

Invisible but accountable: age discrimination, social identity and organisational justice

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Abstract

Purpose – This study critically examines age discrimination and the marginalisation of older employees, specifically Baby Boomers (born 1946–1964), within an Australian higher education provider. It explores how systemic organisational practices and societal narratives shape older workers' access to promotion and workplace recognition, raising broader questions of fairness, identity and accountability.

Design/methodology/approach – Drawing on social identity theory, the research adopts a qualitative case study approach involving survey data from 13 employees aged 50 and above (39% response rate from a total of 33 invited participants). Thematic analysis was applied through iterative coding of responses, triangulated with document analysis and observation-inferred survey insights. Participant triangulation was also used to capture a diverse age spectrum among older workers.

Findings – The analysis reveals four interconnected themes reflecting the lived experience of workplace age discrimination: changing role expectations with age, perceptions of devaluation and exclusion, emotional and career-related impacts and continued employment driven more by intrinsic satisfaction than equitable treatment. Respondents consistently expressed a sense of being part of the organisational “out-group”, reinforcing the relevance of social identity theory in explaining age-based marginalisation.

Research limitations/implications – The findings highlight the need for stronger organisational accountability in recognising and addressing subtle yet persistent forms of age discrimination. They also point to the limitations of existing anti-discrimination legislation and underscore the critical role of workplace policy, societal attitudes and media narratives in either reproducing or challenging ageist practices.

Originality/value – This paper contributes to the accounting and accountability literature by documenting how older workers' experiences of exclusion are shaped not only just by managerial practices but also by broader institutional discourses. It offers novel insights into how accountability mechanisms, both internal and societal, can reinforce or disrupt age-based inequalities in the workplace.

Keywords Age discrimination, Social identity theory, Higher education, Accountability, Workplace marginalisation, Ageing workforce

Paper type Research article

Summary statement of contribution

This study contributes to the journal by foregrounding the lived experiences of older employees within a public institution, critically examining how workplace practices and broader institutional discourses reinforce age-based marginalisation. It extends accountability research by linking Social Identity Theory to structural inequalities in employment, illustrating how accountability mechanisms—or their absence—

JEL Classification — J26, J71, D63, I23, M14

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Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Conflict of Interest: The Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.



perpetuate the invisibility and undervaluation of older workers. By triangulating employee voices with organisational documentation, the paper offers an original, practice-informed lens on how discrimination operates subtly through managerial decisions and societal narratives, raising important questions about social inclusion, fairness, and the limits of anti-discrimination regulation.

1. Introduction

A global challenge exists with the burgeoning of an ageing population. Pertinent questions arise regarding whether governments are equipped to support the large number of people who, if unable to gain employment due to age discrimination, become reliant on government age pensions. As Baby Boomers have ostensibly reached retirement age, concerns about age discrimination have intensified. Baby Boomers represent the largest cohort in industrialized countries, having played a significant role in shaping social norms, politics, and economic structures throughout their lives (Psychology Today). Their historical influence on society raises critical questions about whether their ability to drive societal change has diminished due to ageing. The perception of their waning influence is further compounded by generational tensions, with younger generations, particularly Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996), often characterizing Baby Boomers as a selfish generation (Leach *et al.*, 2013).

Generational labels such as Baby Boomers and Millennials may further exacerbate age discrimination against older workers (Cox *et al.*, 2018). Overcoming intergenerational communication barriers is essential in mitigating these biases, emphasizing the importance of valuing the strengths inherent in each generation (Venter, 2017; Jirasevijinda, 2018). Technology-mediated communication provides a potential avenue for bridging these generational divides, as older employees can engage with younger colleagues to foster constructive digital interactions (Venter, 2017). However, online platforms and social media have amplified generational stereotypes, with some narratives, such as the term “Boomer Remover” that emerged on Twitter in March 2020, reinforcing ageist attitudes, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic (Meisner, 2022; Rosales and Fernández-Ardèvol, 2020). Table 1 provides a comparative analysis of the differing values, goals, strengths, and challenges of Baby Boomers and Millennials, highlighting the generational divide in perspectives and priorities.

Media representations play a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of older individuals. The advertising industry has been criticized for its misrepresentation of older consumers, perpetuating stigma and reinforcing societal perceptions of inadequacy (Rosenthal *et al.*, 2021; Eisend, 2022). A longstanding preference for youth in advertising marginalizes older consumers, overlooking their market influence (Sudbury-Riley, 2016). Additionally, studies highlight the stigmatization of older

Table 1. Characteristics of two generations – Baby Boomers and Millennials

Generation (birth years)	Core values	Goals	Strengths	Challenges
Baby Boomers (1945–1964)	Ideals Success	Lifelong Learning Legacy	Idealistic outlook Inspired to succeed	Narcissism Overachievement Process over product
Millennials (1981–1996)	Reliance of technology Eagerness to learn Confidence	To be a hero To make a difference	Confident Ream oriented Digitally savvy Multitasking	Reward for showing up Need for structure Instant gratification

Source(s): Adapted from Table 1, Jirasevijinda (2018, p. 84)

women in media, where sexual desirability is narrowly defined, rendering older women invisible in representations of attractiveness and desirability (Whiteman and Kerrigan, 2024). Beyond media influences, technological advancements contribute to the perception of older individuals as technologically incompetent, further reinforcing stereotypes. However, research indicates that older adults actively adapt to technology, developing coping strategies such as adjustment and acceptance (Wilson-Nash and Tinson, 2022).

The Australian government acknowledges the issue of age bias in media portrayals. The [Australian Human Rights Report \(2024\)](#) highlights systemic issues with media representations of ageing and older individuals, noting that these depictions reflect broader cultural undervaluation. Structural challenges within the media industry, including limited access to subject matter experts, resource constraints, and a lack of experienced practitioners, contribute to the continued marginalization of older people in media discourse. Furthermore, prevalent themes in media narratives frame ageing as a societal problem, emphasizing decline, frailty, vulnerability, intergenerational conflict, and gendered ageism, while largely rendering the lived experiences of older Australians invisible.

Addressing these biases requires concerted efforts from governments, the media industry, and academia. As Butler (1969) stated, “one day we will be hearing of Senior Power. We don’t all grow white or black, but we all grow old” (p. 246). Until that time, intergenerational tensions and age discrimination persist, particularly in employment contexts. The rising demand for pensions places increasing fiscal pressure on governments. In 2023, the United States’ Social Security program amounted to \$1.35tn, with \$1.15tn (85%) allocated to retirement benefits (USA Facts, 2023). Similarly, nearly half of the United Kingdom’s Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) spending is directed toward individuals of pension age, with contributory State Pensions alone costing £100.8bn in 2020/21 (UK Parliament, 2022). Australia faces comparable challenges, with projections indicating an additional \$60bn in government spending by 2049–2050, two-thirds of which will be allocated to an ageing population (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2012). The [Australian Human Rights Commission \(2012\)](#) underscores the human rights imperative of ensuring older individuals have equitable access to employment opportunities and protection from poverty through social security income and workforce participation.

Older Australians with extensive employment histories who wish to continue working frequently encounter barriers due to age discrimination, resulting in negative outcomes such as diminished self-esteem, financial insecurity, and health issues (Levy and Macdonald, 2016; Mayo *et al.*, 2022; Australian Human Rights Commission, 2015). Employer perceptions, particularly those of younger HR managers, further exacerbate these challenges, as hiring decisions often reflect biases favouring younger candidates (Principi *et al.*, 2015). The [Australian Human Rights Commission \(2018\)](#) found that fewer organizations in 2018 than in 2014 ensured job advertisements were inclusive of all age groups, with some still requiring applicants to disclose their date of birth. However, the same report highlighted that employers recognize the value of older workers, citing their experience (76%) and professional knowledge (68%) as key advantages.

This study aims to identify the existence of age discrimination through an analysis of published academic literature and government reports. Additionally, it examines the prevalence of age discrimination using primary data from a real-life case study of an Australian higher education provider. The study further seeks to develop recommendations for policymakers and businesses to address systemic age discrimination and promote equitable workplace practices. Through this research, the study contributes to a broader understanding of how age discrimination manifests in employment contexts and offers actionable insights to mitigate its effects.

2. Literature review and research questions

The persistence of age discrimination in employment is a widely recognized issue, with scholars emphasizing the need for systematic policy changes in government, organizational

management, marketing, media portrayals, and human resources (HR) policies (Harvey and Thurnwald, 2009). Angeloni and Borgonovi (2016) highlight the importance of flexible working arrangements to facilitate the continued employment of older workers. The reliance on government-funded aged pensions underscores the necessity of maintaining workforce participation among older individuals. Phillips and Feng (2015) emphasize the disparities between urban and rural pension benefits in high-context countries, illustrating the financial vulnerabilities that older populations face.

Poterba (2014) investigates the challenges posed by an ageing population with longer lifespans who consequently face longer periods of retirement with potentially very little income, if any, to supplement government aged pensions which are frequently below the poverty line. Further, Ghilarducci (2010) reports on the increasing fiscal challenges of government pension payouts vis a vis age discrimination in employment and how current government spending on aged pensions is in tandem with government spending on education. Perhaps the recommendation presented by Serrano *et al.* (2011) might offer an economic solution. They query whether the immigration of younger workers provides the financial sustainability needed for the increase in demand for public pensions as populations age. However, this approach does not directly address the structural barriers that older workers encounter in employment.

Age discrimination manifests in multiple forms, from explicit hiring biases to subtler forms of workplace exclusion. Guest (2008) notes that failing to accommodate older workers represents a significant economic inefficiency, as experienced professionals are marginalized despite their competencies. Rappaport (2008) echoes this concern, citing Lahey (2005) in stating that simply encouraging older individuals to return to the workforce does not ensure that they will secure employment. Butler (2020) finds that advanced education correlates with prolonged employability, while Deacon (2019) emphasizes the reliability and expertise that older employees bring to the workplace.

Currently some organisations persist in asking potential employees to state their age and/or date of birth, which leads one to question the efficacy of current government age discrimination laws. Further evidence demonstrating the extent of age discrimination in employment is provided in an experimental study by Bendick *et al.* (1999, p. 5) who found “the older applicants received less favorable responses from employers 41.2% of the time”. To highlight the extent of ageism in employment opportunities and the lack of adherence to the “spirit” as well as the “letter” of the anti-discrimination laws, “the negative employer assumptions about older workers implied by these differences in outcome were seldom explicitly stated” (Bendick *et al.*, 1999, p. 5), thereby making it challenging to bring to court overt charges of age discrimination, quite apart from a successful court outcome (Blackham, 2017, 2020; Macdermott, 2011). This conundrum is supported by Ziólkowska (2021) who states, “practices that are discriminatory towards older employees are often overlooked, because public opposition to discrimination on the grounds of ‘age’ is not as strong as in the case of other forms of discrimination” (p. 398). Further, Conen *et al.* (2012, p. 653) research into employers’ perceptions of hiring older workers found “none of the measures to recruit or retain older workers have been applied by a majority of employers”. Thus, the disparity between an ageing population and the age discrimination displayed by many organisations, critically highlights the importance of addressing this significant societal problem.

Social Identity Theory (SIT) is associated with perceptions of being categorised into the “in-group” or being excluded and categorised into the “out-group”. Experimental studies confirm discrimination by members of the in-group against members of the out-group (Billig and Tajfel, 1973). Allen *et al.* (2014) applied SIT to the hiring process with university undergraduate students applying for sales jobs and taking their cues from the older people interviewing them. University graduates (the in-group) felt disapproval from the out-group (older people) resulting in age discrimination by the in-group towards the older recruiters.

Age discrimination in the workplace abounds (Bendick *et al.*, 1999; Ziólkowska, 2021; Conen *et al.*, 2012). A possible counter to the problem of in-groups and out-groups is

workplace friendships, as suggested by [Dietz and Fasbender \(2022\)](#), who identify SIT as being “closely linked to the formation and maintenance of workplace friendship” (p. 166). [Dietz and Fasbender \(2022\)](#) support the extant literature on the importance of HR policies, processes and practices and leadership being an integral part of age-diversity and workplace friendships in overcoming age discrimination. Further, websites created by grandparents to foster closer relationships with grandchildren resulted in a lower awareness of age differences between these intergenerational groups ([Harwood, 2004](#)). Close communication between grandchildren and their grandparents indicates a lessening of the demarcation between younger and older people. This highlights the potential of close cross-generational communication in reducing negative stereotypes. Nevertheless, negative stereotypes of older individuals persist, particularly regarding their workplace abilities and social roles. Many Baby Boomers refuse to be categorized as “aging” in the traditional sense, maintaining active and vibrant lifestyles ([Chung, 2023](#)). Despite this, media portrayals often reinforce outdated stereotypes, such as depicting older individuals as passive or technologically incompetent. The persistence of these stereotypes can influence workplace policies and hiring decisions, reinforcing systematic age discrimination.

Against this backdrop, this study seeks to explore the lived experiences of older employees and the broader role of society in addressing age discrimination in the workplace. The study is guided by the following research questions:

- (1) What are older workers’ perceptions about their work?
- (2) Does society have a role in diminishing age discrimination?

A significant gap remains in the literature concerning older workers’ direct perceptions of age discrimination and how marketing, management, and HR policies influence their experiences. While existing studies highlight age-related employment barriers and financial implications, few address the subjective experiences of older employees in navigating workplace challenges. Furthermore, limited attention has been given to the societal role in mitigating age discrimination. This study aims to bridge these gaps by exploring the perceptions of older workers and examining how broader social structures either reinforce or challenge age-based biases.

To substantiate a gap in the literature relating to age discrimination in employment, a search was conducted through “ABI/INFORM”; “Business Source Ultimate”; “EBSCO”; “Informit Business Collection”; and “JSTOR” using the phrase “age discrimination in employment”, resulting in a total of 9 relevant articles. This body of literature is summarised in [Table 2](#) resulting in a gap being identified.

3. Data and method

This qualitative study adopts a case study design, informed by principles of grounded theory and utilizing Social Identity Theory as a sensitizing framework, to explore the lived experiences of age discrimination among older employees (aged 50 and above) within a Sydney-based higher education provider. The case study approach allows for an in-depth examination of employees’ perceptions, workplace interactions, and the organizational structures that may contribute to age discrimination. This study was conducted following ethical guidelines and was approved by Excelsia College Ethics Committee (Approval Number: 2022-104 S on 14 April 2023). All participants provided informed consent, and their responses were anonymized to ensure confidentiality.

To enhance the credibility and rigour of the findings, this study employed data triangulation, integrating three primary data sources. First, a structured survey, adapted from the [Australian Human Rights Commission’s \(2015\)](#) National Prevalence Survey of Age Discrimination in the Workplace (see [Appendix](#) for survey questions aligned with research questions as per [Table 3](#) below), was administered to employees aged 50 and above. The

Table 2. Summary of literature and identification of gap

Topic of interest Key words	Key authors	Critical summary of articles	Identified gap	Research questions to address this gap
Age discrimination in employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Axelrad et al. (2021) • Engelhardt et al. (2022) • Järvensivu and von Bonsdorff (2022) • Koçak et al. (2022) • Mok et al. (2023) • Peng (2022) • Tams et al. (2022) • Yang et al. (2023) • Zhu et al. (2022) 	<p>Age discrimination causing barriers to employment for older people is of particular concern due to ageing populations in advanced economies</p> <p>In addition to increased life expectancies, many older people prefer to work than to rely on government aged pensions</p> <p>Governments in advanced countries have raised the retirement age to address the fiscal shortfalls and lack of sustainability of aged pension payments in the longer term</p> <p>The way job advertisements are framed may repel older workers from applying</p> <p>Yet attracting and retaining older workers is essential in overcoming labour and skill shortages</p> <p>Anti-age discrimination training programmes are essential</p>	<p>None of these studies directly examine older workers' perceptions of age discrimination or explore how marketing, management, and HR policies contribute to the problem</p> <p>The role of broader societal structures in mitigating or reinforcing age discrimination is also underexplored</p>	<p>RQ1: What are older workers perceptions about their work?</p> <p>RQ2: Does society have a role in diminishing age discrimination?</p>

Source(s): Authors' own work

survey was designed to capture employees' perceptions, experiences, and attitudes toward age discrimination in recruitment, promotions, workplace culture, and managerial practices. The list of questions emailed to participants who agreed to take part in this study was based on a published source: © [Australian Human Rights Commission \(2015\)](#). National prevalence survey of age discrimination in the workplace • 2015 ISBN 978-1-921449-69-7. The questions from this survey are reproduced in [Appendix](#). Second, although direct workplace observations were not conducted due to confidentiality constraints, the survey provided indirect observational insights into workplace culture, hierarchical dynamics, and age-related biases. Responses to questions regarding managerial attitudes, career progression, and workplace treatment served as observational proxies for understanding how age discrimination manifests in a professional setting. Employees' accounts of promotions, performance evaluations, and workplace interactions revealed implicit biases and discriminatory practices within the organization. Third, document analysis was conducted

Table 3. Alignment of survey questions with research questions

Research questions	Interview question
1. What are older workers' perceptions about their work?	3. Were you working here before you turned 50? Yes/No 4. How many years have you been working here since the age of 50 or above? 5. Do you feel that any aspect has changed in your employment as you have become older? 6. If yes, please elaborate on the things that have changed (positive and/or negative) 7. Have you been treated less favourably than other people because of your age? Please list ALL occasions when you were treated less favourably 8. Do you have a line manager who is significantly younger than you, and if so, is this a problem? Yes/No 9. If yes, please explain in what way this is a problem 10. Are you aware of anybody else (in this workplace) who has experienced age discrimination in any way? Yes/No 11. If yes, please elaborate 12. Determining your choice to stay in this job, assign the percentage of importance you give to 14. Do you think you are above, below, or on the median age of staff working here?
2. Does society have a role in diminishing age discrimination?	13. Although they have not directly told me, my employer or colleagues think that, because of my age 15. At any time since the age of 50, were you in a situation, at work or when looking for work, where you believed that you were treated less favourably than other people in a similar situation because of your age or because of assumptions made about older people, even though you were not told directly that your age was the reason? 16. If yes, did this episode occur when you were applying for a job or promotion with your current employer, when applying for a job with someone you were not employed by, or in relation to some other aspect of your work? 17. What impact, if any, did that episode have on you? (Choose as many as applicable to your situation)

Source(s): Authors' own work

to examine internal organizational policies, HR reports, job advertisements, and performance review criteria. This allowed for a comparative analysis between self-reported experiences and institutional policies, identifying potential gaps between formal policy frameworks and actual workplace practices.

To ensure a diverse representation of perspectives, the study incorporated participant triangulation by including employees from different age brackets over 50. A total of 33 employees were invited to participate, with 13 respondents, resulting in a 39% response rate. The participants were categorized as follows: three respondents in the 50–54 age group, three in the 55–59 age group, three in the 60–64 age group, two in the 65–69 age group, and two in the 70–74 age group. No respondents were from the 75 and above category. This segmentation allows for a comparative analysis of whether age discrimination intensifies as employees advance in age. For instance, employees in their early 50s may still be considered for promotions, whereas those in their 60s and 70s may experience stronger barriers to career progression. [Table 4](#) below illustrates the distribution of respondents across age groups.

Thematic analysis, informed by the iterative principles of grounded theory, was employed following [Braun and Clarke's \(2006\)](#) framework. This process involved initial familiarization with the data, followed by the generation of initial codes and the subsequent development of

Table 4. Age groups and number of respondents

Age groups	No. of respondents in each age group
50–54	3
55–59	3
60–64	3
65–69	2
70–74	2
75 and above	0

Source(s): Authors' own work

initial themes. A critical stage involved the review and refinement of these themes through an iterative process of constant comparison across data sources and participant age groups, ensuring coherence and distinctiveness. This iterative engagement with the data, initial codes, and emerging themes facilitated a deeper understanding of the data's nuances. The final steps included defining and naming the themes and producing the report with supporting evidence from the triangulated data sources. Throughout the analysis, particular attention was paid to identifying recurring patterns in survey responses, which were systematically categorized into themes such as workplace treatment, promotional barriers, and implicit biases. Themes were iteratively refined and validated through cross-referencing with the survey-inferred observations and document analysis, ensuring a rigorous analytical approach. The interpretation of the findings was guided by Social Identity Theory (SIT), which provides a theoretical framework for understanding how older employees may perceive themselves as an "out-group" within the workplace. Memos were maintained throughout the data collection and analysis to document emerging insights, connections between data sources, and the evolution of themes.

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Higher Education Provider Ethics Committee (Approval Number: 2022-104 S, granted on 14 April 2024). Confidentiality was ensured by conducting recruitment via blind-copy (BCC) email, and all survey responses were fully anonymized. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before participation, and they were provided with detailed information about the study. The name of the higher education provider is withheld to maintain institutional confidentiality.

The credibility and trustworthiness of the findings are enhanced through the employment of data triangulation (survey responses, survey-inferred observations, and document analysis) and participant triangulation (diverse age groups over 50). The iterative approach to theme development, informed by grounded theory principles, further strengthens the analysis by facilitating a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the data. The alignment of emerging themes with Social Identity Theory provides a theoretical grounding for the interpretation of the findings.

4. Results

Thematic analysis, following the process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), was employed to identify significant patterns within the survey data. Our initial engagement with the data involved a line-by-line coding of participant responses, resulting in a broad set of initial codes that captured the diverse experiences and perceptions related to ageing and work. Examples of these initial codes included "feeling undervalued by students," "promotion barriers after a certain age," "increased workload with age," "students not valuing experience," and "government age markers influencing retirement expectations."

As the analysis progressed, these initial codes were examined for overlaps, similarities, and underlying concepts. This led to the development of a set of intermediate themes that began to synthesize the initial codes into more meaningful categories. For instance, the initial codes

related to feeling undervalued by students and the perception of experience being irrelevant were grouped under an intermediate theme such as “Devaluation of Older Workers’ Contributions.” Similarly, codes concerning promotion barriers and assumptions about retirement coalesced into an intermediate theme like “Age-Related Limitations in Career Progression.”

Through further iterative refinement and constant comparison across the entire dataset and participant age groups, these intermediate themes were further analysed for their core essence and relationships. This process of abstraction and synthesis ultimately resulted in the identification of four overarching themes that best captured the participants’ experiences of age discrimination and their sense of belonging to an “out-group” within the workplace, aligning with Social Identity Theory. These final themes are:

4.1 Theme 1: changes in the workplace due to growing older

Five participants felt that aspects had changed in their employment as they have become older. Comments were that “Students seem less invested in valuing that they are training for a unique and challenging profession.” And “In Australia at age 69, I am expected to be retired or soon retire. That’s evident by the use of the age 50 as a marker.” Increased workloads with increased responsibilities are evidenced by the comment that “The role has expanded and I’m doing more.” Furthermore, “Promotion has more administration and responsibilities.” The more experience one has, appears to increase one’s willingness to do more the longer one is in their job—“I am more willing to do tasks as I have knowledge in other areas that contribute here”.

Although not all participant comments in Theme 1 point to age discrimination *per se*, one comment highlights problems of government legislation in creating certain markers, such as the expectations of retiring at a certain age. Additionally, at least one of the employee contributions in the superannuation formulae ceases at a mandatory age. Further, “There are caps on the amounts you can contribute though. 28 days after you turn 75, a super fund can only accept Downsizer Contributions” (selling your home and contributing a percentage of the sale money into super) (First Super, n.d.).

4.2 Theme 2: experience of age discrimination in the workplace

Eight of the 13 participants stated n/a (not applicable) to question 13 of the case study (“Although they have not directly told me, my employer or colleagues think that, because of my age . . .”)

Of the five participants who considered the question to be applicable to them, the following reasons were selected: Respondent 1, 2 and 13 responded to: (f) I should not be considered for another job or offered a promotion, and (g) I do not fit in with the culture of the workplace. Respondent 3 responded to: (a) I am too slow to learn new things. Respondent 12 acknowledged: (1) I should not get a job/promotion that I was interviewed for (at the time). These responses reveal a level of age discrimination existing in the workplace.

Further comments related to Theme 2 included: “Age and experience are not valued by my current employer evidenced in that in employing me, I am paid the base rate that a newcomer aged 30 would be paid. Here we are units of production and the implication of the contracting norms here is that experience has no value.” One participant was “not really sure.” Another participant felt undervalued “Not by staff, but by students. There seems to be a sense from some students that as an older person, I can’t possibly know some things that they know and that because I am older what I have learned over the years may well be irrelevant for the current time: That somehow this should be discounted for current contemporary knowledge.” Regarding lessening opportunities for promotion as employees become older was expressed by one participant: “Yes, in a previous job I was given a promotion and then told I would not be eligible for a further promotion. I believe part of the reason was my age since I completed my PhD later in life and so applied for promotion later than some of my peers. It was assumed that I

would want to retire, not stay working.” A sense of a lack of justice by the organisation was expressed by one participant “There is a staff member who has worked here for more than 10 years, in one of the toughest jobs and this person is always overlooked for promotion—in fact this person was recently placed under another employee that this person had trained for a similar job. It’s a demoralising issue over which we have commiserated.” Evidence of instances of age discrimination were again expressed in the comment “I think the contribution of another employee has been discounted because of her age. She is not seen as having important skills and up to date knowledge in her field.”

Eight participants responded no to Q10. “Are you aware of anybody else (in this workplace) you know who has experienced age discrimination in any way?”, with only 3 responses in the affirmative. Conversely, the following question (Q15. “At any time since the age of 50, were you in a situation, at work or when looking for work, where you believed that you were treated less favourably than other people in a similar situation because of your age or because of assumptions made about older people, even though you were not told directly that your age was the reason?”) slightly more employees stated “yes” (7) than “no” (6).

Evidence of age discrimination experiences in the workplace is inherent in the responses grouped under Theme 2.

4.3 Theme 3: impact of age discrimination

Q 17 of the case study asked: What impact, if any, did that episode of age discrimination have on you? Three participants stated that it negatively affected their self-esteem and confidence, with another three participants stating that it caused them stress. This supports the academic literature and government reports on the negative effects of age discrimination. Further, experiences of age discrimination that negatively impacted on their family was affirmed by three participants, whereas negative financial outcomes affected six participants, and age discrimination negatively impacted the career of three participants. Age discrimination also had a negative impact on two participants in their motivation to seek other work, with one participant starting to think about planning for retirement. A further negative impact of age discrimination resulted in two participants considering changing their occupation or industry. Negative effects of age discrimination have wide influences, with one participant stating they were considering accessing their superannuation fund, with another participant stating they were giving up looking for work. In contrast, perhaps a positive outcome of experiencing loss of opportunities in the workplace due to older age was the statement by two participants that they were considering retraining or updating their skills, with another stating they had already upskilled whilst looking for employment.

Nevertheless, perceptions of age discrimination continue to persist in the majority of case study responses in Theme 3.

4.4 Theme 4: reasons for staying in a job

Two choices for staying in a job were provided in the case study instrument—job satisfaction and a lack of age discrimination. Job satisfaction scored significantly higher than non-discrimination based on age. The average for job satisfaction was 83.64 and the average for staying in a job due to a lack of age discrimination was 16.36. Despite some participants reporting having experienced age discrimination, the overwhelming majority continued in employment due to their satisfaction with their job. Evidence in the academic literature and government reports identify the positive effects of continuing to work in older years, both for employers and for employees.

The evolution from the granular initial codes to the more abstract and encompassing final themes demonstrates the iterative nature of the thematic analysis. This process allowed for a deeper understanding of the underlying patterns in the data and how participants’ individual experiences collectively point towards a sense of “out-group” membership based on their age, as predicted by Social Identity Theory.

5. Discussion

Indisputably, perceptions of having experienced age discrimination exist among many workers aged 50 and above, as evidenced in this case study. Generalisations are not able to be made as to whether this higher education provider is discriminatory towards older employees or not, given the less than 50% response rate and the fact that several workers aged 50 and above continue to be employed by the organisation—although this could be offset by the fact they may be overlooked for promotion. Nevertheless, age discrimination is frequently insidious—HR and other policies of this higher education provider display no overt indication of discrimination against older workers—however some of the attitudes and practices appear to. As evidenced in the literature and government reports, age discrimination irrefutably exists in society. It is, however, very difficult to prove and bring to court. Furthermore, as many advanced societies continue to experience ageing populations, governments are beginning to realise the fiscal challenges of continuing to provide age pensions. This challenge is exacerbated by the need to receive sufficient income from taxes from a smaller proportion of workers. It is not suggested that older workers who prefer to retire, should not do so. It is recommended, however, that older people who desire to keep working, should be able to do so based on their level of skill and experience. Consequently, governments, media, marketing and management scholars and practitioners need to be active in the monitoring of age discrimination and to make every effort to judiciously address it. Anti-age discrimination legislation requires stricter adherence to address all age discrimination cases brought before the courts. Organisations need to adhere to the anti-age discrimination legislation by ensuring that no evidence of requirements to state one's age (or year of birth) exists in printed or verbal job application documents.

6. Recommendations

Two recommendations from the [Australian Human Rights Commission \(2016\)](#) Fact Sheet, p. 2 are reproduced below:

- (1) The development and delivery of a sustained, focused national community education and information campaign to lift awareness of the economic benefits of employing older people and to dispel myths and stereotypes to change the way we value the contributions of older people.
- (2) That the Australian Government consider leveraging its position as a major buyer of goods and services to encourage the labour force participation of older Australians.

An effective avenue for negative perceptions towards older people to be changed is through social marketing. Social marketing interventions may influence societal norms thereby changing behaviours (see for example [Miller and Prentice, 2016](#); [Dahl et al., 2013](#)). Social marketing messages have been successful in changing people's attitudes and perceptions towards harmful behaviours in Australia (for example, the “don't drink and drive”, “slip, slop, slap”, “don't speed”, “the grim reaper” campaigns). Attitudes about the importance and relevance of social marketing campaigns are highlighted in a Portuguese survey conducted by [Costa and Esteves \(2020\)](#). Whilst generally all age groups recognised the importance of social marketing, younger people between the ages of 17–27 considered that social marketing campaigns directed at changing their attitudes towards older members, was less effective than the 50–60-year-olds who were more sensitised to the importance of social marketing campaigns in changing attitudes from negative to positive towards the older people ([Costa and Esteves, 2020](#)). Further, “. . . it is possible that these [negative] age beliefs are malleable, and they can be changed. So, I think there is definitely room to increase awareness of these negative beliefs and find ways to overcome them.” ([Senz, 2022](#), quoting Levy, author of [Breaking the Age Code: How Your Beliefs about Ageing Affect How Long and Well You Live](#)).

Reverse metamorphosis is a term used by [Nair \(2021\)](#). Rather than the new life vibrancy associated with metamorphosis, reverse metamorphosis reinforces ageism with images of

older people's lives as being "passive, inactive, shadeless and unattractive". Negative outcomes are emphasised in this statement: "Reverse metamorphosis is reinforced through marginalisation, isolation, neglect and abuse leading to depression, poor subjective well being and reduced quality of life" (Nair, 2021, p. 122). This isolation from the rest of society relates to the Social Identity Theory of older citizens being placed in the "out-group". Social marketing may help in reversing this discrimination. A series of social marketing campaigns to change people's attitudes from ageism to non-discrimination of older people also needs to include changing some unequal structures in society. Chung (2023) states that identities are often social constructions and "old age, like impairment, is not a biological given but is socially constructed, both conceptually and materially" (p. 126). Further, "disability and ageing both rest upon a biological given is a fiction that functions to excuse and perpetuate the very social mechanisms that perpetuate ableist and ageist oppression" (p. 126). Hence the need for resolute changes in embedded social structures and societal perceptions underlying age discrimination, including moving from the categorisation of older people using chronological age, to one based on the levels of health, fitness, vitality, capability and societal engagement. Chung (2023, p. 131) states "the social practices and institutions that identify and constitute a certain numbers of years lived as individual and social problems comprise the system of oppression that is ageism".

6.1 *Shaping attitudes: towards more positive views of ageing*

If societal norms can be changed, negative attitudes towards older people could also be changed. For example, "Experience with sexism and racism has shown that changing social norms is possible and can result in more prosperous, equitable and healthier societies" (Officer *et al.*, 2016, p. 710). Changing societal norms, such as the existing prevalent and persistent stereotyping of older people leading to age discrimination, could be addressed through social marketing campaigns. This might be supplemented through social media, such as educating school pupils about the importance of valuing older members in our society, involving respected and well-known people in society to be ambassadors in promoting the value of older people and in developing respect for those in their older years. The integration of senior citizens into mainstream activities needs to be developed and the improvement of existing services addressed. Media's long-standing extensive negative portrayal of older people requires a significant change. Age discrimination is a societal-wide problem needing to be addressed with a long-standing social marketing campaign to change people's perceptions along with stronger awareness of, and adherence to, age discrimination legislation.

A four-phase model of smoking (Hoek *et al.*, 2022) is adapted to a social marketing campaign to address age discrimination, as follows:

Phase 1: Age discrimination has existed for many decades, particularly in Western nations. Age discrimination has become largely normalised in many societies, even among some aged people themselves, so entrenched is the normalisation of age discrimination. Given the large number of older people in society and the long-standing influence of the now-ageing Baby Boomers, this becomes increasingly problematic.

Phase 2: The longer age discrimination is normalised, the greater becomes its acceptance and prevalence throughout society. This is evidenced by the main media portraying older people in a negative way, such as being presented as old and frail and of no value to society, and therefore invisible (a juxtaposition on the Victorian mantra for children to be seen but not heard). Older people are therefore classified, by the media and many others in society, as belonging to the "out-group" of Social Identity Theory.

Phase 3: Governments have an important role to play. Although officially age discrimination is outlawed in Australia, it is rarely brought to court compared to other types of discrimination. Governments would be well advised to take reports of age discrimination more seriously and to not procrastinate in bringing cases of age

discrimination to court. Legislation requires strengthening to make cases of age discrimination easier to prove.

Governments could also fund social marketing campaigns showing the subtle and insidious effects of age discrimination throughout society, thereby raising societal awareness. A social marketing campaign could then address ways of overcoming age discrimination, by reinforcing that all people, regardless of their age, have the same rights to quality of life, respect, and inclusion. After all, how does society overcome these challenges:

The increasing speed of modern culture, the multiple demands of communication technologies, and the pressure to be competitive, to get ahead, and to earn more money are features of Western society in the twenty-first century that have the effect of adding to the social disablement that older people experience. Another common socially disabling practice in some jurisdictions is mandatory retirement, which makes an arbitrary number of years lived, unrelated to the specific demands of the job, the age at which individuals are forced to give up their jobs, independent of their socioeconomic needs or of any desire they may have to keep working (Chung, 2023, pp. 131–132).

Phase 4: With regular social marketing campaigns highlighting the problem of age discrimination and offering solutions to overcome age discrimination, age discrimination may well become de-normalised over time. It is of the utmost importance that the long-standing marginalisation of older members of society transitions into an acceptance that people are to be valued regardless of their age and that current images of older people's lives as being "passive, inactive, shadeless and unattractive" (Nair, 2021, p. 122) metamorphoses into one where older people are active, vibrant members of society with many decades of life experiences that may be valuable to share with others. At the economic level, in addition to it being a quality-of-life issue, people that desire to work should be encouraged to do so, regardless of their older years. Not only does the paid employment of older people result in satisfaction and increased self-esteem, but it is also becoming essential in terms of adding to the fiscal purse of governments faced with the challenges of an ageing population and aged pensions payouts.

The importance of marketing and management academics contributing to research on age discrimination is highlighted in the following statement "Significant scholarly attention should be given to ageism, considering its importance and universality, as it encompasses every generation and the growth of the population of older adults." (Senz, 2022).

7. Conclusion

This case study, drawing upon survey responses, survey-inferred observations of workplace dynamics, and analysis of organizational documents, indicates that a significant proportion of participating employees have experienced age discrimination, either directly through discriminatory actions or indirectly through perceptions of systemic bias. For instance, the survey data (documentation) revealed that several participants felt overlooked for promotions (Theme 2), aligning with the analysis of job advertisements (documentation) that may implicitly or explicitly favour younger applicants. Furthermore, participant accounts of feeling their experience was undervalued by both employers and students (Theme 2, survey responses) resonate with the survey-inferred observation of a workplace culture where age and experience may not be adequately recognized in compensation or opportunities for advancement.

The findings from this case study corroborate evidence presented in the scholarly literature and government reports, highlighting the pervasive nature of age discrimination despite insufficient attention from media, employers, and legal/governmental frameworks. Memos kept during the analysis (researcher notes) frequently highlighted the consistency between participant narratives of feeling like an "out-group" (aligning with Social Identity Theory) and

the lack of explicit organizational policies effectively addressing age-related biases (document analysis). The study's results underscore the inadequacy of current protections against age discrimination in workplaces and the limited enforcement by governments and institutions.

Given the increasing demographic trend of ageing populations globally, the continued neglect of age discrimination is a critical oversight. Concerted action is imperative from governments, media, academics, and practitioners (including employers) to confront this growing issue. The potential consequences of inaction are severe, potentially exacerbating the financial vulnerability of older individuals relegated to basic government pensions due to discriminatory employment practices. While our empirical evidence focuses on the higher education sector, it is important to recognize that the broader social consequences of age discrimination (such as heightened risk of homelessness and adverse health outcomes) are well documented in the literature (e.g. [Culhane et al., 2013](#); [Petersen and Parsell, 2015](#); [Rippon et al., 2015](#); [Wang and Shultz, 2010](#)). For older workers who do not own their own homes and are unable to secure employment due to age-based barriers, reliance on the age pension can result in significant financial insecurity and increased vulnerability to homelessness. These risks, though less visible in our sample, remain highly relevant given ongoing sectoral restructures and the growing prevalence of precarious employment in higher education.

The nexus between unemployment, rising living costs, and the prospect of poverty, homelessness, increased illness, and even suicide among older adults represents a significant societal cost that cannot be ignored by businesses, academics, and governments.

It is incumbent upon policymakers, scholars, and practitioners to actively combat age discrimination through effective social marketing campaigns, reinforced by robust anti-age discrimination messaging across social and traditional media platforms. As [Chung \(2023, p. 134\)](#) aptly stated, "There is nothing inevitable about ageism or about the ways in which old age is currently constructed." As a research community focused on the multifaceted aspects of ageing, we must actively engage, collaborate, and strive to address this widespread discrimination that renders older members of society increasingly invisible and marginalized, often through no fault of their own. The consistency between the themes identified in the survey data (particularly Themes 2 and 3 regarding experiences and impact) and the lack of explicit preventative measures in organizational documents suggests a critical area for intervention by policymakers and employers.

Ethics approval

1. Ethical approval for this study/case/case series was obtained from the Higher Education Provider Ethics Approval number 2022-104 S on 14 April 2024.

Informed consent

Informed consent for participant information to be published in this article was not obtained because participants were assured of total confidentiality and that their identity would not be divulged to anyone else apart from the researcher. Further, the CEO stated he did not want the name of the College to be mentioned in the manuscript.

Use of animals

This research did not involve the use of animals.

Appendix

Survey Instrument

© [Australian Human Rights Commission \(2015\)](#). National prevalence survey of age discrimination in the workplace • 2015 ISBN 978-1-921449-69-7.

Dear colleague

It would be very much appreciated if you would please answer all the following questions. The questions are estimated to take you 20–30 min to answer. Please be assured of TOTAL confidentiality at all times.

Table A1. Survey instrument reproduced from the Australian Human Rights Commission’s national prevalence survey of age discrimination in the workplace (2015)

List in each below box all the questions from your survey or interview, that request

Demographic information

- (1) Please mark (x – or circle) your current age group
 - 50–54
 - 55–59
 - 60–64
 - 65–69
 - 70–74
 - 75 and over
- (2) Do you feel that your gender plays a role in any age discrimination you have experienced or observed?
Yes/No
- (3) Were you working here before you turned 50?
Yes/No
- (4) How many years have you been working here since the age of 50 or above?
- (5) Do you feel that any aspect has changed in your employment as you have become older?
Yes/No
- (6) If yes, please elaborate on the things that have changed (positive and/or negative)
- (7) Have you been treated less favourably than other people because of your age? Please list ALL occasions when you were treated less favourably
- (8) Do you have a line manager who is significantly younger than you and if so, is this a problem?
Yes/No
- (9) If yes, please explain in what way this is a problem
- (10) Are you aware of anybody else (in this workplace) you know who has experienced age discrimination in any way?
Yes/No
- (11) If yes, please elaborate
- (12) Determining your choice to stay in this job, assign the percentage of importance you give to
 - (1) Job satisfaction
 - (2) Non-discrimination based on age
- (13) Although they have not directly told me, my employer or colleagues think that, because of my age: (Please choose one or more options from the following)
 - a. I am too slow to learn new things
 - b. My set of skills are outdated
 - c. I should no longer be employed
 - d. I cannot do my job properly or as well as a younger person
 - e. I should have to retire
 - f. I should not be considered for another job or offered a promotion
 - g. I do not fit in with the culture of the workplace
 - h. My duties, role or work hours should be changed
 - i. I should be made casual
 - j. I should not have access to training or courses or work opportunities
 - k. My work is unsatisfactory
 - l. I should not get a job/promotion that I was interviewed for
 - m. OTHER (Specify)
- (14) Do you think you are above, below or on the median age of staff working here?

(continued)

Table A1. Continued

List in each below box all the questions from your survey or interview, that request

- (15) At any time since the age of 50, were you in a situation, at work or when looking for work, where you *believed* that you were treated less favourably than other people in a similar situation because of your age or because of assumptions made about older people, *even though you were not told directly that your age was the reason*?
- (1) Yes
 - (2) No
- (16) If yes, did this episode occur when you were applying for a job or promotion with your current employer, when applying for a job with someone you were not employed by or in relation to some other aspect of your work?
- (1) A job/promotion with your current employer
 - (2) A job with someone you were not employed by
 - (3) Some other aspect of your work
- (17) What impact, if any, did that episode have on you? (Choose as many as applicable to your situation)
- Affected your
- (1) Self-esteem and confidence
 - (2) Your mental health
 - (3) Caused you stress
- Negatively impacted on
- (4) Your family
 - (5) You financially
 - (6) Your career
 - (7) Your capacity to seek other work
 - (8) Thinking about or starting planning for retirement
 - (9) Consider changing your occupation or industry
 - (10) Consider accessing your superannuation fund
 - (11) Give up looking for work
 - (12) Consider retraining or updating my skills

Source(s): Authors' own work

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