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Curating Age: Automation, Embodiment and the Design of Experience in UK Television Advertising

Introduction

In recent research conducted by the UK's Advertising Standards Authority on the depiction of older people in advertising, participants repeatedly described advertising as something they approached with "a pinch of salt" (ASA 25). Adverts were recognised as exaggeration, shorthand or even performance. They were not expected to be realistic or especially credible; and yet, the same participants returned again and again to a small set of familiar images of later life. Charity appeals framed by loneliness and adverts for funerals, care services and end-of-life planning. Representations that drifted between crisis and idealisation.

Individually, these portrayals were easy to dismiss, but their persistence made them harder to ignore. Across interviews and focus groups, the ASA found that repeated exposure mattered less because people believed what they saw, and more so because the same depictions recurred across time, platforms and product categories. Over time, the report cautions, these patterns could begin to shape how ageing is understood and felt, not through persuasion or realism, but through familiarity and emotional repetition.

This finding is noteworthy because it emerges at a moment when advertising increasingly frames itself as the design of experience rather than the delivery of messages. Within contemporary branding and advertising discourse, value is often described in experiential terms, with brands expected to generate memorable encounters rather than convey information. That orientation now operates within advertising environments shaped by optimisation and automation. Creative decisions are increasingly informed by data, performance modelling and platform logics, favouring formats that are emotionally legible, efficient and repeatable (Rudnick). Experience, in this context, is no longer treated as something that happens after an advert is seen. It is structured in advance and designed to circulate.

These developments raise a critical question: if advertising now prioritises the design of emotionally recognisable experiences, what happens to cultural phenomena that do not resolve quickly, do not stabilise easily and do not lend themselves to clear affective cues? Ageing offers a particularly revealing case. As both a growing demographic and a desirable consumer market, older people are highly visible in certain types of advertising and strikingly absent in others (Olsen and Scott). When later life does appear on screen, it is often framed through a narrow emotional register that privileges recognition over ambiguity and decisiveness over duration. Advertising does not simply depict ageing, it helps define how later life is expected to feel.

This article examines how ageing is constructed as a mediated experience in three recent UK television advertising campaigns: *If Only You Knew* (Age UK, 2023), *#LastLonelyMenopause* (TENA, 2022) and *Feel Good* (Age Co, 2024). These campaigns differ in tone and intent, yet all exemplify how contemporary advertising curates later life through affective design under conditions of automation and optimisation. They point to a constrained set of emotional forms through which later life is made intelligible within advertising systems shaped by efficiency, coherence and circulation.

Theoretical framework: experience, automation and the representation of ageing

This article treats experience not as an interior or purely subjective state, but as something actively produced through media form, design practice and systems of circulation. In

television advertising, experience takes shape through coordinated decisions around form, pacing, imagery and affect, with ageing organised as a meaningful and emotionally legible condition rather than a neutral life stage.

Advertising has long functioned as a system for organising experience because it invites identification rather than detached observation. As Leiss and colleagues argue, advertising operates as a set of communicative intermediaries, forming “patterned systems of meaning” (182) through which social life is made intelligible. In this account, advertising is not a supplementary cultural practice but a central institution concerned with organising consumption activity and with making objects, persons and situations “come alive” (181) within staged social interactions. This process is particularly significant for ageing, which is rarely left ambiguous in advertising but is animated through specific emotional cues, gestures and narrative framings.

Treating experience as something that can be deliberately produced aligns with what Pine and Gilmore describe as the experience economy. As they argue, “the best way to generate demand for any offering in today’s experience economy is with an experience so engaging that customers can’t help but pay attention and buy that offering” (42). What matters here is not the promotional ambition of this claim, but its underlying assumption that experience can be intentionally shaped and made to work. Once experience is understood in these terms, it becomes open to design decisions concerning pacing, intensity, duration and emotional clarity. Television advertising operates squarely within this logic, albeit in compressed form. Campaigns stage micro-experiences in which affect, tone and interpretation must be established quickly and clearly.

Within this experience-oriented logic, it is important to distinguish between experience design and affective design. Experience design refers to the orchestration of narrative, sensory and temporal elements that structure how an encounter unfolds. Affective design, as used here, describes an increasingly explicit orientation towards emotional calibration within advertising practice. Donald Norman’s work on emotional design is instructive in this respect. Norman argues that “products and systems that make you feel good are easier to deal with” (7), emphasising that affect often precedes conscious interpretation and functions as a mode of judgement. Affect, in this sense, is not a by-product of storytelling but something designers actively work with. Within contemporary media cultures, affective legibility and emotional clarity increasingly operate as normative values, privileging recognisable feelings over ambiguity or contradiction (Döveling, Harju and Sommer; Paasonen). In advertising, narrative, performance, editing, sound and delivery are selected not simply for expressiveness, but for emotional legibility. The emotional arc of a campaign is therefore rarely incidental. It is calibrated across audiences and platforms, with later life staged through familiar affective positions such as vulnerability, recovery, reassurance or affirmation. These framings can appear personal or empathetic, while simultaneously reinforcing culturally familiar emotional scripts about ageing (Featherstone and Wernick). What is at stake is not only representation, but the narrowing of how ageing is allowed to feel.

These affective strategies are increasingly shaped by automated and semi-automated production environments. Contemporary advertising workflows rely on script templates, modular narrative structures, editing presets and performance guidelines that standardise emotional expression. Automation here does not refer solely to artificial intelligence, but to broader infrastructural conditions in which experience is increasingly computed, tested and iterated, shaping not only how advertising is delivered but how affective experience itself is designed (Andrejevic; McStay). These systems influence which bodies are shown, how they move and how they are positioned within emotional and narrative frames (Lury). Although much of this automation remains invisible on screen, its effects are evident in production practice. Platforms such as QuickFrame and Runway enable advertisers to calibrate tone,

pacing and visual style with precision, while direct-response television campaigns rely on templated scripting and modular frameworks that optimise emotional arcs for circulation across platforms. Creativity is not eliminated, but embedded within systems that privilege emotional efficiency and recognisability.

Applied to representations of ageing, these design logics constrain the emotional range through which later life is publicly articulated. While diversity and inclusion have become prominent branding values, the affective scaffolding through which later life is presented often remains narrow. Older bodies are repeatedly positioned within familiar emotional templates of resilience, vulnerability or aspiration, with limited space for ambivalence or contradiction (Gilleard and Higgs; Olsen and Scott). Ageing becomes culturally intelligible, but only within carefully managed affective boundaries.

Methodological note

Adopting a qualitative, interpretive approach, this article is rooted in critical media analysis. The selected case studies were examined through close textual and aesthetic reading, with attention to narrative structure, affective design and the organisation of experience within contemporary advertising formats. Drawing on theories of experience design, affect and cultural ageing, the analysis foregrounds how advertising produces emotional legibility and embodied meaning rather than simply representing later life. The campaigns were chosen for their cultural prominence, thematic relevance and diversity of tone, enabling comparative analysis of how ageing is rendered across different branding contexts. This approach allows for a system-level reading of advertising texts, tracing how automated and pre-structured production logics shape the kinds of experiences of later life that advertising can readily accommodate.

Case I: Age UK, *If Only You Knew* (2023)



Figure 1: Age UK, *If Only You Knew* (2023). Stills from one of three parallel storylines in the campaign. The screenshots illustrate the advert's shift from everyday routine to sudden vulnerability.

Age UK's *If Only You Knew* campaign stages ageing through an affective structure that presents itself as social realism while being tightly engineered for emotional impact. Drawing on helpline data and first-person testimony (Age UK), the advert organises the experience of

ageing around a single moment of rupture that reshapes how the viewer is asked to feel. It opens with scenes of everyday normality. Older people move through familiar domestic routines, framed in warm light and set to The Tams' "Be Young, Be Foolish, Be Happy." The mood reassures. Autonomy and ordinariness are foregrounded, sometimes shading into contentment. Ageing appears managed and socially unremarkable. The pace remains slow, the affect muted, urgency absent. Then the interruption arrives. The music stops. The screen darkens. The lights go off. Vulnerability enters through shock rather than accumulation, collapsing normality into precarity within seconds. Instead of relying on the slow build of social detail, recognition is compressed into an instant. The power cut renders hardship visible all at once, turning structural deprivation into a perceptual event that demands feeling before interpretation. Emotional clarity is achieved quickly, well within the constraints of the television format. Yet this efficiency also raises questions. What forms of ageing become visible only when crisis is staged as revelation? Which experiences remain affectively indistinct because they unfold gradually, lack spectacle or resist translation into rupture?

Everyday constraint, persistent anxiety and slow decline struggle to register without such dramaturgical force. The aesthetic grammar of hardship reinforces this economy. Dim lighting, worn interiors, withdrawn gestures operate as immediate cues of distress, functioning less as social texture than as affective signals. As Leiss and colleagues observe, advertising animates meaning through staged interaction rather than sustained complexity. Ageing becomes legible here through a narrow but effective visual and emotional vocabulary. The emotional arc follows a familiar charity template, moving decisively from reassurance to urgency through pacing and sound rather than argument. Ethical intent remains intact, but interpretation is minimised. The older subject occupies a double position. On screen, they appear as individuals whose hardship warrants recognition. Within the logic of experience design, they function as affective proxies through which urgency and responsibility circulate. Ageing becomes visible only once it disrupts the surface of normality, a form of immediacy well suited to pre-structured narrative arcs and compressed affective cues characteristic of contemporary advertising production.

Case II: TENA, #LastLonelyMenopause (2022)

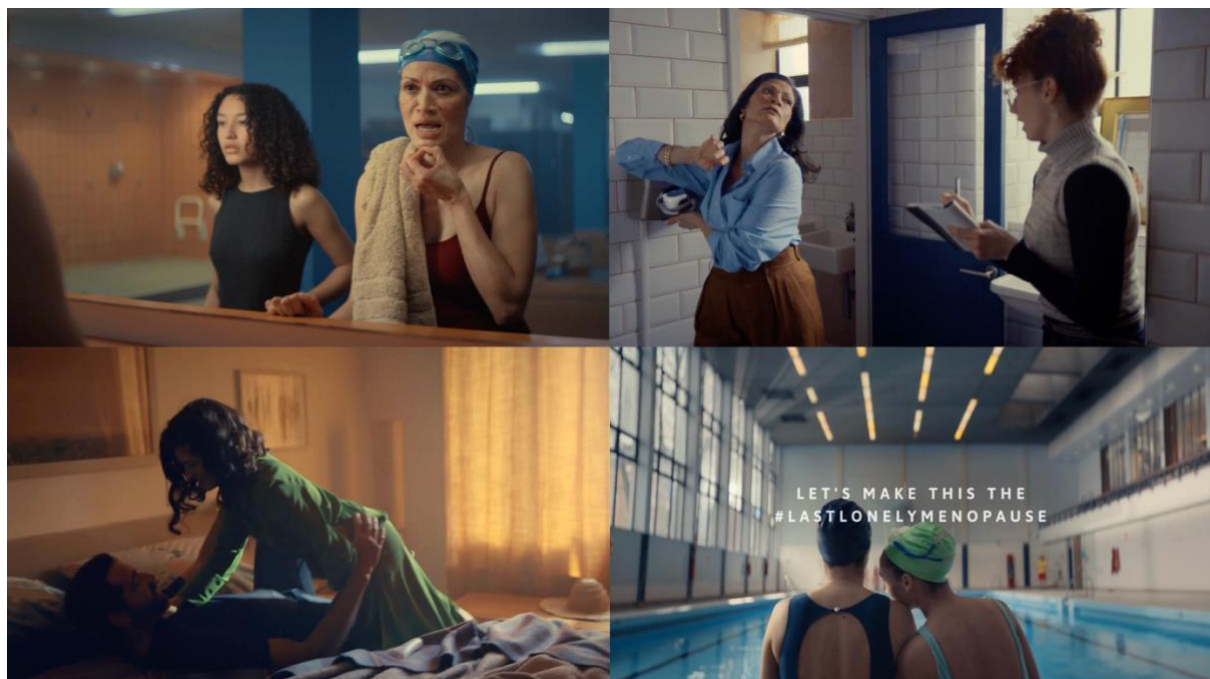


Figure 2: TENA, #LastLonelyMenopause (2022). Screenshots from the advert highlighting the intergenerational mirroring that structures the campaign's representation of menopause and later-life embodiment.

TENA's *#LastLonelyMenopause* campaign approaches later-life femininity through recognition rather than disruption, relying on alignment as its central affective mechanism. Menopause becomes emotionally legible through mirroring with a more culturally familiar bodily transition. The advert follows a mother and daughter across domestic scenes, cutting between the daughter's experience of puberty and the mother's experience of menopause. Time does not advance. Two life stages sit side by side, establishing an immediate affective bridge. Menopause appears intelligible because it is placed next to a transition viewers already understand. There is no requirement to learn a new emotional language. Instead, menopause is translated into an existing one.

Mirroring stabilises affect. Puberty carries a familiar emotional grammar shaped by confusion, embarrassment, bodily adjustment and social self-consciousness. Aligning menopause with these affects reduces uncertainty and softens disruption, allowing recognition to arrive quickly and with little resistance. Empathy emerges without requiring menopause to stand on its own terms as an autonomous or unsettling experience in later life. The tone that results is intimate but contained. Close-ups and quiet voiceovers foreground interiority, while montage limits prolonged dwelling. Affect circulates between mother and daughter, producing continuity across the life course. Bodies change, but the emotional script holds. Such stability reflects an experience-design logic in which coherence and reassurance take precedence over surprise or disruption (Pine and Gilmore). Emotional intelligibility is secured through selective amplification, intensifying certain feelings while allowing ambiguity or contradiction to recede (Paasonen). Within this framework, menopause becomes publicly legible not by asserting its specificity, but by being translated into a familiar emotional form that can be readily processed and circulated.

Yet this familiarity imposes constraints. Anchoring menopause to puberty risks flattening the specificity of later-life embodiment, while also presuming a normative life course structured around intergenerational continuity. What kinds of menopausal experience become speakable only when rendered symmetrical with youth and aligned with familiar patterns of transition? From an affective design perspective, this narrowing is deliberate. Compression and translatability take priority over ambiguity, allowing the campaign to circulate efficiently across audiences and platforms. In doing so, *#LastLonelyMenopause* performs important cultural work by breaking silence, while simultaneously limiting the emotional range through which menopause can be publicly recognised. Ageing becomes visible by being made familiar. Menopause feels less lonely precisely because it is never allowed to feel fully strange.

Case III: Age Co, Feel Good (2024)



Figure 3: Age Co, Feel Good (2024). Selected screenshots from the advert showing the transition from consumer decision to choreographed movement, central to the campaign's affective resolution.

Age Co's *Feel Good* campaign completes a different affective movement, operating not through rupture or mirroring but through resolution. The advert is organised around a simple promise: later life should feel good. The narrative centres on Barry, a man in his sixties, who experiences a burst of joy after switching insurance providers. The storyline is stripped back: a phone call is made, a decision follows, the body responds, Barry dances. The emotional transformation occurs quickly and decisively, leaving no residue. The dance functions as the advert's affective hinge, visually confirming that the transaction has succeeded both financially and emotionally. Joy becomes evidence. The choreography remains playful and controlled, framed within the domestic interior. It reads as familiar and repeatable: rhythm holds, movement begins, music swells, feeling resolves. Cause and effect collapse into a single gesture. Care appears complete and anxiety recedes. The emotional arc closes cleanly, offering the viewer a sense of completion rather than reflection.

From an experience-design perspective, this structure is highly optimised. Pine and Gilmore describe memorable experiences as coherent and closed, and *Feel Good* adheres closely to that logic. The experience does not unfold gradually; it lands. Resolution presents itself as self-evident, yet this clarity carries consequences. Joy is conditional, triggered by correct consumer behaviour. Emotional uplift follows from making the right choice, modelling when happiness should occur and how it should be earned. Later life emerges as a space where good feelings are produced through ethical and rational consumption. This framing raises further questions, such as what happens to emotions that do not resolve neatly, that linger or return, or that resist closure? Ambivalence, ongoing worry and uncertainty find little space here, while feelings that fail to close risk appearing as personal failure rather than lived experience. Within this modular emotional arc, automation shapes this logic. The dance can be trimmed and redeployed across platforms without losing its meaning. Joy functions almost like a preset, calibrated through timing, framing and performance. In contrast to crisis and recognition, *Feel Good* presents ageing as solved. Vulnerability remains implied but largely bypassed. What ultimately matters is the feeling at the end.

Synthesis: affective templates and automated experience design

Across the three campaigns, ageing emerges as an affective experience shaped by a narrow but powerful set of design logics. The campaigns reveal recurring patterns through which emotional experience is structured, stabilised and made readily recognisable within contemporary advertising practice. These patterns can be understood as affective templates. Rupture, mirroring and resolution function in this way, organising how later life is rendered emotionally intelligible across otherwise distinct campaigns. These templates do not simply reflect creative preference or genre variation. They respond to institutional pressures to produce experiences that are immediately legible, emotionally decisive and capable of circulating efficiently across platforms. Ageing, in this sense, is curated less as a biographical process than as a patterned emotional encounter.

These affective templates privilege emotional clarity over emotional depth. Across the three campaigns, recognisability operates as a design goal in its own right, with affect calibrated to feel immediate, intuitive and appropriate in ways that foreground ease of recognition over reflective complexity. Rupture condenses vulnerability into moments of crisis that demand rapid acknowledgement. Mirroring stabilises later-life experience by translating it into familiar emotional scripts. Resolution offers closure, reassurance and reward within tightly bounded narrative arcs. These strategies prioritise speed, decisiveness and completion, while marginalising forms of ageing that unfold slowly, remain ambiguous or resist narrative containment. What becomes visible is not the full range of later-life experience but those aspects that can be organised into clear affective trajectories.

This narrowing reflects broader shifts in experience design within the contemporary media economy. Advertising increasingly operates as an emotional architecture, orchestrating affect through pacing, gesture, sound and narrative rhythm rather than relying on extended explanation or social realism (Leiss et al.). Experience is produced through staging rather than accumulation. The emphasis on coherence and closure echoes long-standing principles of experience design, in which memorable encounters depend on tightly coordinated elements that arrive at recognisable emotional endpoints (Pine and Gilmore). What distinguishes the current moment is the extent to which these principles are no longer situational or craft-led, but increasingly systematised across production environments.

Emotional arcs are now shaped within settings where affective responses are anticipated, tested and refined through data-driven assumptions about audience behaviour (Rudnick; McStay). Storytelling becomes modular. Emotional beats are stabilised. What 'works' is iterated, repeated and normalised. Within digital affect cultures, recognisability functions as a normative value, reinforced by platform logics that reward rapid comprehension and response (Döveling, Harju and Sommer). Rupture, mirroring and resolution are well suited to these conditions. They operate as affective shortcuts that translate complex experiences into forms that can be processed quickly and at scale.

The consequences for the representation of ageing are substantial. Embodiment remains central across the campaigns, but it is consistently shaped by the demands of designed experience. Older bodies appear as sites through which affect is activated, stabilised or resolved, addressing both the on-screen subject and the viewer interpellated through empathy. Ageing is thus organised through a dual experiential logic, operating simultaneously at the level of lived embodiment and mediated perception. Experiences marked by endurance, oscillation, uncertainty or contradiction remain difficult to accommodate within advertising's affective economy.

The tension that emerges across these campaigns is therefore not between positive and negative images of later life, but between designed experience and lived embodiment. Automation does not displace creativity or ethical intent. It situates both within systems that

standardise emotional form and normalise particular ways of feeling. In doing so, these systems do more than shape representation. They participate in setting the affective terms under which ageing can be publicly articulated, recognised and valued.

Conclusion: advertising, automation and the cultural future of ageing

This article set out to examine how ageing is constructed as experience within contemporary UK television advertising, and how that construction is shaped by automated forms of experience design. Through three analytically situated case studies, it has shown how ageing can be organised through affective templates that render later life emotionally legible, readily circulable and inclined toward resolution within particular segments of the advertising landscape. These findings do not claim representativeness for advertising as a whole. Rather, they demonstrate how specific design logics operate in contexts where affective clarity, recognition and completion are prioritised as conditions of effective communication.

Viewed in this way, concerns about narrow or repetitive depictions of later life appear less as the product of individual creative failure and more as outcomes of how experience is designed at scale. Contemporary advertising environments favour emotional forms that can move quickly, settle decisively and circulate with ease. Over time, such forms accumulate, not because they persuade viewers of their realism, but because their familiarity renders them increasingly difficult to ignore. This has direct consequences for how ageing comes to be understood and felt. Later life that unfolds unevenly or resists resolution sits awkwardly within these systems, while experiences that promise recognition, reassurance or crisis are easier to stabilise and repeat. Advertising does not merely mediate how later life is seen. It participates in defining how later life is expected to feel.

This reframing also complicates prevailing industry narratives that position automation primarily as a future-facing advance toward greater autonomy and intelligence. The more consequential transformation identified here is already embedded in everyday production practice, through the routinisation of affective design decisions that pre-structure experience in advance of encounter. These decisions shape not only what kinds of stories about ageing circulate, but how often they do so and in what emotional form. If regulatory concern tends to focus on emotional extremes, and industry discourse celebrates ever more responsive advertising systems, this analysis points to a different critical challenge. Questions of representation must be accompanied by questions of design. Understanding how later life is made feelable within automated media environments is essential for grasping not only what ageing looks like in advertising, but how its emotional contours are being shaped before they reach the screen.

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