: They were walking, fishing, and kayaking. The *"super senior"* category (Set 6), by contrast, showed counter-stereotypical images depicting older people doing things like skydiving, surfing, and bodybuilding.

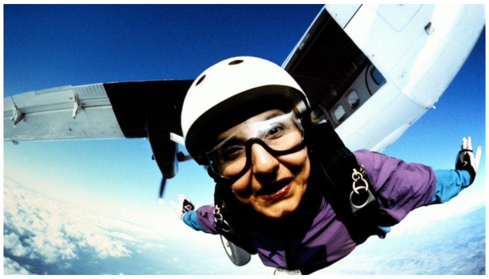


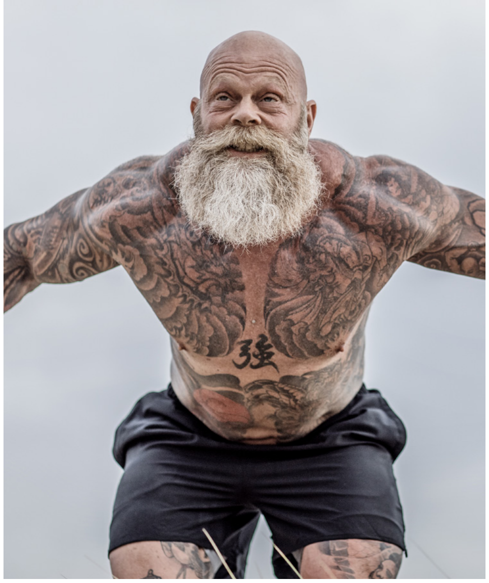




**Set 5.**
**Active**







**Set 6.**
**“Super Senior”**

## The Results

In our survey experiment, the *"super senior"* category increased explicit agreement with negative stereotypes about older people's ability to live a full life when compared to both the control condition and the active category. In addition, when compared to the active category, *"super senior"* images increased explicit agreement with negative stereotypes about older people's social and community engagement.

Why do these *"super senior"* images backfire? Previous research, coupled with our interview findings, suggests that *"super senior"* images are not believable to most people and are discarded as the exception, not the rule.[16] In fact, during interviews, participants expressed doubt as to how old the people depicted in the images really were. And in recalling the idea that older people are not capable of these activities, the images reinforce people's existing assumptions about older people's limitations.

One way to convey that older people can be active is to use images that align more closely with the active category. These images depict older people as engaged realistically in less extreme activities. In fact, we found that showing images of active older people significantly reduced implicit bias against older people for participants age 18-34, relative to the control. Although images of active older people did not reduce explicit agreement with negative stereotypes about older people when compared to the control, neither did they increase these stereotypes or other negative attitudes about older people.

In interviews, images of *active* older people appeared to help people think of older people as active participants in their own lives. Participants exposed to these images said things like, "You can have just as many adventures when you're old as when you're young," and, "Life doesn't stop when you're old." Unlike the *"super senior"* images, images of *active* older people help people recognize that there are many ways in which older people can be and are active.

## Implications

When seeking to convey that older people are still active and full of life, images of *active* older people do so more effectively than *"super senior"* images. By depicting older people being active in a way that is relatable and accurate, we can reduce implicit bias and avoid channeling the skepticism that often arises from images that show older people engaged in over-the-top activities.

# Recommendation 4: Use images of older people in workplace settings to help people see them as active contributors to their communities.

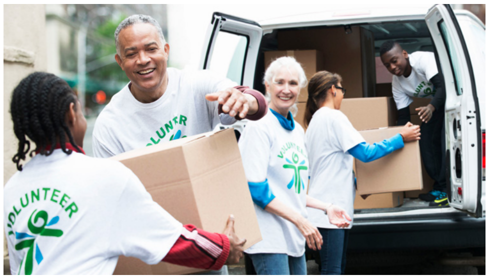
As noted above, older people are often absent from media entirely, which means people are not regularly exposed to images that show how older people contribute to their communities. In fact, people age 50 and older contributed more than $9 trillion in economic and unpaid activities in 2018.[17] Images that depict older people in the workplace are particularly well suited for showing that older people are active contributors to their communities.

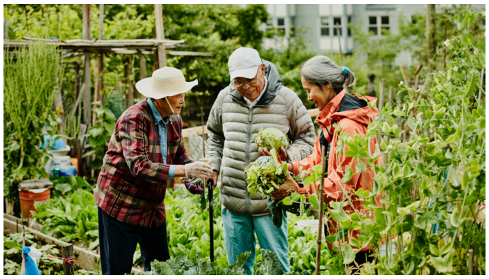
## The Experiment

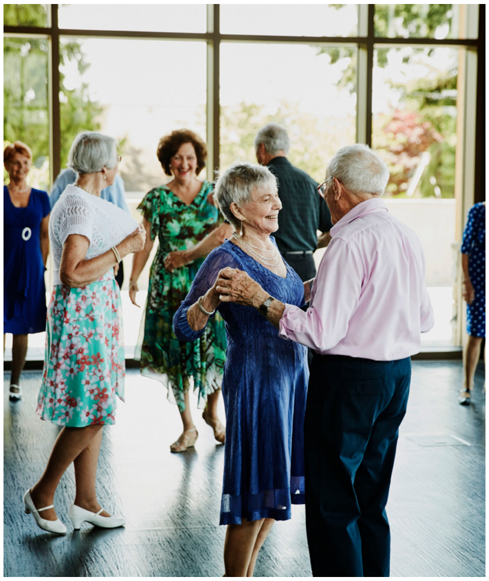
We tested three different sets of images that depict different settings: *workplace*, *community*, and *household*. The *workplace* category (Set 7) depicted older people engaged in the workplace; the *community* category (Set 8) depicted older people as actively participating in community activities; and the *household* category (Set 9) depicted older people in home settings.

**Set 7.**
**Workplace**

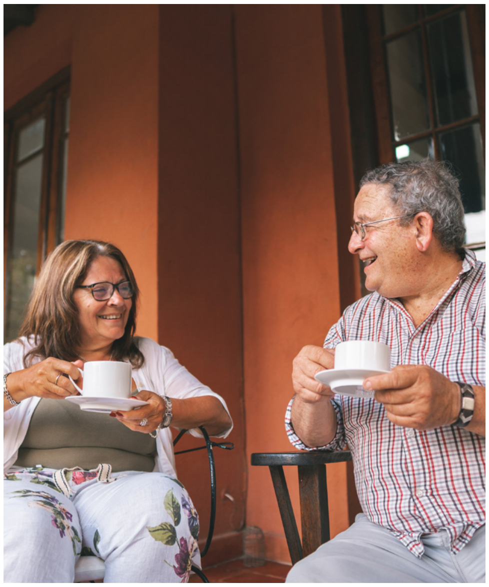
**Set 8.**
**Community**

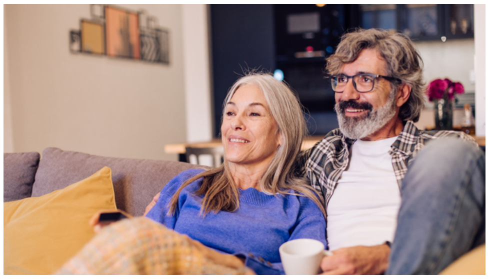


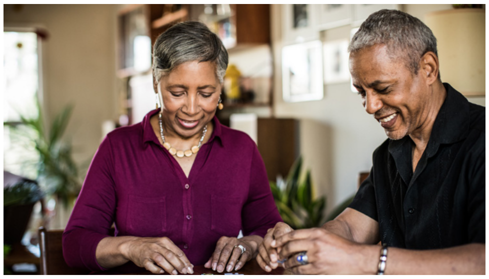




**Set 9.**
**Household**







### The Results

When compared to *community* images, *workplace* images reduced explicit agreement with most negative stereotypes about both aging and paternalism. In addition, images in the *community* category decreased explicit support for the notion that there is diversity in the aging process, which was contrary to researchers' expectations. When compared to *household* images, *workplace* images also decreased explicit agreement with paternalism and stereotypes about older people being old-fashioned.

### Implications

Given these results, it is important to use images of older people in the workplace to counter negative stereotypes about their level of involvement in their communities.

## Recommendation 5: Use images that depict older people in positive settings and engaged in positive activities.

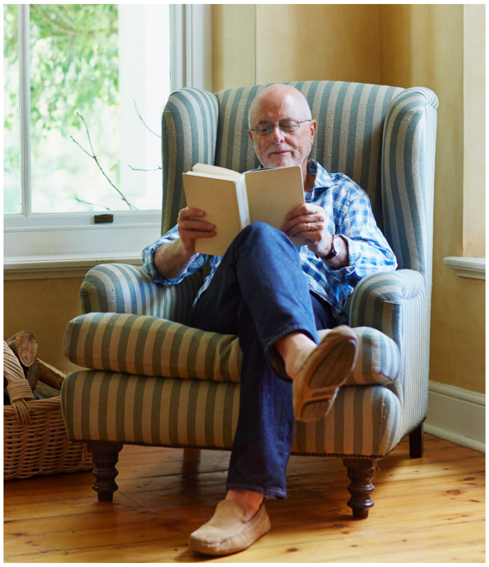
When appropriate, use images where older people are in surroundings that exude a positive mood. While mood is difficult to measure quantitatively, our interviews with a diverse set of participants made clear how important positive settings are in people's perception of images of older people.

Participants in these interviews reacted positively to most images across all image categories. Typical reactions emphasized how older people seemed to be living fully. Nearly all images were also well lit in bright settings. Even something as seemingly innocuous as a prop can signal a certain mood. For example, in the *same generation* images (Set 10), participants seized on the leis that the subjects are wearing as a signal that they were having a good time on a vacation.

Together, these elements created an atmosphere that depicted a positive mood. The only real exceptions were the *alone* images (Set 11) that intentionally depicted a more ambiguous mood (unlike the upbeat *technologically competent* image of someone alone). These images provoked a much more ambivalent reaction than others.

We recommend paying special attention to the mood your images convey. Whether the feeling is conveyed through brightly lit settings or props that indicate positive experiences, images should be realistic and true to lived experience.

**Set 10.**
**Same Generation**



**Set 11.**
**Alone**

# Recommendation 6: When possible, select images based on your target audience.

Our research revealed that reactions and receptiveness to certain images of older people varied among different audiences—particularly across age and gender.

## Age

Of all ages tested, middle-aged people (age 35–49) are most likely to change their attitudes on aging after being exposed to more authentic depictions of aging and older people, signaling that people of this age group may be an ideal target for shifting attitudes about aging in a more positive direction. We found that, when compared to the control condition, several image categories improved both implicit and explicit attitudes toward aging and older people for 35- to 49-year-olds. The same cannot be said for other age groups, who were less likely to experience a change in both implicit and explicit attitudes toward aging when compared to the control group.

While we cannot say with certainty why this middle-aged group is particularly sensitive to movement, we suspect it relates to distinctive experiences in this period of life. Adults in the 35–49 age range are often considered a “sandwich generation” because of their combined responsibility to take care of their own children, maintain their work or career, and begin caring for their aging parents. These various experiences point attention in a distinctive way to the full life span and the aging process. As such, counter-stereotypical images of older people might help 35- to 49-year-olds envision what their life could look like as they get older, or they might give them ideas for how they might help their parents maintain a full life as they age.

**Adults age 35–49 are more responsive to images of older people than other age groups, and thus may be an ideal target for shifting public attitudes about aging in a more positive direction.**

In addition to the findings about middle-aged audiences, we found that older people respond to images in nuanced ways. Although older people typically have more positive attitudes toward their own age group, they are not immune to backfire effects. In fact, our findings suggest that people age 65 and older are particularly prone to negative attitude shifts, both implicit and explicit, when seeing certain images of older people. Some research indicates that older people are aware of negative stereotypes about their age group and seek to distance themselves from it. This allows them to agree with negative stereotypes (because they see older people as an out-group) while also being able to feel more positively about themselves.[18]

For example, both *community* (Set 8) and *intergenerational* (Set 12) images—which were aimed at countering negative stereotypes about older people—actually *increased* explicit agreement with negative stereotypes about older people among people age 65 and older. In addition, the *household* (Set 9) and *technologically competent* (Set 3) images significantly increased implicit bias against older people for this age group. This may be because the participants found these images unrealistic or overly upbeat in mood, especially those older people who have had more negative experiences of aging. These results point to the delicate balance that advocates and communicators must strike between depicting a positive mood and realism in the images they choose. How to best achieve that balance should be the subject of further research.

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**Set 12.**
**Intergenerational**

We recommend keeping images authentic and true to lived experience when targeting an older audience (those age 65 and older). More specifically, counter-stereotypical images that are not faithful to the lived experiences of older people are more likely to backfire than other types of images.

**These results point to the delicate balance that advocates and communicators must strike between depicting a positive mood and realism in the images they choose—particularly when communicating with an older audience.**

## Gender

In addition to age, the gender of the target audience is also an important factor to consider when selecting images. Women generally hold more positive explicit attitudes about older people and aging than men do. Our research also found that men's explicit attitudes about older people are less susceptible to images than women's, suggesting that men generally have further to go in terms of shifting these attitudes.

*Workplace* images (Set 7), specifically, can shift men's explicit attitudes toward older people in a positive direction above and beyond other image categories. Compared to the control condition, we found that men who saw images of older people of any gender engaged in the workplace held fewer negative explicit attitudes toward aging, less paternalism, and reduced explicit agreement with negative stereotypes about social and community engagement, health and mobility, and cognitive decline in older people. Thus, it is particularly important to use images that depict older people of all genders in the workplace when communicating with heavily male audiences.

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More positive attitudes toward older people are indeed desirable, but–as we saw was the case with adults age 65 and older–this can also mean that there is more room to backfire because of a stronger negative reaction to stereotypes. For example, stereotypical images in both the *limited mobility/disengaged* (Set 2) and *technologically incompetent* (Set 4) categories increased explicit agreement with negative stereotypes about older people, particularly among women. We recommend that, when targeting women, extra steps are taken to ensure that images of older people do not reinforce any existing negative stereotypes.

# Closing Thoughts

Research into how images can help counter negative stereotypes and foster more positive attitudes about aging and older people is still in its early stages. This is partly because of the complications associated with this kind of research. Among other factors, images are inherently more subjective than text, which makes it more difficult to select which images participants should be exposed to in research.

Despite such challenges, we can point to some conclusions with confidence based on commonalities across the 13 image categories we studied. First and foremost, we confirm that images can, in fact, help reframe aging. Out of that premise come recommendations, which can be summed up as follows:

- When choosing images, employ a critical eye to ensure an image choice does not feel unrealistic.
- Use images with subjects who are engaged—with each other or their surroundings.
- Pay close attention to how images depict competence, using images that portray older people as being capable.
- Whenever appropriate, use images that reflect a positive setting through aesthetic qualities like lighting or props.

It's also important to remember that images are rarely displayed in isolation; they are usually accompanied by text. Past research indicates that text-based frames can be powerful in shifting understanding of and attitudes toward aging–both implicit and explicit.[19] Images and text, therefore, should work in tandem, with images incorporated into effective text-based framing strategies. Our findings on images suggest that the right images can help amplify positive changes in attitudes and strengthen those mainly text-based strategies.

Using images strategically to reframe aging is an evolving practice. The research presented in this guide is a small but significant step in defining this work. More research is needed to help us harness the power of images in combating negative stereotypes and fostering positive attitudes about aging and older people.

# Endnotes

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# Reframing Aging Through Images:

## Recommendations from Research

**October 2022**

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