



# Women Over 50: The Right To Be Seen on Screen

Geena Davis Institute  on Gender in Media  
*If she can see it, she can be it.™*

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50  
INITIATIVE

# Executive Summary

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## Consumers of Entertainment Media Want More Authentic Representation

42% of respondents 18 to 49 said they are very satisfied with the accuracy of characters who portray their age group, compared to only 25% of respondents 50+.

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## Stereotypes Are Evident in Entertainment Media

83% of both men and women 50+ agree with the statement "sometimes I feel the media/culture doesn't realize how much they stereotype older people."

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## Older Characters Are Missing

Characters 50+ are less than a quarter of all characters in top-grossing domestic films and most-popular television shows, from 2010 to 2020.

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## Women 50+ Are Hardly Seen

Among characters 50+, men are far more common on screen than women; of all 50+ characters, men are 4 out of 5 in film, 3 out of 4 in broadcast television, and 2 out of 3 in streaming television.

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## Older Characters who are LGBTQIA+ Are Most Visible in Top Streaming Shows

From 2010-2020, on average 4% of 50+ characters were LGBTQIA+ in top streaming shows, compared to 0% in top films and 1% in broadcast television.

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## Disabled 50+ Characters Are Rarely Shown

From 2010 to 2020, on average, the share of 50+ characters with a cognitive, physical or mental disability in top streaming shows was 1%, compared to 5% in film and 5% in broadcast.

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## Older Characters Are Villains, Not Heroes

Popular films and television shows are more likely to have 50+ characters who are villains than heroes -- 59.0% of films have a 50+ character who is a villain, but only 30.0% have a 50+ character who is a hero; 43.2% of the television shows have a 50+ character who is a villain, but only 22.1% have a 50+ hero.

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## Romantic Storylines Are Uncommon For 50+ Characters

Younger characters are far more likely to have a romantic storyline than characters 50+; depending on the year, characters 49 and under are two to three times as likely to have a romantic storyline than characters 50+.

# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONTENT CREATORS

**Just 25% of people who are 50+ said they are very satisfied with the accuracy of characters who portray their age group. By telling more authentic stories about aging with characters who look and feel their age, consumers will see themselves better reflected on screen:**

Characters 50+ are less than a quarter of all characters in top-grossing domestic films and most-popular television shows. To address this inequality, reflect on past, present and future productions to identify where 50+ characters' stories have been overlooked and have potential to be told.

Challenge your own expectations about who can play what. This report finds that three in four 50+ characters are men. Consider 50+ women, especially women of color, to play characters in male-dominated occupations to bridge this gap.

Intersectional diversity is uncommon among 50+ characters. Write more stories that center on the lives of LGBTQIA+ and disabled 50+ characters.

Age and aging is used as a punchline in many films and shows. But older people are not inherently undesirable or funny simply because they are old. Avoid hiring the older background actor whose only purpose is to be the butt of a joke. Think twice before including dialogue or camera shots that imply that someone's sexuality is a joke or that they are inherently sexless or undesirable simply because they are above a certain age.

Consider how all characters talk about age, even when older characters are not around. Do guys call each other "grandma" as an insult? Do characters complain that they are "so old" because they stay in on a Saturday night? This kind of language contributes to harmful attitudes about the value and quality of life over 50.

Our analysis observed extremes in 50+ representation. Characters 50+ are either seen as old and frail or as adept action stars or supervillains. Allow more space for 50+ people who are living normal, dynamic lives. Show the aches and pains, but also show the joy, the insight, and the adventures that people over 50 experience as well.

# REPRESENTATION PITFALLS:

## Common Tropes to Avoid

According to our survey, 83% of men and women 50+ agree with the statement “sometimes I feel the media/culture doesn’t realize how much they stereotype older people.” The following are some common tropes that rely on stereotypes about older people in film and television. Try to avoid these representation pitfalls:

### The Sage

Older characters are sometimes relegated to roles in which they serve no purpose other than to advise younger characters. While it is good to show appreciation for the wisdom that comes with age, these characters need to be well-rounded and have their own narrative arcs and motivations beyond just serving younger people. Note that this is often attributed to characters of color, and can contribute to racist stereotypes as well (such as the “Magical Negro” or “The Guru”).

Does this film or episode employ “The Sage” trope?

- An older character whose main purpose is to advise or mentor younger characters.
- Wise, but lacks dimensionality and autonomy

### The Age Gap

Age gaps occur in two different ways. First, there are romantic couples with major age differentials between the two partners (often an older man and a much younger woman). Second, there are major gaps between actors’ ages and those of the characters they play. The former can contribute to harmful notions of predatory power dynamics between men and women and can also disempower female actors over a certain age. Similarly, the latter also takes roles away from older actors while also potentially contributing to stereotypes, as younger actors do not have the life experience for the role and can often fall back on what they have seen on screen. Endeavor to cast age-appropriate actors for roles and consider whether casting choices could contribute to stereotypes.

Does this film or episode employ the “Age Gap” trope?

- An older male character is in a relationship with a female character who is much younger.
- An actor plays a character whose age is much older or much younger than the actor’s actual age.

## The Cranky Old Person

The Cranky Old Person trope embodies the “get off my lawn” stereotype. They complain about social change and people, and talk about the good old days.

Does this film or episode employ the “Cranky Old Person” trope?

- An older grumpy character.
- An older character who is anti-social.
- An older character who is stubborn and unwilling to change or adapt.

## Dirty Old Man/Woman

The Dirty Old Man/Woman is an older (usually male) character who hits on, sexually objectifies, or sexually touches younger characters. This character’s behaviors are usually portrayed in a comedic way, which makes it seem innocent or harmless.

Does this film or episode employ the “Dirty Old Man/Woman Trope?”

- An older man or woman who is sexually inappropriate toward much younger characters.
- An older man or woman who preys on younger characters but it is shown as comedic and/or harmless.

## Old Maid

The “Old Maid” is an older female character who is unmarried, without children, and is typically lonely. She may have pets (e.g. cats or birds), but is seen as a sad lonely person by others. Other characters may comment that she is a “spinster” or “barren” because she never married or had children.

Does this film or episode employ the “Old Maid” Trope?

- A lonely older woman who never married or had children.
- A lonely older woman pitied by other characters for being unmarried and without children.