

# **Defying the expiration date: Women practitioners' perspectives on aging and ageism in the workplace**

**By Olga Zatepilina-Monacell and Jiangxue (Ashley) Han**

## **Executive Summary (500 words)**

A new research article in the Public Relations Journal contributes to the ongoing conversation about diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the industry by addressing the issue of ageism. One of the authors' own industry experiences inspired this inquiry. This author's perspectives were both amplified and challenged by the wealth of data collected from 18 racially diverse women each of whom had a more than 20-year-long career in the public relations and journalism professions in a variety of organizational settings.

Interpersonal and organizational communication literatures have responded to the demographic trend of aging US workforce by examining age discrimination across industries and organizations (Bergstrom & Homes, 2004). Whereas public relations and mass communication literatures have focused on gender- and race-related inequities extensively, age discrimination in the public relations and other communication professions remains unexplored (Aldoory & Toth, 2021). Yet, several recent reports and articles in trade publications documented ageism (Daniels, 2020; Global Women in PR, 2023, February 9; Monllos, 2019; Pawkinska Sims, 2023, February 3; Twyning, 2019). The youth bias is said to be ubiquitous in public relations agencies (Daniels, 2019; Pawkinska Sims, 2023, February 3; Twyning, 2019). Moreover, ageism impacts women practitioners to a larger degree than men, as women tend to have shorter career longevity in communication industries (Global Women in PR, 2023, February 9).

This study gives voice to women whose ages range between 50 and 75. Many of them switched from the journalism profession to the public relations profession at various stages of their careers. Women shared their work experiences in radio and television broadcasting, print and digital journalism, strategic communications consulting, and both agency and in-house public relations. Regardless of industry or organizational setting, women experienced ageism in job searches, employment status, and career progression.

As this study shows, most rampant instances of ageism occur during job searches, as the current hiring practices appear to favor younger applicants over qualified older women. Older women communicators are also more vulnerable than their younger or male colleagues to losing their jobs or being forced to retire early. Job performances of older women and their ability to learn new technology are often questioned. Former broadcasters who left the media industry because of its youth bias, encounter ageism in corporate public relations as well. Race differences may become less pronounced than gender differences as women get older. Although caregiving affects women's professional lives at all stages of their careers, older women who care for their parents accept lower-paying jobs or hide their caregiving roles from employers fearing the assumption that caregiving would diminish their job performance. Older women who work not only in television but also in print journalism and public relations often disguise their age fearing discrimination and inability to advance one's career beyond the age of 50.

These findings have direct implications for the public relations discipline by (1) advocating for older women practitioners whose voices need representation, and (2) urging organizations to go beyond their stated commitment to DEI by taking meaningful actions against gendered ageism.

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Olga Zatepilina-Monacell (PhD, Syracuse University) teaches in the Department of Communication Studies, directs the Master of Arts Program in Strategic Communication and Leadership, and advises the PRSSA chapter at Ashland University in Ohio. Building on her two decades of industry experience in strategic communication and international development, Dr. Zatepilina-Monacell's scholarly pursuits focus on public diplomacy, corporate and country reputation, and feminist storytelling.

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