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[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/15734/gender/v06/GCB-06

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The Perfect Age? Consumption Choices for Women in their Forties

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ABSTRACT

Women in their forties face a range of issues regarding how they choose to present themselves to the world. We talked to two groups of British women and discussed how they felt about themselves and the pressures upon them. We present a discussion which aims to synthesize some of the key features of how these women face their futures and suggest potential theoretical positions to help encapsulate women’s present and futures selves. We suggest that we can consider responses in terms of their active and passive nature, often set within a sense of female community.

‘Hardly a week goes by in which some well-wisher doesn’t give me a little lecture about the advantages of HRT and the terrible dangers of ‘letting myself go’. Why can’t I let myself go? I feel I’ve earned the right to, I’ve done my stint on the treadmill of attraction…..’

(Lynn Barber, Sunday Times, May 29th, 1994)

INTRODUCTION – US GROWING OLDER

That we age is a fact biologically determined, but as a human experience it takes place in a social world. Ageing is interpreted from the perspective of that social world and takes its meaning from the norms, mores, cultural and social settings of society. Much of the social construction of age in the west seems to stem from the linear and quantitative concept of time (Adam, 1995; Myerhoff, 1978). Rather than viewing old age as an accumulation of understanding, knowledge and wisdom, in the west we are much more likely to see it as the last stage of the so-called life-cycle, a winding down leading to the inevitable ending of life. As we increasingly become a secular society this concept of old age leading to death being the final outcome of our existence has increased in significance, we should perhaps be talking about a life course. There is clearly a cultural perspective to such social construction and eastern cultures are often cited as holding a cultural philosophy where admiration for the wisdom of those who have achieved old age is high (Barak, Mathur, Lee, Zhang, 2001). Additionally we must view the social construction of age from a historical viewpoint. Moody (1991) says that since the seventeenth century westerners have given preference to activity over contemplation. It is a view that does not condone the lilies of the field neither spinning nor weaving, but rather advocates that our lives need to be busy to be considered meaningful. At the same time, social institutions
work against maintaining meaning; for example we are removed from the labor market at defined ages regardless of our ability or desire to continue to work. The social construction of aging as undesirable is exacerbated to some extent by the notion of an ageless society. Increasingly, well-intentioned efforts have been made to promote the deconstruction of long-held associations between old age, illness, disability and decline (Featherstone & Wernick, 1995). During the twentieth century there was a shift in the stereotyping of the older person which went together with a change in expectations and consumption. Middle age for example was revamped from a time to be staying at home and gardening to a time to be enjoying the ‘best years of your life’. This process, however, required women, in particular, to age ‘well’, to exercise, think positively, eat carefully and use appropriate cosmetics (Benson, 1997). This trend, bolstered by global media, supports such an ‘ageless society’ built upon role models in their 40s, 50s and 60s which provide proof that you do not have to be young to be glamorous (Barak et. al, 2001). But while Robert Redford, Clint Eastwood and Paul Newman, clearly fit and well cared for and basically good looking older men, are able to show their chronological age at least to some extent, it is well known that female role models such as Goldie Hawn and Cher are regular users of cosmetic surgery and look physically much younger than their chronological years. Society’s double standards with regards to the ageing of males and females has long been prevalent in advertising (Greco, 1989; Szmigin & Carrigan, 2000) and continue in terms of expectations for males and females wishing to pursue the ‘ageless’ route. This in turn has provided a huge opportunity for the development of products and brands aimed at this ‘new’ market of mature women. The message of many of these products is to make the older woman look younger, - ‘Maybe it begins at 30. Maybe 40. One day you realize your skin is just not as resilient. Now we can help you bring it back’ (Estée Lauder advertisement, 1994). Role models such as Jane Fonda and Joan Collins appearing nude in Playboy in their fifties, set expectations of what we should do and how we should look as we grow older. For some women this replacement of largely negative age stereotypes with a new youthful, fit, optimistic one offers the most appropriate ‘alternative’. For others it is neither so easy nor so desirable and there is a vocal opposition to this search for perpetual youthfulness (Germaine Greer, 1999; Friedan 1993), as it insists we deny the benefits of ageing which could include no longer needing to constantly groom, wear uncomfortable clothes, and diet. Indeed the very notion of needing to appear sexually attractive once we are past the biological age for bearing children can be questioned. In addition, so-called successful ageing may be a form of regulation denying bodily dysfunction and cultural disengagement (Tulle-Winton, 1999). Services such as cosmetic surgery, beauty parlors and hairdressers, offer innovative ways to continue the age defying process, thus constantly offering the choice of whether to accept ageing or not. Clearly, this raises issues of what society expects in a normative sense, as compared with what women wish and desire for themselves as they grow older as well what is physically possible. We do not wish to underestimate the ambivalence and even contradiction of some of these issues; we are effectively living in a contradictory world when it comes to what we should and want we want to do. There is also a deep cultural ambivalence with regard to beauty,
sexuality and potency on the one hand and universally condoned human outcomes such as good physical and mental health, and productivity on the other.

This issue is more complex than whether society will become ‘ageless’ or not. For women we would suggest it implies a number of choices regarding how they present themselves, what they do, who they listen to and significantly whether they try to appear younger than their chronological age. The choices that middle aged women make now regarding the products and services they choose will affect their ageing and society’s views of it. In effect, women in the west today face the inevitable fact of resistance in terms of whatever choices they make. Whether they resist ageing through cosmetic enhancement or resist media and social extortions to remain young, slim and attractive. This dilemma makes the resistance choice to also be one of insistence of the style of life and consumption they will pursue (Andrews, 1999).

PRIME-LIFERS, BABY BOOMERS OR JUST MIDDLE AGED?

Recent research has begun to focus on those people now in their forties and fifties that belong to the so-called baby boomer generation (Barak, 1998; Moschis, Lee, Mathur and Strautman, 2000). It has been argued that this generation of middle-aged has the greatest power both in political and economic terms (Barak et. al, 1998). Household income has grown together with discretionary income (Lee, 1997) and products and services have proliferated for a generation of people often both willing and able to spend their money. Improvements in medicine and education have meant that they are also better able than ever before to enjoy their good fortune and look forward to many more years of activity and good health than their parents or grandparents. It is quite possible that just in terms of the numbers of middle aged alive and well today, the notion of marginalization and age discrimination will disappear and society will be less age sensitive, such that wisdom and experience might be valued more highly than a wrinkle free skin (Catterall and Maclaran, 2001). But while this generation clearly faces many new opportunities and experiences, it also faces many challenges and has choices to make for which help and advice may not be available. The middle-aged will inevitably become old-aged and the ageing trend is a global phenomenon. Policy makers are only too aware of issues related to long-term pension requirements and health care for the elderly. Increasingly, families will be required to address the issues of long-term care. At the same time women are often putting off starting a family until they are in their 30s or 40s so disrupting some of the norms of previous generations. Such dechronologization frees some people from the constraints of age and time but brings other problems with it. These changes have led to a much wider variety of ages at different stages in the family cycle, such that age norms are invariable questioned. The typical age structured roles are changing but the social institutions have not kept pace with this producing what has been referred to as ‘social lag’ (Riley and Riley, 1994). Such social change has altered the nature of human lives; one aspect of this that has impacted upon middle-aged women in particular is that they are often part of what has been termed the ‘sandwich generation’ (Moschis et. al, 2000). They may find themselves still fit and relatively youthful required to have responsibility for both their parents and their grandchildren. While looking after family members is nothing new, it is set now in a very
different social setting than previous generations and presents the middle-aged with responsibilities and choices which they may not have anticipated. The baby boomer generation may well have been led to believe that the world was their oyster and they could pursue what they wanted when they wanted, the reality for many will be very different (Szmigin & Carrigan, 2001). What we face is a time of age disruption, where middle-aged women may be looking after their own children or grandchildren or their parents, equally they may reject such roles and pursue careers, further education or other activities within their economic and physical capacities (Turner, 1996). Such age disruption is also important for our own identities and how we present ourselves to the world. Our relation to ourselves as we grow older is essentially negotiated through decisions and actions about how to manage ourselves and our bodies in terms of choices (Tulle-Winton, 1999). Many of these choices we suggest are formed within the context of gender, youth orientation, role models and access to economic means. So stereotypical images have helped to foster assumptions such that older woman shouldn’t be concerned about their physical appearance and sexual attractiveness (Tunaley, Walsh and Nicolson, 1999) unless it is within the realms of the Fonda, Collins stereotypes and even then they are liable to be criticized for trying to be something they are not – the ‘mutton dressed as lamb’ syndrome.

Tunaley et al (1999) have suggested that the older woman has been relatively ignored in social science research. Such an oversight they suggest can be related to negative social stereotypes surrounding older women’s physical appearance and sexuality with such women being judged in relation to ideals of female beauty which emphasizes youthfulness and thinness. Although anti-wrinkle creams, hair-dye, botox injections and even plastic surgery are available to those with the economic means, the general experience of ageing for women was more often seen as one of humiliation through a process of sexual disqualification (Sontag, 1978). While there is evidence to show that some women as they grow older maintain or develop positive self-identity through routes other than sexual orientation (Harrison, 1983; Itzin, 1990), every day they are also barraged with images of youth and exhortations to remove signs of ageing. In the January 2002 edition of Harpers and Queen an article on the increase in cosmetic surgery included the following:

‘We are bombarded by images of attractive young people in the media’, says Dr. Dai Davies, one of Britain’s most respected plastic surgeons, who has a private practice at the Stamford Hospital in Hammersmith.’ And we live in an ageist society, where looks really matter.’ Studies show that younger-looking, more attractive people gain more respect from their peers, and are more likely to be promoted.’ (Jourdan, 2002).

Against such a tide, it is increasingly difficult for middle-aged women to feel happy about themselves and their bodies as they witness the inevitable signs of ageing and begin to consider the choices they face in terms of how they will present themselves. Researchers have recognized the paradox that no matter how positive older role models may be, the fact is that the unpopularity of being elderly has not changed (Barak, 1998). Ageist feelings of a negative type are prevalent among the young and the media in particular with many still associating
old age with poverty, poor health and unattractiveness (Alderson 1999; Carrigan and Szmigin 2000; Anon. 1999). Similarly advertising agencies and their clients have found the old a useful caricature for use in developing creative approaches which are usually at the expense of older person. Recently this was seen in the ‘Paddy Powers’ betting shop advertisements depicting an off-road vehicle bearing down on a couple of disabled elderly women on a zebra crossing, with odds superimposed on the women suggesting bets should be placed upon who would be hit by the vehicle first. Numerous complaints from the public resulted in the Advertising Standards Authority upholding a judgment against the betting firm, and the advertisement being withdrawn. Although evidence of more positive depictions of ageing in the media exist, for example the Olivio, Nike and Guinness campaigns, on the whole the advertising industry maintain a distinctly negative and disinterested attitude towards depicting ageing positively.

THE RESEARCH STUDY

As two women in their forties we are faced with many of the same issues that we have so far described. The inevitability of ageing in chronological terms brings with it issues of how we perceive ourselves and how others perceive us. As such we have the benefit of deep personal involvement with what we would term a community of age. Other researchers have looked at communities in terms of shared meanings and rituals related to product categories and brands (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001), and subcultures of consumption (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995) and we suggest that similar meanings and understandings are relevant here. While McCracken (1986) has well described the problems in attempting to understand consumers via ascribed groups such as age, class or gender, there is an inevitability about such an age community which we describe here that involves a shared understanding of what it means to grow old. Women in their forties do not necessarily consume the same things and the differences in views and opinions and choices within this community are significant, but they do, we would argue share a similar sense of being which develops from having been through inevitable life experiences and having faced similar body changes.

The research we present here is an exploratory pilot study of two groups of women all aged in their forties. The women were recruited through friends of the researchers but the majority of the women were previously unknown to the researchers. The women were all white and middle class, some worked. All but one had been married with children. One group of six women lived in an urban environment and the other group of five, lived in a rural area. We considered that there might be different issues and pressures facing women in these environments and therefore took this opportunity of talking to a predominantly city based group and comparing it to one living in rural Britain (see Table 1 for details of participants). For this research we became active participants in a discussion with the women. The issue of the appropriate mode of research for ageing studies is a sensitive one. Murphy and Longino (1992) citing Barthes (1987) stress the need for research instruments to be designed to engage subjects in discourse such that an invitation to dialogue should guide the research. This is what we have tried to achieve with this research, recognizing the need for intimacy rather than refined descriptions at this stage (Fry, 1980). Each group discussion
lasted about 90 minutes and was taped. Following the transcription of the tapes both researchers noted down emergent themes and these were further discussed to produce the initial research themes which are presented below. Previous research has shown that older women are aware of alternative ways of presenting themselves as they age (Furman, 1997). Our research describes some of the problems and alternative choices which these women feel they face as they grow older. Although the discussion, which was led by the researchers, did not focus only on the physical aspects of growing older this was one of the most noticeable concerns which both groups of women discussed. As the discussions developed themes and contradictions emerged, possibly built upon the influence of other participants. One aspect was particularly noticeable in the urban group, which to begin with was very negative about any aspect related to cosmetic surgery, but as the discussion developed some became more critical about their physical appearance and began to talk about the possibility of cosmetic enhancement.

We focused initially upon attitudes and use of three areas of consumption, cosmetic enhancement, dress, and leisure activities. We entered this research with the belief that increasingly, it will be difficult for women to resist the ‘no-ageing’ scenario and this has implications for their consumption choices, expenditure and self-identity. The discussion below identifies that some of these pressures are clearly felt by the participants but that there is also an underlying current of developing their own self esteem and being within a broader understanding of who they are as they grow older.

The research is reported in two forms; where a discussion is presented between a number of people we have not identified individuals; each new discussant is noted by an indentation where they follow one after another this presents a section of conversation among a number of participants. Where one person speaks for longer about a particular issue we have indicated a named individual.

BEING VERSUS FEELING OLD

The first theme that we have developed is the notion of being versus feeling old. This was important for our discussants, as many were able to present the negative externalities of ageing together with a positive sense of their own self-esteem that was not entirely dependent on their physical appearance. In our discussions everyone could readily cite the physical manifestations of growing older. The idea that the body was ‘drooping’, that skin had lost its elasticity and that hair was graying were the most often cited physical changes noted in the urban group. The rural group also noted the increase in facial hair. All these changes were bemoaned as inevitable and as happening to all the women of their age. The emergence of wrinkles was particularly distressing to some of the participants:

Trish (urban): ‘I’ve really noticed it in the last two years. I’ve noticed other friends – They’ve gone along fine till they hit their 40s. Then 41, 42. There is a noticeable age difference. They aged dramatically and I noticed it happened to me as well.’

The signs of ageing led some but not all members of both the urban and rural group to consider their bodies more carefully. There was considerable discussion of nutrition, the benefits of drinking plenty of water and eating the ‘right’ food. This would reflect the general concern that has been reported
in the literature for a ‘healthier’ lifestyle among the prime-lifer group (Barak, 1998).

Gail (rural): ‘When I was 40 I decided to get fit so I started thinking about my body then. So in some ways I look physically fitter than I did ten years ago.’

Although generally accepting that the visible ageing process was out of their control, all of the women pursued sports, not only as a health benefit, but also in recognition that it enabled control over their weight and body shape, something that enhanced their sense of self-esteem. It became evident, however, that what most of the women in both groups were more concerned about was how they were going to deal with the psychological and emotional aspects of the ageing process.

Pat (urban): ‘I think it is all in your head and internally. I think you could look awful one day and somebody say ‘Oh you look lovely’ and you think ‘god I feel horrible’ its an internal feeling as well as how you project yourself when you actually get out there and you’re with friends or whatever’.

Many accepted the inevitability of the physical aspect of ageing:

Janette (urban): ‘You know like with your body changes. I think to myself, the biggest thing that I didn’t say 10 years ago, is that what is happening is out of your hands, and its not something you can do anything about.’

Ellie (rural): ‘I can see the wrinkles, but it doesn’t make me feel I’ve got to do anything about it’.

This response to the physical signs of ageing is interesting as we know that certain signs of physical ageing are difficult to change for a woman, for example the increase in fat storage following puberty, pregnancy and the menopause. They also support to some extent the view that women do not unreflectively internalize media stereotypes of ‘successful’ ageing (Tunaley et. al., 1999). ‘Successful’ ageing is a form of words which hides the inevitability of internal (and external deterioration), however we respond, we can not turn the clock back, nor stop it from going forward.

HOW DO WE WANT TO PRESENT OURSELVES TO THE WORLD?

None of the women involved in the discussions felt strongly about appearing sexually attractive. They were much more concerned about generally ‘looking good’ and this seemed to be more related to ‘looking good for their age’ than in terms of attracting attention from the opposite sex. There was a certain amount of joking about plastic surgery, tummy tucks and botox injections but it was generally agreed in both groups that this depended very much on your own personal circumstances.

Louise (urban): ‘It depends on the circumstances of your life and things like that. I mean I have a friend whose husband left her for somebody else. Before she never would have done anything, but she went and had a facelift and everything. It helped her.’

Some people were willing to share their insecurities about ageing and their relationships.
Sally (urban) ‘I have to say that as I am getting older, I think well I don’t know if I’m quite so in control. If I split up with my husband, The way I think, and I think well it would be difficult to go out there again….’

While these insecurities were present there was a great feeling of female solidarity, of community, of being in it together.

‘You are putting yourself under pressure all that time, throughout that relationship to look a certain way and what happens when you don’t look that way. You see I can honestly say I have never, ever, lost weight to please my man.’

‘Oh no nor me.’

‘Nor me’

‘Do you know; as we’ve got older, bless her, all my friends like Trish, we all keep each other in check. She looks good, I want to keep up’

‘There is this pressure that we all want to look like each other.’

‘I am more likely to diet for Trish than I am for my husband.’

Despite an increase in the UK in cosmetic enhancement from 65,000 in 1996 to 150,000 in 2000, this is relatively small compared to the US. Plastic Surgeons estimate that 6.3 million women in the US chose to have a cosmetic procedure. Amongst the participants in our discussion there was relatively little interest in plastic surgery and a degree of worry about the risk involved.

‘I wouldn’t be that bothered. I don’t think I could be bothered to spend it on my self and have liposuction or something.’

‘I’m worried it would go wrong as well though. I’m seriously worried it would go wrong. I wouldn’t care what anybody thought if I decided to do it, because I would be just doing it for me, but I would just worry about something worse.’

Indeed as the discussion continued, horror stories of the effects of plastic surgery emerged.

Trish (urban): ‘And once I went to Wimbledon and it was so funny. We went into this restaurant and there was this American elderly chap losing his hair. Because he was losing his hair you could actually see all the stitches behind his ear where he had had his face-lift. It was obvious he had had it because it was so taut. It was like chiseled but then you could actually see the little marks behind his ear where they had pulled it back’

Both groups were highly skeptical of role models who they believed had had facelifts. In the urban group Sue began to discuss the kind of older women she admired:

Sue (rural) ‘I don’t think I envy people. I don’t want to try and be like somebody else, like Lulu or anybody, but I think I admire people who are in the spotlight in the media, who can be themselves, who seem to be, I know growing old gracefully is an old cliché. Who just seem to be able to be themselves and not play this game.’

There then followed a discussion of famous older people:

‘Well you look at this image of her (Goldie Hawn) and while
she’s all dressed up and you don’t see all the bits hanging out.’

‘I think she looks silly. I think she looks too young. I think she’s taken it too far. I think that looks stupid.’

‘I just don’t think she gets any respect.’

‘I think people like Honor Blackman who look to have aged well….’

‘Oh yes she’s lovely. She looks wonderful, but she’s very sophisticated.’

‘I think Joanna Lumley is another one; she’s lovely as well I think she projects herself very well and she always looks smart and well groomed.’

Similarly the rural group rejected the role models so often portrayed in the media and opted instead for Dawn French, Victoria Wood and Jo Brand, all women of a certain age and size with no evident cosmetic surgery. This is not the context to debate the rationality of role models who may be considered overweight and hence unhealthy. Rather it seemed that the choice of such role models was dependent on their being exemplars of a particularly positive, confident and even assertive attitude. It was as one respondent said ‘Dawn French always acts like a beautiful woman’. This positive approach to ageing and appearance can be summed up by one of the urban discussion group.

Pat (urban): ‘I take a pride in being; well I like to think I look after myself. I’m healthy and I’m fit. I want to look nice, good and smart. But I am 45 and I don’t think that’s a bad thing and I’ve done a lot and I’ve got more to do yet. But I would have surgery if I had some sort of deformity or what I consider a deformity.’

SOCIAL PRESSURE, PEER PRESSURE, GENERATIONAL PRESSURE

In both discussions the participants described how they felt pressure to look, behave or dress in a certain way. They were very aware that this was quite different to the kinds of pressures that their mothers would have undergone. We suggest that this can be seen in three particular contexts, the social milieu within which they mix, the pressure from their friends and husbands and what we consider to be a new theme which is primarily pressure from their children to act, conform or dress in a certain way. The discussions begun outlining the social and peer pressure felt by the participants. They discussed the kinds of activities they felt they could or could not do. There was a lengthy discussion in the rural group regarding dancing. While most of the women were reticent about going dancing some of them held a more resistant view highlighted here by Sally.

Sally (urban) ‘I would still go (to a disco). I’m conscious of whereas 20 years ago I would be one of the crowd now I would feel sod it I’m going and enjoy it, have a good time anyway. I don’t feel one of them I just carry on doing what I want to do.’

The ‘what the heck’ mentality displayed by Sally reflects earlier work by Tunaley et.al related to body size and ageing. While the women in that study often felt pressure from husbands to diet, others were adamant that they should continue enjoying themselves while they still could.

The urban group discussed the historical context of ageing, identifying that there were pressures they felt that
they did not believe their mothers had suffered.

- ‘I think all of us are striving to look good, and be fit and like Janet says to present ourselves in a certain way. Like I was saying earlier, 40 year olds, 30 year ago looked like 40 year olds and they don’t now. They look like 30 years olds did 30 years ago.’
- ‘But 50 years ago when people were in their 40s nothing was expected of them. They weren’t meant to look slim, they weren’t meant to be trendy.’
- ‘But at the same time there is a uniform that we all wear, in the sense that we all wear the same type of clothes and things but it is a lot younger than it was.’

But the positive side to this was that women could do much more than they perceived their mothers had done:

‘ -I can’t remember my parents when they were 40 going to a wine bar. The might have gone out to dinner.’
‘ -They didn’t have the disposable income that we have either’
‘ -We are all a lot better off than they were. All of us are.
‘ -A 45 year old women, 30 years ago weren’t playing squash were they. It just didn’t happen.’
‘ -My mother wasn’t a member of any club, but she worked. She did the housework, but it was probably a lot more physical than what we do now because my mother didn’t have a dishwasher. She had a washing machine, but it was a twin tub, it wasn’t an automatic.’

But while some of the group relished this increased ability to do different things others felt differently:

Janette (urban): ‘This fitness thing, I do think, is being pushed down our throats as well, from every direction, and again 30 years ago women would swim a bit and play a bit of tennis’.

One of the most interesting aspects of both groups was identifying who were the significant others in terms of who they were presenting themselves for.

One woman described how her sister who was working full time with two children separated from her husband began jogging in preparation for a holiday with her, this lead to a discussion on where pressure to look a certain way was coming from:

‘ -She’s toning up to go on holiday. I think right, that’s it I’ll have to join Weight Watchers now or something and she’s made me do that.’
-This is what we said earlier, its peer pressure. Its not men its for other women
-Because you’re comparing yourself all the time.’
-All our husbands are happy with us the way we are and if we were half a stone heavier they would be happy with us. But its us that’s not happy with us.’
-They don’t care do they?
- I think mine does.

Interestingly the different codes for older men and women was only mentioned once by Gail who as a 42 year old woman who had moved from London to a rural community in Herefordshire had found being accepted as ‘normal’ quite difficult in this community. She had dated a number of men both locally and through a dating agency and felt the ageist pressures more than any of the other participants.
Gail (rural): ‘It’s perfectly acceptable for a 60 year old man to go out with a 40 year old but not other way round. It’s alright for men to have big beer guts but its women who are supposed to keep slim.’

What became increasingly clear as the discussions developed was that those women with children were often influenced in the way they behaved by the opinions of their children. The sense of approval or disapproval from their children appeared to exert considerable influence, and self-esteem was boosted if children gave positive comments about their appearance. More often than not this meant the children’s disapproval of them wearing something that they considered to be either too old or too young for their mothers. There was a strong sense of mothers taking cues from their children on certain aspects of their appearance. Here is part of a discussion with the urban group which was mirrored by that of the rural group.

Researcher  ‘Whose opinion do you care most about in terms of how you are ageing?’
- ‘My own.’
- ‘Probably my kids. They go, “you look vile in that.”’
- ‘What are you wearing?” or “that’s horrible.”’
Researcher  ‘- Do they pressure you into wearing younger things?’
- ‘No not really. But they will tell me. “Don’t wear that, that’s too old. That’s really old.” Or they’ll say “Nanny would wear that”, I think OK thanks, I’ve got that.’

Some considered the children’s input constructive, but for others it was clearly worrying, as they were aware of being assessed as either wearing something ‘too young’ or ‘too old’.

Generally the participants seemed to want to humor the children but there appeared to the researchers that there was an undercurrent of uncertainty generated by a younger generation, here reflected in what Lucy from the rural group said:

Lucy (rural): ‘I want them to feel happy in my company. When you’ve gone through a few years of rejection and having them walking in a different place in the street to you, you want them then to like you. So you do adapt, I adapt a little bit to how they want.’

THE PERFECT AGE? THEMES AND THEORIZING

As the conversations developed, one of the issues that came up time and again was the concept of whether there was a ‘perfect’ or ‘ideal’ age to be. This theme revolved around a number of issues not just to do with the way they looked but also how they felt about themselves and their lives and what they were doing. The subject was also raised as to how people were going to feel, as they grew older.

Janette (urban): ‘When you get to our age, I think everybody realizes you get something somewhere along the line. Nobody gets off Scot-free. You just try to make the best of everything don’t you...’

Pat (urban): ‘Can I tell you one of the things that I worry about. I worry about when I’m 60 how am I going to feel about myself. Because I want to feel good about being 60. I don’t want to admit as 60 ‘Oh god I wish I were 40’... are we constantly looking for some perfect age’
Lisa (rural): ‘You get to a point where you try and keep slim and you try and look a certain way and you try and keep up with everything and you get your hair done and you buy the clothes and you’ve got the lifestyle but then, I just think you go on and on and there is no turning back. There is no point that you can actually let yourself go.’

Louise (urban): ‘I think when my marriage split up, I didn’t like that time of my life, so didn’t think I looked particularly good then. When I had the kids it was like rush, rush, mad mad, four children. I like my life now. I like what I’ve got. I would just like to look like perhaps 5 years ago... Take the wrinkles away and just do a tiny little bit here and there and then I think I would feel perfect then, apart from my cellulite which I’m always going to have. Take my face 5 years ago and put it on me now and just let me be like that until 60.’

Adaptation, Isolation and Sense of Community

What became clear to us when considering the points made by the discussants above is that ageing for women is a constant battle between adaptation and isolation. As Andrews (1999) says there is pretence in denying who and what one is that is ultimately disempowering. But none of the respondents were even considering ‘passing’ as young. There was not an attempt to speak about positive ageing in a way that denies ageing. Certainly, Anne did say she might like to look younger but within the context of the fact that she liked her life now. It was interesting that when asked at what age they felt ‘best’ about themselves there was little consensus among the groups; some suggested their late teens, others their thirties, while there were many who felt that they were currently feeling good about themselves in their forties and fifties. De Beauvoir (1970) pleaded for understanding the importance of not cutting ourselves off from our own future, for understanding that we will grow old and that is what we will be. This as such is one of the choices facing all of us, to examine what and who we will be when we are 60, 70 and older. As women, we do therefore face some choices in terms of how we adapt to ageing and whether we even isolate ourselves through the process of trying to look younger. Community could be an important bridge in bringing women together to understand the possibilities and share the problems of ageing. It may therefore be appropriate to develop further research following the work of other researchers (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001; Schouten and Alexander, 1995) but without brands providing the unifying theme. Muniz and O’Guinn for example suggest there are shared components in brand communities including a consciousness of kind, shared rituals and traditions and a sense of moral responsibility. Further research could see whether these themes or others are replicated amongst leisure, vocational or friendship groups of women.

Resistance, Insistence and Acceptance

Finally, we think that now is the time to consider more carefully female responses to their ageing selves both in terms of the social pressures to look and behave in certain ways, and in terms of the possibilities that face them as individuals physically, mentally and socially. Within a basically Western and specifically UK context we see these issues being largely about choices, some of which may be
symbolic and many real. Firstly, any theorizing needs to be set within the context of the culture and norms, the youth orientation and general societal and legal positions, for example towards cosmetic surgery, the age at which we retire, pension provision and so forth. To begin thinking further, however, we see choices in terms of active and passive responses, do you fight or not, do you respond or not. Such a response does not need to be set against what you do to your self, it may well be how we view say, ageist advertising, how we respond to patronizing comments and so on; there are no value judgments implied in such an active/passive division. Within this initial framework we further suggest considering responses in terms of areas that cover the concepts of what we are terming acceptance, resistance and insistence. Acceptance is the status quo of ageing, this would imply a person responding to and accepting the norms of society and ageing in a way which might be accepted by the majority; they may do this actively, by getting involved in the kinds of activities and pastimes thought ‘suitable’ for an older person, or passively, accepting the inevitability of ageing but with no particular or direct response. Resistance, is an active response to the signs and norms of ageing whatever those might be; it might include choosing cosmetic surgery, wearing ‘younger’ clothes, being involved in what are thought youthful activities and so on. Finally, insistence is the position espoused by writers such as Greer (1999) and Friedan (1993) that reinforces the benefits of ageing almost in opposition to youth. Insistence is primarily an activist position although it may not be exclusively so as it may include people who do not necessarily conform to the norms of society as in the case of acceptance, but feel no need to for example, fight the visible signs of ageing. We suspect that it may be quite possible to hold one or more of these responses at any one time and indeed to changes responses over time. We envisage our future research will explore these concepts in the first instance as individual in depth interviews with women in their forties and beyond.

LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

This research is clearly framed within an English context. While there are likely to be similarities between women’s responses in the US and Europe, this is by no means certain. Traditions, culture and norms are likely to have affected and be currently influencing women differently. Once one looks further a field, the complexities become even greater. Thus this research can only be viewed from an idiographic perspective. Also we have not considered men in this study and there is clearly increased pressure upon men to look younger but we believe that men and women face different pressures and our interest and focus are therefore limited to women.

CONCLUSION

In the 2001 Reith Lectures Tom Kirkwood noted that old age if anything has become more of a negative stereotype. With longer life spans we are effectively entering uncharted territory where the challenges to individuals and society will be formidable. It is inevitable that we have to some extent to face this challenge alone; as women we have to make many decisions as to how to present ourselves that are as yet not significantly suffered by men. The consumption choices we face are really about how we age; some of these choices, e.g. in relation to cosmetic surgery are not available to most
women from a purely economical basis. Other choices will depend on individual self-esteem and how that is reflected in the support of others. We did not find that the women we spoke to supported Andrews (1999) assertion that successful ageing is to minimize externally and internally the signs of ageing. There certainly was little support for many advertisers’ assertion that everyone wants to be chronologically younger than they are (Miller 1998).

Janette (urban): ‘I’m happy. I wouldn’t want to go back to that age.’

Women will increasing be facing the possibilities and alternatives of which way to go as they age and the choices they make will inevitably be affected by personal and societal values. Ageing was faced with trepidation but also with a degree of confidence that may be significant of this age cohort or related to a feeling of community amongst women of the baby boomer generation that support one another probably more so than previous generations of women whose concept of community was more wedded to the family unit. Possibly with this generation we are witnessing the continuing development of women as being themselves as they age (Kaufman, 1986) but this is likely to be a battle against ageing stereotypes that recourse to the surgeon’s knife will not solve.

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Table 1: Participants in Perfect Age Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marital status</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pat (urban)</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>p-t hairdresser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janette (urban)</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>p-t teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sally (urban)</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Not working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trish (urban)</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>College</td>
<td>p-t Govt admin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louise (urban)</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>p-t receptionist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carol (urban)</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Not working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gail (rural)</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>College</td>
<td>Designer/lecturer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellie (rural)</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy (rural)</td>
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<td>Married</td>
<td>College</td>
<td>Special needs teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa (rural)</td>
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<td>Married</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sue (rural)</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Language Tutor</td>
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