

# WHY AGE IS THE NEW DIVERSITY ISSUE

By Sarah Douglas

29 : 04 : 2019 Diversity : Ageism : The Flat-Agers

**Ageism is the next frontier for diversity, so it's time for brands to get informed about its nuances, writes Sarah Douglas, director of The Liminal Space.**



Unclaimed by The Liminal Space

**‘ While we can all expect to live longer than previous generations, we must be attuned to the fact that the ageing experience is incredibly diverse ’**

— Sarah Douglas, director, *The Liminal Space*

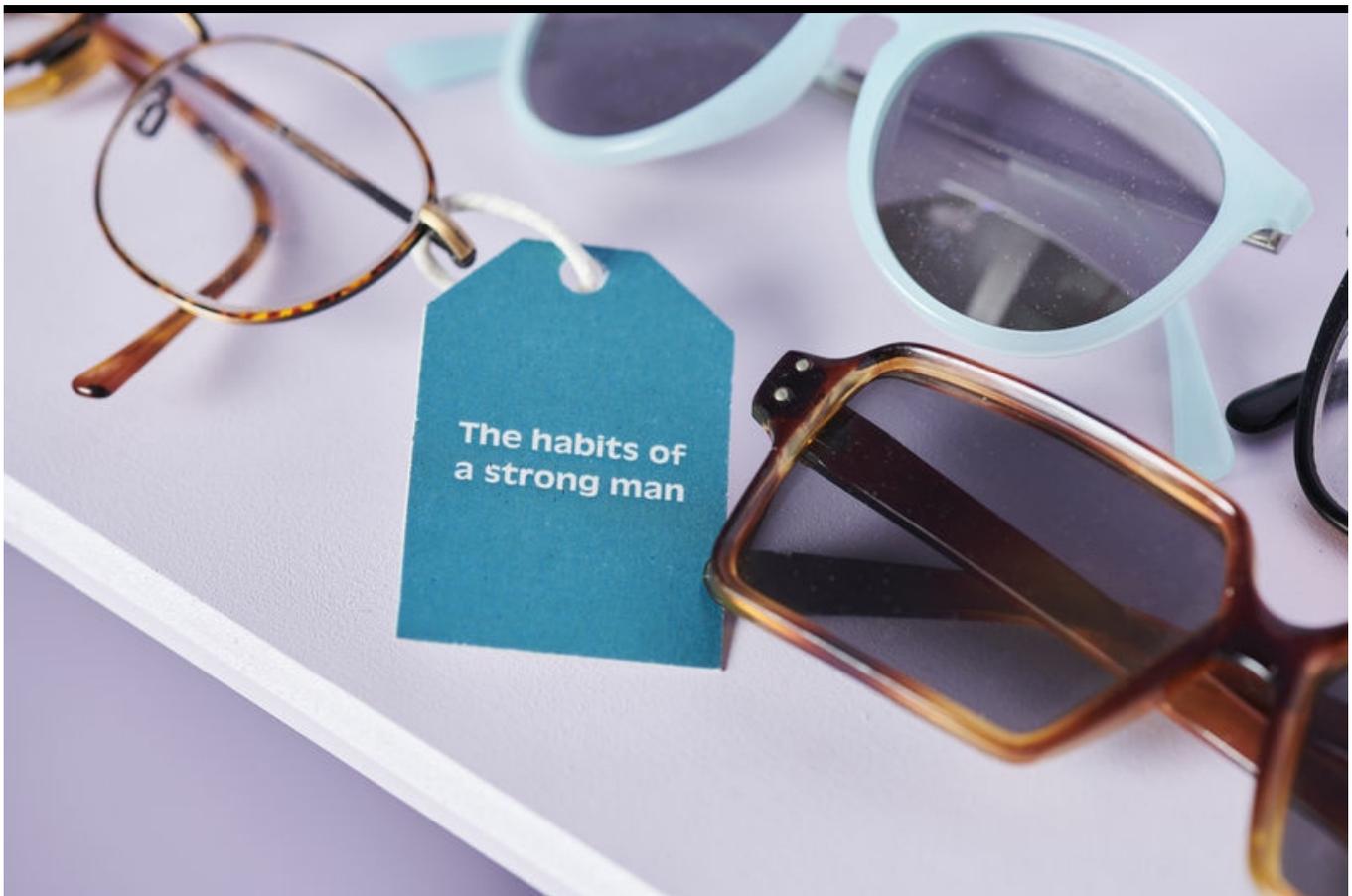
When the #MeToo movement gained online traction in late 2017, the impact it would have on consumers and brands alike could never have been predicted. Less than two years on, companies like Nike, Dove and Gillette have all committed to addressing sexism and gender equality in their advertising, while the Black Lives Matter campaign has similarly sparked its own moment of corporate enlightenment. So when it comes to diversity, what is the next frontier for brands?

As companies become more attuned to minority groups and more inclusive in their approach, ageism is set to form part of the next wave of change. One in three people now living in the UK will live to celebrate their 100th birthday (source: Office for National Statistics). In 2014, the average age in the UK exceeded 40 for the first time and, according to the Office for National Statistics, by 2040, almost one in four people (24.2%) will be aged 65 or over. We have never lived so long.

Yet, as our **Unclaimed** exhibition at the Barbican reveals, at the heart of our longevity lies deep inequality. The project, created by **The Liminal Space** in conjunction with the Wellcome Trust and leading researchers at University College London, is a unique installation that uses the visual concept of a surreal lost property office to explore the latest research into ageing.

These complex social and strategic topics have been translated, using art and design, into unique and engaging experiences that aim to transform how people think, feel and act in relation to ageism. One of the exhibition's key take-outs is the idea that while we can all expect to live longer than previous generations, we must be attuned to the fact that the ageing experience is incredibly diverse, affected as it is by our socio-economic status, education and family background.

*'One in three people now living in the UK will live to celebrate their 100th birthday'*



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From our research, we expect consumers and brands to become more aware of the need to rethink assumptions about ageing. There is no single way in which we age, and as with gender, race and sexual identity, brands will have to face up to the reality that one size does not fit all.

Indeed, brands that want to stake a claim to having a social purpose will have to become more inclusive of all communities, including the ageing population. As a culture we have tended to shy away from the reality of the ageing experience, instead choosing to promote youthfulness. Yet, to remain relevant, brands will increasingly have to embrace the ageing population and its broad needs and demands.

*'We should all consider carefully how we think about and treat older people, because 'old' is the one minority group to which we will one day all belong'*

There is still a long way to go, however. In Sweden, where over-60s make up a quarter of the population, **a 2018 study of representation in the media** found that this group occupied a mere 5% share of total media buzz in 2014. This is only a slight improvement on their share in 1994, which was 3%.

From pharmaceuticals to clothing and from beauty products to technology, as our society ages, marketing the concept of newness to a younger consumer will no longer prove financially viable. Instead, brands will have to choose between pursuing an ageless approach, in which products are designed to work for anyone regardless of age, or tailoring products and services to appeal to older consumers who demand aesthetically and thoughtfully designed goods that reflect the diversity of their experiences and aspirations.

We should all consider carefully how we think about and treat older people, because 'old' is the one minority group to which we will all belong one day.

**Unclaimed** runs at the Barbican until 3 May. For more on how Baby Boomer women are creating a new language around ageing that focuses on positivity, see our **Flat Age Women Market**.