

Last fall, a coworker and I went to a conference and spoke about a topic we know a lot about - youth culture online. When we had finished our presentation, a man got up to thank us on behalf of the conference organizers. In front of the entire 60-person audience, he told us that he and his colleagues had learned so much from us in the past hour, but that it was safe to say they knew more than us about the "bad guys". And with that, he cast a shadow of doubt over our credibility and reinforced the age division between us and everyone else at the conference. My coworker and I both have degrees in criminology and have worked on the front line with these same "bad guys"; we have spent years in prisons and courtrooms, reading charge sheets and police reports while listening to the stories and experiences of victims and offenders alike. All this was ignored and we were effectively dismissed as too young to be able to understand or even critically think about the complexities of crime.

This wasn't the first (or last) time I have been discriminated against based on my age or how young I appear. I've chaperoned youth events and not been taken seriously because I was mistaken for one of the participants, I've given presentations only to be asked questions about what I intend to do after high school instead of questions about the subject matter, and I can't even begin to count the number of times someone I'm working with has done a double-take when meeting me in person after only communicating via email or telephone. The look I'm given every single time silently asks how I could possibly be old enough to do the work I do and speak with authority about any subject. More often than not, I'm dismissed and my input ignored based not on how I came to have it but because I'm seen as too young to give it.

When I mention my frustration to others, they sympathize but often tell me that when I'm older, I'll appreciate looking younger than I am. The fact is, I'm not offended that I'm frequently mistaken for a sixteen-year-old even though I'm in my twenties. What offends me is that I'm treated a certain way based on my perceived age, and not based on what I actually say or do. It bothers me equally when individuals who are actually in their teens are dismissed as being too young to have valuable contributions or observations to make.

Ageism - discriminating against someone based on his or her real or perceived age - is not limited to targeting young people but affects older adults as well. It frequently goes unnoticed because it is seen as logical: the idea that experience and wisdom increase with age and then deteriorate after one's 65th birthday is very popular. This is often true, but not always; young people are equally capable of thinking critically and having experiences that give them authority on certain subjects. Unfortunately, this systemic form of ageism is so common that we are not only almost entirely unaware of it, but not questioning it either.

Being the victim of ageism is very frustrating and often damaging. It has not stopped me from doing work I am passionate about or speaking up about subjects I know a lot about, but it has changed my behaviour. By the end of the conference I mentioned, I was worn

down and had grown hesitant to ask questions and offer my perspective because I knew I wasn't going to be taken seriously. While other speakers at the conference could wear jeans, I dressed in business clothing the entire time in an attempt to look older. If I have a choice, I prefer to conduct business via email so that whoever I'm communicating with can't see how young I look. Other young people become even more discouraged and stop contributing to discussions and initiatives that they are interested in. It's not a huge surprise to me that the voting turn-out rate is lower for young people than for Canadians in general ([Calgary Herald](#)). After living through years of being told to be quiet and listen to the adults who really know what's going on, why would young Canadians be flocking to the polls? We often doubt our abilities to spark change in our communities because we are used to our knowledge and abilities being judged and ignored.

Ageism has resulted in a great deal of disengagement of youth, but several groups are now fighting back. [Apathy is Boring](#) is an ongoing project that was created in 2004 with the aim of increasing the representation of youth in politics and democracy. The creators saw how their peers were disengaged from the political process and decided to use art, technology and media to get them involved in human rights, social justice and politics. The project has grown and evolved, creating offshoots such as the [Youth Friendly Guide](#), which provides resources and counsel to those who want to create intergenerational partnerships. Many organizations (such as [Ottawa's Youth Services Bureau](#) and [yours truly](#)) have also formed youth advisory committees to ensure that young voices are heard and reflected in policies and projects.

Being subjected to ageism is incredibly discouraging, but we cannot allow it to stop us. We must fight back, get involved and raise our voices even more. We have a lot to offer and from a unique, largely overlooked perspective.

Links

[Apathy is Boring](#)

[The Youth Friendly Guide to Intergenerational Decision Making Partnerships](#)

[YouthInfusion](#)