Hitting the glass wall: Investigating everyday ageism in the advertising industry

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Abstract

This paper contributes to the growing research into the structural inequalities characterising the cultural industries by investigating the lived experience of older cultural workers. By drawing on 22 in-depth interviews with experienced advertising creatives it explores how ageism manifests itself in the creative departments of advertising agencies and how older creatives negotiate their professional identities in response to ageist representations, discourses and practices. By focusing on one of the so-far mostly neglected inequality regimes prevalent in the cultural industries, this research adds to recent attempts to empirically explicate the formation of entrepreneurial subjectivities of cultural workers and the 'psychic life of neoliberalism' (Scharff, 2016). In all, the accounts provided by older advertising creatives paint a complex but also a consistent picture of entrenched ageist work cultures, which require considerable efforts on the part of older practitioners to successfully navigate. They do this by adopting an attitude we describe as *resigned resilience*. This notion encapsulates the ambivalence expressed by these older creatives towards their prospects in the industry and adds nuance to 'oversimple' portrayals of the entrepreneurial subjectivities of cultural workers (Taylor and Littleton, 2012).

Keywords: Advertising, creative industries, ageism, inequality, entrepreneurial subjectivity

Introduction

The cultural industries are characterised by 'paradoxical inequalities' (Gill, 2014). While in celebratory discourses they are presented as diverse, egalitarian and meritocratic (paradigmatically: Florida, 2002), mounting evidence of seemingly deeply ingrained inequalities and divisions surrounding cultural work suggests that this image of egalitarianism and diversity is just that – a powerful ideological myth. As a recent special issue of this journal comprehensively illustrates, gender discrimination is one of these persistent inequalities (Conor et al., 2015; see also Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2015; Nixon, 2003; Banks and Milestone, 2011; Gill, 2002; 2011; McRobbie, 2011). Inequality is also a common feature in relation to race, ethnicity, class, disability (Holgate and McKay, 2009; McLeod et al., 2009; Hesmondhalgh and Saha, 2013), and – last but not least – age. Arguably an important aspect of the 'cool' image of the cultural industries is its 'youthfulness'. This is, as statistics show, not just a metaphorical claim glamorising practitioners' character and attitude, but quite

literally a fact: Many jobs in the cultural industries are the preserve of the young. But why? What discourses, representations and (purported) economic and organisational imperatives cause this distorted age profile? So far, surprisingly little research has investigated the lived experience and creative identifications of older cultural workers (though see Taylor and Littleton, 2012; Hennekam, 2015 for notable exceptions). Usually, the 'youthfulness' of the cultural and creative industries is only mentioned in passing as a potentially problematic structural factor affecting creative workers (see for example Nixon and Crewe, 2004; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011) or theorised on a more abstract level in relation to the conceptual framework of immaterial labour (Farrugia, 2018). To provide further insights into this issue this paper investigates the perceived relationship between age and creativity in the Australian advertising industry. It is based on the qualitative analysis of 22 in-depth interviews with experienced advertising creatives. The focus of this research is on the identity work they perform in response to their special position as 'older' practitioners in an industry regularly characterised as 'youth obsessed' and regarded as paradigmatic for the hyper-competitive 'entrepreneurial disposition' required of workers in the cultural industries (Gill, 2014). Thus, the article contributes to the growing critical literature on the conditions, characteristics and lived experience of work in the cultural industries (Ross, 2009; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; Deuze, 2007; Taylor and Littleton, 2012; McRobbie, 2016; Scharff, 2016) by drawing attention to the distinct manifestations of a so far mostly neglected, 'inequality regime' (Acker, 2006) prevalent in one particular segment of the cultural industries.

This paper is divided into three sections. The first provides empirical background on the age characteristics of the advertising industry in Australia and positions this issue in the context of the developing industry discourse around ageism that is taking place in trade journals and online publications. The second section summarises the research methodology. The third presents and discusses the key themes emerging from the interviews and relates them to broader frameworks employed in critical literature on both creative work in general and the subjectivities of (advertising) creatives specifically. In all, our participants' accounts paint a complex but also consistent picture of entrenched ageist work cultures, requiring considerable efforts on the part of older practitioners to successfully navigate. We pay particular attention to the way the perceptions of our participants relate to the growing research into the 'labouring subjectivities in neoliberalism' (Conor et al., 2015; Scharff, 2016) and the valorisation of particular forms of immaterial labour in post-Fordist economies (Adkins 2005; Farrugia 2018). We argue that they adopt an attitude we describe as *resigned resilience*. This notion encapsulates the complexity of the identity work these older creatives perform and adds nuance to 'oversimple' portrayals of the entrepreneurial subjectivities of cultural workers (Taylor and

Littleton, 2012, p.45).

Hitting the glass wall

Despite the attention advertising has received in critical media studies (Pollay, 1983; Wernick, 1991; Taylor, 2009), the lived reality of those working in advertising agencies remains – bar a few noteworthy exceptions (Moeran, 1996; Nixon, 2003; Nixon and Crewe, 2004) – a rather unexplored territory. The few studies that investigate the actual work of advertising practitioners and the workplace sociology of advertising agencies mainly focus on two areas of interest: There is, firstly, a small body of literature on the way creatives negotiate their professional and often disputed identity as 'artistically-minded' cultural intermediaries in opposition to the business imperatives imposed on them by managerial staff and the organisational structures of agencies (Hackley and Kover, 2007; 2011; Koslow et al., 2003). Secondly, a few studies investigate the highly gendered, 'macho' working environment of the creative departments in advertising agencies (Nixon, 2003; Nixon and Crewe, 2004), and the way they are dominated by white, hedonistic and combative middle-class males. Thus, while inequality based on gender and class has been the object of at least a few investigations into the workplace culture of advertising agencies, the issue of age inequality has received almost no attention in critical studies into creative work, despite the extraordinarily distorted age profile of the advertising industry. For instance, according to the 2016 *Labour Force Survey* by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), the average Australian advertising and marketing professional is 34 years old. [1]

Only 13.7 per cent are between 45-54 years old, and a mere 2 per cent are aged between 55-59. A recent survey of 15 leading Australian advertising agencies revealed that 62 per cent of their employees were under 35 years old, and just 10 per cent were older than 45 years (Burrowes, 2016). These figures mirror those of the British advertising industry. In Britain, the average age of an agency employee is 33.6 years, and less than 6 per cent of agency staff are over 50 years old (IPA, 2016). In the US, over 60 per cent of agency employees are aged between 25-44, and only five percent are over 50. Furthermore, most of these older employees are not working in the creative departments of their agencies but in managerial roles in advertising agencies (Dan, 2016). These age distributions not only deviate significantly from the averages for other industries – they also indicate that 40 appears to be a critical 'threshold age' at which many advertising practitioners (have to) leave the industry.

Recently, this extreme underrepresentation of older creatives has been addressed in the advertising industry's trade press. For instance, the US journal *Adweek* acknowledges that ageism was 'an even more pervasive form of discrimination in the industry than gender or racial inequality' (Coffee, 2016). The Australian advertising news website *Mumbrella* reports on events where ageism has been defined as 'the new sexism' (Kelly, 2017) and as 'the forgotten issue of the industry' (Jones, 2017). And the British trade magazine *Campaign* calls ageism 'adland's next frontier' (Kemp, 2016). In 2016, and in conjunction with the media agency MEC, *Campaign* commissioned an industry-wide survey on the issue of ageism in marketing and advertising. According to the study, over 30 per cent of respondents reported to have experienced ageism in the workplace, 42 per cent have observed ageism directed at colleagues, and almost 60 per cent agreed with the statement that advertising was 'a young person's game'. Furthermore, only 49 per cent of men and 42 per cent of women see themselves working in the advertising industry past the age of 50, and 16 per cent of female practitioners surveyed said they would even consider cosmetic procedures to make themselves look younger for their career. According to this research, ageism is significantly worse in the advertising industry than the British workplace average, with three times as many advertising practitioners experiencing ageism, and twice as many observing ageism against other employees (Roberts, 2016). It appears that in addition to the proverbial 'glass ceiling' the advertising industry is also characterised by a 'glass wall', blocking career paths not just vertically, but horizontally. In other words: Once creatives reach their late-thirties, they are either successful in obtaining one of the few leadership positions available in agencies, or they (have to) leave permanent employment.

Despite these staggering figures, we know very little about the lived experience of older creatives working in the cultural industries in general, and even less about the subjectivities of older creatives

in the advertising industry. One of the few exceptions is a study by Hennekam (2015), which found that many older creative workers in the Netherlands were pushed towards self-employment as a result of age discrimination, age-related prejudices and negative stereotyping. Similarly, based on interviews with 'mature' creatives, Taylor and Littleton (2012, p.106) briefly note that their informants perceived the cultural industries as a field in which 'age is constructed as a source of trouble'. They however do not investigate this issue any further. Similarly, in his detailed portrayal of the workplace culture in the creative departments of advertising agencies, Nixon (2003) mentions in passing the deeply entrenched valorisation of youth and the generational stereotyping that characterised the outlook of the young creatives he interviewed for his study. But again, he did not explore this finding in more detail.

About the study

To understand the lived experience of older creatives in advertising agencies in their own terms and in its richness and complexity, we conducted in-depth interviews with 18 male and four female creatives between August 2017 and March 2018 (see Table 1). Our youngest participant was 32 at the time of the interviews and our oldest 53, with the average age being 43. By selecting participants within this age-range we sought to capture the experiences of creatives who are either approaching the critical juncture represented by the industry's 'age threshold' or who had already crossed it. Reflecting the significant overrepresentation of males in creative departments in advertising – and acknowledging the fact that working in the creative industries poses specific challenges for women (Taylor and Littleton, 2012) – the sample of this exploratory study focuses predominantly on males. However, we enrich and contrast their accounts with preliminary findings from interviews we conducted with four experienced female creatives. Twelve of our participants were working in permanent positions at leading multinational advertising agencies in Sydney or Melbourne, and 10 were self-employed. They were either of Australian or British nationality and had a minimum of 10 years' work experience. On average, they had worked for five different agencies throughout their careers, allowing them to draw on a broad range of workplace cultures in their accounts. The first participants recruited were practitioners the authors had met previously in a professional context or had been suggested as possible study participants by industry contacts. Subsequently, these participants were asked to identify further potential informants. With the informed consent of the participants, semi-structured interviews lasting between 45 and 90 minutes were conducted either in the participants' offices or off-site if requested. An interview guide consisting of exploratory and open-ended questions was used to encourage participants to provide detailed descriptions of their experiences. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and field notes were written immediately

after the interviews summarising methodological reflections and additional observations, for example noteworthy non-verbal communication. Interviews were continued until it was felt that theoretical saturation was reached (Wodak and Meyer, 2015). Analysis of interview transcripts and field notes followed Miles and Huberman's (1994) three-stage framework of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. During the data reduction phase, the researchers individually identified meaningful 'chunks' of information to establish initial categories, codes and themes. The researchers then collaboratively reviewed these classifications and inferences drawn. Differences in the classification and interpretation of data were resolved through a 'negotiated agreement' approach in which each researcher provided a justification for decisions made in order to, through further discussion, achieve consensus (Campbell et al., 2013). The display stage saw a matrix developed to present coded data – including confirmatory and contradictory cases presented in the form of participant quotes – within analytical categories. The data analysis stage involved drawing conclusions on the basis of theoretical insights. Interview transcripts were then returned to as a means of confirming the coding analysis and case selection used to form our conclusions, which we will now discuss in detail in the remainder of this article. In order to protect the anonymity of our informants, pseudonyms are used throughout this paper, and any references to particular agencies are removed.

Table 1: Participant characteristics

Participant	Position	Age	Gender
ACD1	Associate Creative Director	35	Male
AD1	Senior Art Director	37	Male
AD2	Senior Art Director	40	Male
AD3	Senior Art Director	45	Male
AD4	Senior Art Director/self-employed	41	Male
AD5	Senior Art Director	52	Male
CD1	Creative Director/self-employed	45	Male
CD2	Creative Director	38	Male
CD3	Creative Director	38	Male
CD4	Creative Director/self-employed	42	Male
CD5	Creative Director/self-employed	50	Male
CD6	Creative Director/self-employed	48	Male
CD7	Creative Director/self-employed	52	Male
CD8	Creative Director	44	Male
CD9	Creative Director	38	Male
CD10	Creative Director/self-employed	47	Female
CD11	Creative Director	37	Female
CD12	Creative Director/self-employed	53	Female
CW1	Senior Copywriter	42	Male
CW2	Copywriter/self-employed	35	Male
CW3	Copywriter	32	Male
CW4	Copywriter/self-employed	53	Female

The Economics of Ageism

In line with the statistics presented above, all our participants identified an age imbalance in their respective agencies, making them part of a minority or sometimes even the sole creative aged around their mid-thirties or older. One approach to explaining this lack of age diversity – as well as other social inequalities – is to focus on the project-based 'production model' of the cultural industries, which leads to high insecurity of employment and income, low wages, unsocial working hours, high geographical mobility and network-based recruitment (Eikhof and Warhurst, 2013). All these factors particularly disadvantage women, ethnic minorities and aspirants from working class backgrounds. Yet while insightful, this model cannot fully account for the ageism prevalent in the advertising industry, which also affects socio-economically privileged practitioners (white; male; Anglo-Saxon) who are working in permanent positions in their agencies. More problematic, in the view of our informants, are the overall economics of the industry as well as the current remuneration models used by most agencies. Many informants pointed towards the ever-decreasing profit margins of advertising agencies, resulting in the requirement to cut costs – with a reduction in the number of senior staff on higher wages emerging as a means of reducing overheads. Accordingly, agencies

commonly keep costs low by hiring less experienced, and therefore less expensive young creatives, who just 'put in the hours'. As one participant explained:

> That's the argument: You can hire a lot of cheap people and get a whole bunch of throw-away bits of work, as opposed to having some senior people who work more efficiently. […] We have lost that efficiency and instead just exploit that enthusiasm of people who don't know any better until they are burned out. [CW4]

The dominance of the economic discourse forces older creatives to define their creative identities first and foremost in relation to costs, thus furthering the 'economisation of subjectivity' (McNay, 2009) characteristic for work under neoliberalism. Consequently, most participants stressed that the efficiency of older creatives – their ability to 'steer the ship' [AD2] – justified their comparatively higher salaries. Furthermore, they saw themselves as more capable than younger creatives to *craft* ideas into creative concepts with the capacity to solve the client's business problem as opposed to merely being able to produce 'the biggest, craziest, most captivating idea' [AD3] or to 'think gimmicky' [AD4]. The complex relationship between experiences and discourses of craft and creativity has been identified as a key theme in research into cultural labour (Conor, 2014; Sennett, 2008). It is therefore noteworthy how our participants foreground 'craftmanship' is as a key component of their identity and seek to put their tacit knowledge and experience in opposition to the unrestrained 'creative exuberance' [AD1] of young creatives.

Yet while older creatives like to think of themselves as 'a safe pair of hands', they feel their reliability and experience is often not valued. Rather, they reported a persistent feeling of insecurity due to being considered expensive in comparison to younger creatives. For instance, one participant described having his salary on two separate occasions explicitly equated to 'the number of juniors' the agency could hire in his place [AD3]. As a consequence, many older creatives admitted that they frequently contemplated the need to find 'exit-options'.

However, the cost-factor argument offered by many participants in itself does not fully explain the distorted age profile in advertising agencies. One female creative said she knew 'a lot of [older] people who would happily take less salary' but still had no success in obtaining a permanent position after having worked freelance [CD12]. For her and some other informants, a key issue was that people in creative leadership positions in agencies were 'less comfortable to have subordinates around them who are close to their age' [CW4] or were even 'intimidated' [CD12] by experienced practitioners. Instead, they were keen to 'seem cool by surrounding themselves with young people' [AD4].

There are, however, further discourses and practices at work that reinforce ageist cultures in advertising agencies, as we illustrate in the next section.

Re-affirming creative identities

Cultural work is characterised by an elevated and productive tension between cultural and economic values (Nixon and Crewe, 2004). The advertising industry is arguably a field in which this tension is particularly pronounced and productive in the way it shapes practitioners' creative identities (Hackley and Kover, 2007). As a result, advertising creatives exploit the contradictory values of creative and business cultures for forging a creative identity based on symbolic non-conformity, expressed through casual yet fashionable clothing, a 'youthful investment in the glamorous image of creative work', a 'highly self-conscious sense of masculinity' and a strong 'identification with hedonism and a consumption-based ethic of enjoyment' (Nixon and Crewe, 2004, p.145). Nixon (2003) notes the striking extent to which the young advertising creatives he interviewed had embraced the competitive rules that characterise the market in creative jobs and how they had cultivated a habitus that allowed them to establish and continuously re-affirm a creative identity appropriate for dealing with these demands. Part of this creative identity described and expressed by Nixon's young creatives was also a heightened consciousness of age and a tendency to stereotype older creatives as 'dead wood'. Framing 'youth' as a prerequisite for newness and innovation was central to the discursive regime these young creatives tried to establish in their attempts to justify their ambition to rise-up in the hierarchy and to unseat established members of the creative department. The following section illustrates how participants experience their roles as older creatives in these hyper-competitive workplace environments and how they manage their professional identity in response to the subtle forms of ageism these cultures engender.

Exhausted creativity, inaccessible online cultures, and fear of a use-by date

A mentioned above, a common way for our interviewees to position themselves against younger creatives was by discursively establishing a binary between 'youthful creative exuberance' and 'mature strategic experience'. This seemingly confident self-positioning based on experience, craftsmanship and reliability however was often accompanied by an underlying level of self-doubt, mainly fuelled by neuroscientific, materialist and ultimately essentialist theories of creativity circulating in society. A regularly mentioned issue in our interviews was that older creatives had to struggle against 'the universal perception in society that older people are less radical and creative' [CD1]. And while some of our participants maintained that age did not matter with regard to creative

potential, others shared their anxieties of becoming, for example, 'set in their ways' [CD2], or even considered the possibility that there was a causal, neurologically hard-wired relationship between youth and creativity. For instance, one participant specifically referred to neuroscientific research suggesting that one's ability to think laterally declines with age.

Furthermore, our participants felt that the stereotypical perception of older practitioners as less creative was compounded by the elevated role of digital media – and specifically social media – in consumer culture. Our interviewees commonly reported that the assumption that 'old people don't get digital' [AD1] was widespread in advertising agencies, leading to 'open discrimination against people who had a bit of grey in their beards' [CD6]. Although older advertising creatives always had to live with the perception that 'younger people may be more in touch with contemporary trends' [AD5], the widely shared opinion among our participants is that 'online and social media have accelerated this perception in recent years' [CD1]. Particularly problematic for older creatives is that this perception does not predominantly refer to the issue of technological competence, but that 'online culture' as such was deemed 'inaccessible' to older creatives [AD1]. One participant put it succinctly: 'Online culture matters, and young people are better at that' [ACD1].

This observation points to the central role advertisers currently ascribe to social media as a vehicle for producing, circulating and validating commercially valuable 'youthfulness' – the 'affective capacity for playful enjoyment, cutting edge taste-making, savvy consumption and desirable embodiment (Farrugia, 2018 p.561). As Farrugia (2018) notes, in the post-Fordist economy 'youthfulness' is increasingly considered a quality which needs to be mobilised for imbuing goods, services, and labouring subjectivities with desirable forms of commercial value. Thus, what the notion that older creatives 'don't get social media' refers to is their purported inability to recognise and mobilise valorised forms of 'youthfulness' that would allow them to productively participate in and exploit the commercial opportunities provided by the immaterial labour performed on social media.

As a consequence, many of our participants felt they were being subjected to the 'starvation tactic' of being denied access to career-furthering work in the form of briefs with 'creative potential'. As one informant paradigmatically stated:

> You can have an illustrious career and win businesses and awards, but once you pass the 'grooviness threshold' you get fewer and fewer of these briefs. And then, when you are only able to do the level of work that the brief allows you to do, that's further proof that you're not capable of doing other work. [CW4]

Among many of the older creatives who were still in permanent positions this vicious cycle raised the fear of being systematically sidelined. One informant explained:

> I have seen older creatives […] who have no desire towards creative management being marginalised in terms of the work they have been given. We joked: you end up in the old guys corner, at the crappiest desk in the open plan, and you get work nobody else wants to do. [CD6]

Many informants reported the detrimental effect this had on their mental health:

> I often worry about whether or not I have an expiry date. I worry about whether or not people might not hire me because of my age. [CW2].

> I just feel so insecure it's not fun. I've still got a healthy mortgage to pay, and I've got two kids, and it keeps me awake at night'. [AD3]

Looking the part

In addition to the exclusions stemming from the belief that older creatives 'don't get online culture' and concerns about being given projects with less scope for creativity, these practitioners are also in danger of being 'passed over for opportunities if they don't look their part' [AD1]. The importance of maintaining a youthful appearance was stressed by the vast majority of the older creatives we interviewed. One participant put it bluntly, stating that 'if you are 50 but look 40 or younger you are fine; you are not if it is the other way around' (CD1). While making this statement he grinned and pointed at his fashionable sneakers. In the view of this interviewee it was at least partly due to his 'boyish looks' that he was still employed in the creative department of a leading agency. Similarly, a female creative admitted that she felt the pressure 'to maintain a groovy, arty kind of look' [CD10], and another said that 'you are not supposed to age past 35, particularly not as a woman' [CW4].

What is particularly revealing about these comments is that they illustrate the conscious and at times even instrumental perspective these creatives have on the way they manage their appearances. Rather than just unconsciously reproducing an internalised and field-specific bohemian dress code, these creatives used the way they dressed strategically, responding to the industry's disciplinary requirement to perform the 'labour of youthfulness' (Farrugia, 2018, p.524). It illustrates how in neoliberalism aesthetic practices increasingly constitute aspects of psychic life. The injunction to self-optimise, which is central to neoliberalism, requires ever more intense forms of 'aesthetic entrepreneurship' (Elias et al., p.39) – the seemingly self-directed and calculative labour of managing appearances. While originally employed in the context of feminist beauty studies, the concept can productively be applied to the purposeful attempts by these older creatives to produce and maintain

forms of embodied youthfulness that help create the desired hip and bohemian atmosphere valorised by advertising agencies and their clients. Yet the insights provided by our participants shed light on the complexities involved in mobilising appropriate forms of valorised youthfulness. For instance, one informant pointed out that 'he would look stupid if he dressed like a twenty-year old' but that nevertheless 'style did not hurt' [CW1]. Thus, it was important to identify age-appropriate aesthetic renderings of youthfulness. It is however particularly problematic that this aesthetic entrepreneurship encourages creatives to feel they must mitigate the negative consequences of appearing not sufficiently youthful and, as a result, knowingly perpetuate ageist stereotypes of the 'ideal creative' through dress. Another participant pointed out that 'dressing young' was not just about using fashion to fit in 'stylistically'. Rather, he explained, youthful looks were akin to a Darwinian fitness indicator, signalling that the creative in question still has the energy and enthusiasm to cope with the gruelling pace and pressure of the industry. In the words of this interviewee it was problematic 'if you look like you don't have the stamina' [CD4]. Another informant reported that older creatives often had to do 'castings' prior to client meetings or presentations, since usually only 'one grey-haired guy' was allowed in teams or client-meetings [CD1] – and that they were often required to perform the role of the 'token old guy' to communicate 'experience and gravitas' [AD3] [CD5].

Ultimately, the accounts provided by our informants highlight the almost complete devalorisation of age and associated accumulated skills and competencies. The extent to which this devalorisation informs the professional identity of the industry can be paradigmatically illustrated by the following quote from Rory Sutherland, vice-chairman of Ogilvy UK and former president of the IPA (Sutherland, 2013):

> Advertising, by failing to ally itself to any recognisable science or body of knowledge, does not really pay a premium for experience. There is no mental framework on which you can hang a lifetime of accumulated experience. This means that we habitually value youth and vitality over wisdom and maturity.

Thus, as a consequence of this perceived lack of a stable canon of professional knowledge, older creatives are forced to re-affirm their creative identities by substituting claims to technical skills and professional knowledge with the immaterial labour of embodying youthful subjectivities. 'Age' thus transforms from a potential marker of professional experience inextricably linked to a person to a fluid and alienable product of 'cultural work' (Adkins, 2005, p.124). This reconfiguration of embodied skills and techniques from being considered as 'properties of the self' into performances that are subject to continuing processes of qualification and re-qualification is, as Adkins (2005) suggests, a key feature of immaterial labour in post-Fordism. She shows how in the new economy gender is

being reconstituted from 'type or kind' to a 'fluid strategic artifice' subject to 'cycles of production, distribution and reception' (Adkins, 2005, p.124). As a result, gender becomes a 'performance of femininity', whose value as a 'workplace resource' is contingent on the effects it has on its intended audience and the ever-shifting ensembles of social relations and practices involved in the qualification and re-qualification of this 'cultural work' (Adkins, 2005, p.124).

It is productive to apply this theoretical perspective to the aesthetic entrepreneurship described by our participants. Similar to the cultural work of 'doing gender' described by Adkins, in their accounts 'age' features as a fluid artifice which older creatives attempt to employ strategically, but whose value is ultimately determined by audience effects (co-workers; clients) and the wider networks of social and economic relations that valorise and devalorise specific performances of youthfulness (Farrugia, 2018). This explains why, as our informants report, in certain contexts age is being construed as a valorised signification of 'experience' and 'gravitas' whereas in others it is considered to be an undesirable embodiment of lacking cultural capital. It might also help explain the phenomenon that to many practitioners ageism remains 'unspeakable'.

Unspeakable ageism?

A particularly striking theme emerging from the interviews was the extent to which many creatives appeared to be ambivalent about the ageist nature of the advertising industry and the constitutive characteristics of ageism in general. Most of our participants characterised the advertising industry as ageist, yet at the same time these practitioners – particularly male creatives – reported that they hadn't experienced 'explicit' or 'blatant' ageism. In contrast, female creatives were far more prepared to identify practices and discourses as ageist. As one female participant explained: 'Unless the man has been an outsider in some way I don't think he has experienced discrimination. […] But women recognise it straight away because they have been there before' [CW4]. Overall, however, though our participants tended to acknowledged ageism 'in theory,' they often did not recognise or acknowledge ageist mentalities and manifestations in their everyday workplace practice. One explanation for this apparent contradiction might be that especially male creatives simply disavow personal vulnerabilities. Yet our participants' accounts also suggest that ageism as a concept is still somewhat unintelligible and easily explained away by the dominant economic explanations for the lack of age diversity and the creativity stereotypes associated with older creatives. The following response by our youngest participant to the question of whether he had experienced ageism in the workplace is illustrative of a general lack of critical reflection of the age profile of creative departments:

Definitely not personally. I guess when you hear ageism, I automatically think it'd be more about people on the older end being discriminated against. […] One of the oldest teams were made redundant recently, and I don't know why that is. My first thought was that it is just about money. I don't know whether you would count that at ageism. [CW3]

This informant also reported the aforementioned, widely shared experience that young creatives usually were given briefs with creative potential and therefore received 'a lot more of the attention', while 'the older guys' were allocated work that wasn't seen as 'a fun and sexy job'. Yet despite these potentially ageist instances, he was unsure whether they should count as such. This illustrates how the requirement to embody the industry's valorised quality of youthfulness has become normalised and invisible to someone who is still in the position to successfully perform this immaterial labour. Ageism thus shares central characteristics with Gill's (2014) conceptualisation of 'new sexism' as 'an agile, dynamic, changing and diverse set of malleable representations, discourses and practices of power' (Gill, 2014, p.517), rendering sexism unintelligible and unmanageable. One of our female creatives explicitly compared and interrelated the 'slipperiness' of this new sexism with that of ageism:

And it's like from 40, I have become more and more invisible in the agency network, and it has been really hard to figure out why. You know, back in the old days when the creative director used to put his hands on your shoulder and harass you, that was easier to deal with than the gender issues that come up now when you are just silenced. You just get overlooked. [CD12]

Another female creative agreed, saying that ageism was similar to gender bias in that it was 'difficult to put the finger on what maintains it' [CD10]. For many of the creatives we interviewed, ageism manifested as a subtle, pervading atmosphere rather than as an easily identifiable, concrete set of practices. As a participant paradigmatically explained:

I don't think it's one of those things that people will say to your face … I think it's rather like any of those 'isms' – you experience it as an overall feeling. [AD4]

As a consequence, ageism – despite being acknowledged in general – is rendered somewhat unspeakable in specific terms. One of the problematic consequences of this unspeakability is that it results in the lack of a critical vocabulary for talking about it in the first place. Thus, it is not surprising that despite the increased attention ageism has recently received in the trade press and industry discourse, hardly any concrete discussion about the non-economic, culturally embedded reasons for this structural inequality and the practical markers of ageism is taking place.

Embracing the freelance economy – with resigned resilience

It is illuminating to relate the 'ageist atmospheres' experienced by our participants to the growing research into the 'psychic life' of entrepreneurial subjects in neoliberalism (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; McRobbie, 2016; Scharff, 2016; Gill, 2014). In neoliberal discourses surrounding the creative industries, cultural workers are frequently portrayed as 'paradigms of entrepreneurial selfhood' (Scharff, 2016, p.110), operating according to 'feeling rules' (Gill and Kanai, 2018, p. 319) who positively embrace a high degree of adaptability, flexibility, mobility, and the ability to thrive on risk. The advertising industry is commonly considered a segment of the cultural industries in which the discourse of the entrepreneurial subject is particularly potent (most recently Deuze, 2017). However, the picture that emerges from our interviews draws attention to the rather complex 'psychic life' of older creatives and their ambivalent relationship to their jobs and the industry more generally. While the accounts of our participants reinforced many of the commonly identified 'contours of entrepreneurial subjectivity' (Scharff, 2016), they also differed in some important aspects. Most illustrative of the power of neoliberal discourses surrounding creative work was the figure of the 'jaded creative' that many participants invoked as a generalised and imaginary representation of the industry's 'negated other'. This jaded creative was described as a 'cynical know-it-all', lacking 'energy' and 'enthusiasm', and producing 'stale ideas' since they did not 'push themselves'. Tellingly, it was particularly important to almost all our participants to stress that they still had the energy and passion to prove themselves anew with every project, acknowledging that 'what you have done in the last six months' [AD1] ultimately defined their creative identity and standing in industry. This perspective evinces a willingness to individualise the intense competition that characterises the advertising industry by transforming it into a competition with oneself and is thus central to the subjectivities of our participants. However, at the same time these creatives are acutely aware of the structural forces shaping the industry and the exploitative nature of their workplaces. While, for instance, Scharff (2016) noted in her study that young female musicians exhibit a tendency to disavow structural inequalities and replace social critique with self-critique, our participants were, at least on an abstract level, prepared to call out the structural inequalities prevalent in the industry. But due to the unintelligibility of ageism, the dominance of the economic explanation for inequalities in industry discourse, and the lack of formal professionalisation mechanisms and unionisation, our participants doubted that change could be achieved from within the industry. Change would only happen, most participants agreed, if clients demanded it. As a consequence, the dominant attitudinal disposition of the older creatives we talked to is best described as one of 'resigned resilience': They are prepared to continue trying to make a living as creatives despite the structural forces working against them.

However, the entrepreneurial spirit commonly ascribed to advertising practitioners was not completely internalised and fully embraced by our participants; rather, it was experienced as being imposed upon them. This perspective was particularly pronounced for participants who had been retrenched from their permanent roles (sometimes several times) and now made their living as freelance creatives. In many cases the drive of these older creatives to work as freelancers or to run their own studio was the effect of making a virtue out of necessity, having to respond to a lack of opportunities in established agencies. In fact, only one of the participants still in permanent employment said that his final career goal was to run his own creative studio, while the others generally considered it only as a fall-back option. Interviewees already working as freelancers often reported that they had become creative entrepreneurs only involuntarily, highlighting the marginalising experience that got them there. As one participant explained of her transition to freelance work: 'I would not call it a decision – it was the option that was available'. Asked whether she had become comfortable in this role she replied: 'I enjoy freelance. I might as well enjoy it, because I can't see myself [being] employed' [CW4]. This quote paradigmatically summarises the perceptions – or what we call resigned resilience – pervading the accounts of many of our participants.

Conclusion

This paper contributes to the investigation of inequality regimes in the cultural industries in two ways: Firstly, by focusing on the interplay between age, subjectivity, and creative labour in the advertising industry, it provides empirical evidence illuminating the lived experience and entrepreneurial subjectivities of older creatives in relation to the perceived ageism of the industry – a so far mostly neglected aspect in the literature. Our findings show that despite the fact that our participants – mostly white, Anglo-Saxon males – could be considered a 'privileged' subsection of creative workers, their accounts resonate with many of the findings reported in the literature on creative labour in the cultural industries. Even many of the older creatives who were in permanent employment reported a pervasive feeling of insecurity and looming precarity. A particular challenge for older creatives is the need to perform the immaterial labour of embodying specific forms of youthfulness valorised by their workplace cultures. This illustrates how the unevenly distributed capacities to produce certain embodied affective qualities shape the subjectivities and career prospects of older labouring subjects in the constantly shifting 'economies of youthfulness' (Farrugia, 2018) that characterise contemporary neoliberalism. Furthermore, by responding to this disciplinary requirement, older creatives unwillingly become complicit in the perpetuation of stereotypical associations between creativity and

youthfulness. This is a dynamic that warrants further research in the context of other sectors of the creative industries and beyond.

Secondly, we contribute to research into the lived reality of creative labour by introducing the notion of 'resigned resilience' as a conceptual framework for theorising the specific and shared subjectivity emerging out of the accounts of our participants. These older creatives – in contrast to arguments repeatedly made with regard to other subsections of the creative workforce – neither subscribed to the 'meritocratic myth' (Gill, 2014) of the creative industries, nor did they disavow the deeply entrenched structural inequalities characterising the industry. Instead, descriptions by our participants of their quotidian practices indicate the formation of ambivalent dispositions that allow them to negotiate the industry's entrenched ageist mentalities and their own diminishing career prospects. This resigned resilience is a complex amalgam of entrepreneurial dispositions and residual values based on communities of practice, mentorship, craft, and social critique. It is part of the 'inertia' of the collective cultures of labour that Morgan and Nelligan (2018, p.149) have identified in the context of their research into aspiring creatives. And, as the accounts of our informants illustrate, the resistance inherent in this inertia is not so much turned inwards; it simply 'lingers around' with nowhere to go – neither discursively nor practically. Discursively, they felt the advertising industry's inherent ageism is 'unspeakable' due to its malleability and the way it intersects with other regimes of inequality. And practically, it is hard to tackle as a consequence of the individualised nature of creative labour in the advertising industry. Yet if one agrees with Skeggs (2014, p.17) that rather than searching 'both sociologically and ontologically for a coherent political subject' we should focus more explicitly on contradictions that enable resentment, the resigned resilience felt by our participants could be a productive starting point not only for developing a critical vocabulary that would make ageism intelligible, but also as a potential counterforce to the demands of neoliberal entrepreneurialism.

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[1] According to the ABS (see http://joboutlook.gov.au/occupation.aspx?code=2251), the average age across the Australian workforce is 40 years. When comparing the age distribution of the advertising and marketing industry to other sectors of the Australian cultural industries, the distorted age profile of the advertising industry becomes apparent: For instance, the average age for *Public Relations practitioners and Graphic Designers and Illustrators* is 36 years, for *Artistic Directors, Media Producers & Presenters* it is 39 years, for *Journalists and Photographers* it is 41 years, and for *Visual Arts and Crafts Professionals* it is 50 years. Notwithstanding the fact that the clusters used by the ABS do not provide a more fine-grained analysis of advertising agencies specifically, the numbers nevertheless support the widespread impression of industry observers and practitioners that the age profile of the Australian advertising and marketing workforce is particularly skewed towards the young.