



EXPERIENCES OF AGEISM IN RETAIL AND HOSPITALITY

2025

Introduction

National Seniors Australia is a member-based, not-for-profit research and advocacy organisation representing Australians aged 50 and over.

Every year we survey thousands of older people on diverse topics relevant to their lifestyle and wellbeing.

This report is based on a 2024 survey module about ageism.

In February 2024 National Seniors Australia surveyed older Australians on whether they had experienced exclusion or discrimination based on their age.

The answers were many and varied and are fully reviewed in our 2025 report on the question, *Elements of Ageism 4: Experiences of Exclusion and Discrimination*.

But one topic stood out as worthy of special attention: older people's experiences of being ignored, served last or otherwise treated poorly in retail and hospitality settings.

This is an under-appreciated form of ageist exclusion that nevertheless needs to be addressed.

The consequences of ignoring an older customer or serving them last may seem small to the person doing it. Being left behind happens to us all once in a while.

But when it happens repeatedly it is debilitating to the person on the receiving end. And when it happens more to older people than younger people, it is clearly ageism – a pattern of discriminatory behaviour based on age.

It is also illegal. Treating someone differently because of their age contravenes the [Age Discrimination Act of 2004](#), whether in customer service or anywhere else.

And it is bad for business. As some of the comments in the following pages show, people who experience ageist service do not come back and do not spend their money at that business again.

For this report we have reproduced the 130+ comments we received from survey participants about ageism in retail and hospitality so that people in the industries can hear the problem in their words. Every coloured text box is a different older Australian's quote about their experience of exclusion.

We hope the report will encourage the retail and hospitality industries to foster a more equitable service environment for all.



OLDER PEOPLE FEEL INVISIBLE IN SHOPS

retail

Sometimes in shops it is as if I am invisible - until of course I point out to people I am there and would appreciate being attended to.

The invisibility of the aged in retail, entertainment or service environments.

The retail sector can sometimes just not see me, which I find really annoying.

The usual being invisible in retail store.

occasionally feel invisible in a retail store

in retail situations when you become invisible. Generally when in a queue in small retail. Newsagent Baker fast food etc.

What is most frustrating is feeling 'invisible' in public places like waiting at a counter and not being served

Occasionally when shopping, can get overlooked at the counter. Do not have a problem gently and politely reminding person serving, that I am here. Always thank them

Occasionally overlooked when waiting to be served at a shop counter.

invisible to young counter assistants

Shop assistants frequently don't see old people waiting for service. Sometimes I feel invisible. My local [duopoly supermarket] is known for this

clothing

quite often I'm invisible when shopping, especially when shopping for clothes.

Invisible to staff in clothing shops or tech stores

I have found as I get older I am often invisible in retail shops, particularly in regard to technology. [Well known furniture store] is particularly bad for this. Sometimes in cafes as well. I call invisibility my secret power! But I really do get upset when it happens. On the other hand, if I have really good service I always thank the person.

tech

counters

any shops

In shops the assistants obviously have problems with their eyesight as they sometimes do not see me!

As an older person I've come across the way I'm treated in some shops, as an older person you become "invisible"

Shop staff don't see me

invisible at shops

Sometimes overlooked in shops or queues. Until I point out the error of the other person's ways!

To some people, I have become invisible which I notice most in shops.

I have sometimes felt invisible in some shops

Customer service is lacking compared to a few decades ago but it seems if you have grey hair you can become invisible.

There can be a lack of respect when shopping. A feeling of being invisible.

the "invisible factor" when in shops

Mostly just feeling invisible e.g. when looking for service attendants

AND IN HOSPITALITY

cafes

In a hospitality or public area I don't receive recognition for service as easily

when you are standing waiting to order something you can be overlooked being old female and short doesn't help

I feel like I'm invisible at times especially in restaurants. I often joke that it's a good time to rob a bank as no-one sees me!

Sometimes I become invisible in shops and cafes (must be the grey hair) but generally I get stroppy and demand to be served

Sometimes in cafes or bars I'm overlooked for quite a while

Not getting service at bars and shops

Every time I walk up to a bar - women over 50 are invisible.

sometimes at a bar for example, young staff [not all] treat you as though you're invisible.

bars restaurants

SOMETIMES WE ARE ACTIVELY IGNORED

Frequently ignored in shops.

Being ignored while shopping

Being ignored when shopping

Ignored by shop assistants.

Shop assistants ignore you

Cafes, ignored in shops.

Not noticed or ignored when shopping.

Being ignored in some retail outlets.

Frequently ignored in retail outlets. Yet amazingly my money and custom appears to be accepted.

Occasionally I feel ignored when clothes shopping

Ignore or pretend not seeing me while queue up trendy hair salon or cafe.

The way you are treated (or generally ignored) in retail outlets.

I am usually ignored when waiting at the bar to buy a drink

Sometimes in stores shop attendants ignore you as if you are not there.

Most noticeable when shopping - older people tend to be ignored.

It's very subtle, but I now sometimes feel invisible, for instance not being served in a shop. This is usually younger people who just ignore older people.

I see ageism constantly in retail environments when you are overlooked or not even acknowledged

Not being served in shops or greeted.

In shops, no service or help

ignored ignored ignored

Pretending we are not there waiting to be served for up to 15 minutes and then I leave retail establishments then this happens often.

Often overlooked when shopping for clothing and household items, even a car. When accompanied by one of my adult children they are usually the ones sales staff speak to, completely ignoring me. If I'm on my own I have walked in and around a store sometimes for 15 mins, or more, without staff approaching or offering assistance.

going into shops the shop assistants seem not to see older people, and are reluctant to serve or enquire if you need any help

staff turn their backs

Going into [well known furniture store] or [well known white goods store] and having the young staff turn their backs on me without even asking how can I help you. Needless to say I never shop there.

in department stores like [furniture store] and [white goods store] where young staff look at my grey hair and turn away.

Being ignored when I go into some larger department stores, wait at counter to be served. Staff give me eye contact but ignore me Ultimately I left the store without my purchase.

Definitely ignored by technology shop assistants like [well known telecommunications store] and [well known technology store]. Brick and mortar shop assistants tend to ignore me even when i ask for assistance.

even when we ask for help

Going into stores, particularly ones that sell technology. Most young people don't want to see me and that really makes me angry and frustrated. They obviously think that I am not tech savvy. Also in cafes & restaurants have had the experience of being overlooked, or forgotten about. I tell my children it is my new super power, invisibility.

Sometimes I get ignored by younger staff if I'm in a technology store wanting to buy a new phone or tablet etc. I do my very best to research what I'm looking for before going to the store so I have a pretty good idea of what I want to buy.

and when we know it can be better

The main place I experience the above is when shopping mainly for clothing. Young people tend to ignore me and for some reason do not ask if I would like some help. I have worked in retail and every customer was always approached and asked if they would like some help.

Ageism in retail environments can lead to being ignored or discounted as a serious customer. I have called this out on several occasions and received good responses from management.

Shopping is amusing. If I get a young assistant they can be dismissive and ignore. But I'm pushy and get attention when I want it

OUR YOUNGER (OR MALE, OR ABLE-BODIED) COMPANIONS ARE ADDRESSED INSTEAD

I have the double whammy of my assumed older age and being in a wheelchair. so often in a restaurant, cafe or other retail environment the assistant will refer/speak to my companion and totally disregard me, often not even looking at me.

Ten years ago when I would go shopping with my mother, she resented that shop workers would ignore her altogether and talk to me when she was the one looking to spend money.

When I shopped with my mother years ago, often the assistant would ask me questions, rather than ask Mum, who was standing beside me and starting to 'boil'!

Salespeople have addressed my daughter rather than me despite the fact that I am the purchaser.

Salespeople will address my daughter and ignore me. People assume that I can't do something

In shops with my daughter the shop assistants may direct their responses to her, even though I am asking the questions. Especially with tech matters there is an assumption that, because I have gray hair I could not possibly understand (not the case). This is mostly an unconscious response, or the person is trying to be kind. But it is very frustrating.

Sometimes I find that people prefer to speak to or deal with my husband rather than me, even though I mostly take care of the household accounts and problems with breakdowns etc. I'm not sure whether it's just because I'm a woman or an old woman.

AND WE ARE PATRONISED

Sometimes younger retail staff treat me like I am an idiot.

In retail situations I sometimes feel that finer details about products can be omitted with an underlying current of you wouldn't understand the technical aspects
Sometimes feel that you are spoken down to or ignored due to gender and age

[Well known telecommunications store] retail assistant who could not answer our question (and we knew more about digital sim cards for overseas use than he did, I suspect). He made a comment "It must be hard for old people like you to use this sort of technology. There are special phones that are easier to use, you know".

I am very aware of young people serving me in shops and I think they think I'm not very technical (they are right!) but I do feel the need to say something about helping an old person today! even though I don't really feel like an old person

Both my husband and I have regular/ongoing prescriptions. Some last 30 days, others 28. I try to get them all filled at the same time, monthly and approximately a week before the last ones expire. Over time, 30 day scripts won't need filling and then things get out of 'sync'. A pharmacist (angry middle aged man) refused to fill a script that wasn't due for another week, and followed by saying, you need looking after, don't you have anyone who can do these things for you? I felt bullied, humiliated and exasperated all at once. I am intelligent, alert and my brain is not affected by age (yet). I am well organised and scheduling visits to the pharmacy (in an era of COVID) is best kept to a minimum. I have 3 degrees (hons) from A Grade Universities + post graduate qualifications and this man, who is (maybe) a bit more than half of my age, and with probably one degree, thinks age and gender makes me stupid and inferior to him.

OLDER PEOPLE ARE OFTEN SERVED LAST IN PUBS



More so in social settings, eg hotels and other social venues where queues exist

I experience invisibility when trying to buy a drink at a public bar. They want to serve the "sweet young things" first and ignore the fact that I have been patiently waiting my turn. I put them straight in a polite but loud voice.

Not really exclusion or discrimination but as you age you become invisible to some younger people. Servers in a cafe or bar often look beyond an older person to serve a young person.

Only when I stand at a bar or counter seeking service and the staff look past me and serve someone else - I think invisibility is a function of ageing!

Ha ha going to a bar and waiting forever to be served while all of the young women get immediate service Being ignored as though you are invisible - again the young retailer looked past me to speak to the younger woman

As I have aged, probably from 50ish I have often felt invisible when in shops or entertainment where someone younger or a man is served before me, even when I have been waiting

one time in particular stands out. My husband and I were in a pub for an event they were holding and had gone to the bar and were looking at the menu to decide what to order for food and get some drinks. Once we had decided, I attempted to get the attention of the young [bartender], but she acted as if I wasn't there, and proceeded to serve everyone else, even people who came to the bar after us. Eventually, I said to the person next to me who [had] arrived after us 'excuse me do you mind if we go first since we were here before you', he was quite happy for us to do this, but the server said 'I'll get to you in a moment' and proceeded to serve him instead. I have heard people say that once you reach a certain age, you become invisible and irrelevant to the younger generation, but this was my first time experiencing it for myself.

AND IN SHOPS

after younger people

sometimes shop assistants would rather serve a younger person than an older one

You are often overlooked in queues or out shopping
Young people tend to young people first.

In shops passed over for young person to be served

Sometimes when waiting to be served in a shop and younger person served ahead of me

In shops, younger people will be served before you.

Often when shopping/lining up, you are passed over for a younger customer

Often in some shops, younger sales person serves younger customers and look past as if I don't exist.

Treated as if I'm invisible when waiting for service - sometimes completely overlooked in favour of younger customers

despite waiting longer

The only thing I have occasionally experienced is being "invisible" in a shopping encounter where other people can be served first even though I have been waiting longer.

Sometimes shop assistants, especially the younger ones, serve other customers before me even though I have been waiting longer.

sometimes when there are younger ones being served ahead, even when I have been waiting longer

In stores, I am ignored despite being the longest waiting, others push in front of me.

or just because

ignored in shops or last to be served

As I age, I find I am sometimes bypassed in queues or when requesting service.

Often when waiting in a queue I am totally ignored and someone behind me is served.

Sometimes in stores staff will serve others assuming I am not standing there.

when shopping staff will ignore me at times and serve others I find that annoying

it happens on shop floors

Occasionally I have been ignored by the sales person in e.g. a clothing shop when they act as though I am not there but immediately assist a younger person.

Shop assistant ignored me and served someone younger. When I tried to buy a car I was ignored by the sales man it wasn't until a female [salesperson] approached me I got assistance.

Retail you seem to be invisible example on a trip to [well known white goods store] to purchase an item I was totally ignored by sales staff whilst they helped younger people

I wanted to make a significant purchase but due to this treatment went to [competitor store] where the service as exceptional (and the price was a bit cheaper)

in an electronics store the salesperson will attend to a young couple before me even though I was there first.

Went to a makeup/cosmetic store and felt invisible. The staff attended to the young women but ignored me and one other older lady.

However I went to that shop a year later and was served immediately and given attention to what I needed.

Sometimes I am left unserved at a shop's counter while people, who are younger or have more 'presence', and arrived after me, are served before me.

As an older woman I am now invisible. I am served last at counters. I need to be loud and assertive to be taken seriously.

i have been in deli supermarket and younger people have been served.

in service areas

I am one of the last to be noticed in a queue because of my white hair and aged face.

I call it the "white hair syndrome". Often the older person is left waiting while others are served.

When I look for service in some shops I feel as if I am invisible even though I am 180cm tall and so should be easy to see, as I end up being the last person assisted. I have sometimes walked out of places where I am ignored and never returned.

it's white hair syndrome

Occasionally being overlooked in a shop because a young man behind me seemed to be more important.

While shopping in some shops you are ignored by shop attendants as they talk to younger customers.

As we age younger people tend to ignore or overlook us. I don't know if it is intentional or a subconscious thing but we quite often are treated as though we are invisible. Example. Getting served at places where there are a few people waiting, being overlooked numerous times, or others jumping the queue as if we aren't there.

I often experience discrimination when I'm shopping. In many cases I'm invisible. I often walk into a shop and one of two things happens. 1. The shop assistant continues to look on her mobile and completely ignore me. 2. I walk into the shop and I can be completely ignored yet when someone younger walks in a few minutes later the shop assistant 'is all over that person like a hot rash.'

shopping in stores i am often ignored and then when i speak up when it is my turn to be served I feel others think i am being pushy and not entitled to have my turn. My grey/ White hair is also a barrier to service

Often overlooked whilst waiting to be served in a shop - on occasion a younger person comes into the shop and the retailer attempts to serve that person before you, even when you have been standing waiting - as though you are invisible. I am happy to wait my turn, but speak up if overlooked in this way.

Occasionally in shops when there are a number of people waiting to be served, sometime the trader would serve a young person when I should be next in line. If this happens now, I raise my hand and say 'I believe I am next' not because I am in a hurry but because I believe it is my right.

we will speak up but we shouldn't have to

SOMETIMES IT'S JUST POOR SERVICE

Feel unwelcome
in some shops.
Feel people
assume they have
nothing for you
there so why are
you there.

mainly in retail shopping settings.
Staff can be very condescending, to
absolute rudeness, often ignoring
myself or my partner to serve
younger often very well dressed
people. When looking for clothes, I
often am told that they have nothing
that would be suitable for me, even
before asking what I am wanting.

Purchasing clothes is a
problem for me. I'm 75 years
old, I'm 149cm in height and I
wear a size 14-16. When I
enter some stores, the staff
turn their back to me. That
tells me that I will not find
anything to buy in that store.

On a recent attempt to purchase an air
conditioner I was repeatedly told by the sales
woman that whatever I said about what I
wanted I was told repeatedly that it would
cost more. It was on the basis of how many
metres of extra wiring would be needed for
the job. In fact the cost of the wire was the
cheapest part of the whole job. The sales
woman repeated "It would cost more"
numerous times that I finally had to leave. It
did not occur to me to ask her "Are you going
to pay for the air conditioner plus all other
costs with it?" Later this thought occurred to
me. It was as if I was a little kid asking my
mother if I could have this or that at the store
and my mother would be paying for it.
However it occurred to me that the sale
woman was actually saying "You will NOT be
able to afford to pay for it." It was NOT just
because of my white hair but also that I had
brown skin.

Discrimination by younger
retail staff - especially in the
clothing sections of larger
department stores

I have had my choice of car questioned
while purchasing despite telling the
salesperson about my experience in
club Motorsport.

[Well known telecommunications
store] staff member reluctant to assist
with an enquiry (very dismissive) and
made up an excuse for the problem
(basically lied about the amount of
data that might be used in updating
my apple operating system).

treated as
a nuisance

I have been treated as if I was an old nuisance by some workers in the deli section of a shop

Often get treated by young service providers with disdain. Being almost shouted at when I ask someone to repeat what they said.

disdained

unworthy

retail and service providers can sometimes fail in providing customer based services. One sometimes feels invisible or unworthy of being heard.

My presence is frequently trivialised...in the shops

trivial

**THOUGH OUR MONEY
IS WORTH THE SAME**

I find that retail workers do not offer to serve older people including me. After self serving myself with a small appliance in an electrical store I shared my frustration with the check out person when she asked me which sales person had I dealt with, by suggesting someone should remind the saleswoman who had done the same thing last time I was there when I needed to order a fridge I was wanting to buy and have delivered, that baby boomers were the group with most disposable income and I would be taking my business elsewhere after 30 years as a customer.

often excluded from service in shops - if this happens, I don't use the service again - their loss as I have the means to employ them.

I feel invisible these days. In shopping centres, people don't seem to see me and I have to take the initiative to get out of other people's way. Salespeople spend little time or effort to help me. They assume I am not going to spend much. Overall, I believe that most of society overlooks older people and/or excludes them from most mainstream situations. Funnily enough, it is the older generation who is cashed up and can spend more. We just don't want to waste it.

What's to be done?

TO BE
Invisible
Ignored
Patronised
Served last
Excluded
Treated poorly

It is a generally accepted fact that when we take a wad of cash out on the town to spend on goods or services, we want to have a fun time and be treated with respect.

If we behave badly ourselves that's another story. But if we're just a regular customer looking to buy a coffee or a fridge, none of us want to face patronising attitudes and backs turned against us.

It can be upsetting or infuriating when it happens. When it's based on our age it's also illegal.

It's over two decades since the Age Discrimination Act was passed so it's time for this to stop.

Many of the comments in this report put the blame on frontline retail and hospitality staff, especially young workers. Ultimately it is the staff who interact with customers, so making older customers feel valued is their job.

IS
Not fun
Illegal
Bad for business
The responsibility
of owners,
managers, &
staff – everyone

But it is unfair to lay the blame at workers' feet. There are others behind them who need to lead cultural change within individual businesses and their industry as a whole.

Business owners and managers have to take responsibility for creating a welcoming environment on their premises. They attract or deter customers through marketing and design choices. They decide protocols for greeting, assisting and serving customers. And they reap the profits when customers spend more.

The solutions for ageism here are the same as the solutions to any form of exclusion or discrimination in customer service:

- Understand how ageism might manifest in your business. Start with the comments in this report. Then ask your older customers.
- Proudly adopt a diversity and inclusion policy.
- Rework your advertising, website and premises for inclusivity.
- Train all staff – meaningfully – in working with customer diversity.
- If – and only if – your customers' needs change with age, teach staff how to meet the particular needs of older customers.
- If customer age isn't relevant, reinforce a policy of treating every customer equally, and ensuring everyone is seen.
- Employ a diverse workforce to mirror your customer base, including employing older people in all roles and levels.

don't let ageism
ruin your business

The head office of National Seniors Australia is located in Brisbane/Meenjin but we represent older people from across this great continent.

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land and waters in which we operate, the Turrbul People, and all other First Nations, Aboriginal, and Torres Strait Islander people.

We honour and value their continuing cultures, contributions, and connections to Country, and pay our respects to Elders, past and present.

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