

THEME 02

A new narrative for old age

DEMOGRAPHY

SILVER
ECONOMY

AGING
POPULATIONS

We are used to thinking of growing old as an inevitable undesirability, while youth is synonymous with life, hope and growth. However, our lifespans are stretching and populations across the globe are aging rapidly. As a result, new narratives emerge about older people as tech-savvy, active and open to meaningful experiences. These are the contours of a new image for old age.

Our observations

- Credit Suisse reports that the global population aged 60+ will rise from 900 million in 2015 to [2.1 billion](#) by 2050. There will be more people older than 60 years than children younger than 15. Life expectancy will increase by one year every five years. Studies suggest that half the children born after 2000 might live more than 100 years.
- By the end of this decade, global annual consumer spending by age 60-and-over adults will reach [\\$15 trillion](#). In the U.S., the 50+ market constitutes nearly 70% of the nation's consumer spending, and older adults dominate 119 out of 123 consumer packaged-goods categories. McKinsey reports that the 60+ cohort will generate [51%](#) of consumption growth in developed countries in the coming years.
- In *The Longevity Economy*, Joe Coughlin notes that business shows itself to be trapped in an [outdated narrative](#) of older consumers by describing them as unlikely to try anything new, technologically inept, in poor health, and happy to withdraw from productive life.
- Older consumers are more interested in the role [technology](#) could play in their lifestyles than is often assumed. Older people have widely embraced smartphones, laptops, tablets, and social media (65% of the over-50 cohort is on Facebook).
- Beauty magazine [Allure](#) has stopped using the term “anti-aging” in order to stop reinforcing the message that aging is a condition we need to battle. The magazine wants to change the narrative by celebrating beauty in all ages.



Connecting the dots

With longer lifespans, population aging, and the subsequent rejuvenation of old age, we are forced to reconsider our perspective on what it means to grow old. Issues concerning older people have already gained significant attention (e.g. loneliness, the right to voluntary euthanasia). Moreover, a more optimistic perspective about people in old age is emerging, as businesses target their high spending power, they have become more tech-savvy, and popular culture has come to celebrate their life stage. As such, cracks are beginning to show in the narrative that aging is a process to be feared, stopped, or reversed. This shift could inspire older people and amplify optimism about old age.

Rising spending power for older people is changing the perspective on consumption as being driven mainly by young people. For some products that are designed and marketed to young people, older consumers eventually become the prime demographic (e.g. certain [cars](#), tablets). This could also apply to [smart home and on-demand services](#). As businesses no longer consider older consumers to be technologically inept and unlikely to try anything new, a new image of old age consumption is appearing. [A Toyota commercial](#) illustrates this by showing a young woman hooked to social media, while her 50+ parents are cruising in their car and mountain biking with friends. Indeed, as older consumers become more active, tech-savvy, and increasingly look for meaning in consumption, the [Hyper Experience Economy](#), in which experiences carry potential for personal transformation instead of mere escapism, also ties into the [Silver Economy](#) of an aging population. Likewise,

in the realm of technology, we still assume that older people either do not understand or principally dislike technology. However, an alternative explanation is that older users set the bar higher for product adoption. Research shows that older people do not fear technology, but rather perceive it as [liberating](#) – indeed, most people currently aged around 50 were among the first smartphone users. Similarly, in a [fascinating recent study](#), researchers found “extremely sophisticated attitudes” about technology’s dangerous role in daily life among “hillbillies” in rural Appalachia (people who’ve also been labeled irrationally fearful of technology). In popular culture, a different image of older people is emerging as well. Traditionally, in many Hollywood movies, seniors are [underrepresented, mischaracterized and demeaned](#). However, more recently, some successful movies have explored aging in a more meaningful (e.g. *Up*, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, *Amour*) and increasingly, a more [optimistic](#) way (e.g. *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, *The Bucket List*, *Quartet*). All in all, while perhaps we will always have an overly negative perception of aging (as an equivalent to nearing death), cultural attitudes towards aging could change. Old age has always been something to be feared and overcome through, for example, “anti-aging” products. Scientists like [Aubrey de Grey](#), an advocate of the view that we will one day control the aging process, are products of this narrative. However, in the emerging optimistic narrative, aging is something to be celebrated through meaningful consumption and an active lifestyle assisted by useful technology (compatible with an aging lifestyle).

Implications

- Longer lifespans, aging populations, and a rejuvenated life stage for older consumers means that opportunities will rise in the smart home sector (with technology-enabled home services that provide convenience and support for older people); lifelong education (for personal enrichment and to remain competitive in the workplace); and new approaches to leisure (such as Hyper Experiences, travel, and other types of meaningful consumption).
- Technology could increasingly be [geared towards older people](#), and, as part of an aging lifestyle, older people could require technology more than ever with devices like smartwatches, fitness trackers, and dedicated devices with EKG trackers.