Mirror, Mirror: Youth Quest For Middle-Aged Women

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[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/14123/la/v2_pdf/LA-02

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ABSTRACT

This study provides a deeper understanding of the deliberation behind women’s consumption of age-defying products and services. In-depth interviews were conducted with 20 middle-aged women. Findings suggest that women use age-defying products and services to attain hoped-for possible selves and prevent dreaded ones. These seem to be created by the media and women’s social contexts. The media and advertising seem to be emphasizing and creating youthful ideals for women, however how women react to these is likely to depend on the extent to which these standards are internalized and perceived as easily attainable.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary consumer culture views apparent bodily aging as problematic and offer marketized solutions to the problem (Coupland 2007). Within this culture where we are not allowed to age, bodies become commodities that can be preserved and altered by the hard work of their owners (Shilling 1993; Strasser 2003) and a great deal of consumption reflects the desire to control natural forces, particularly those resulting from the inevitable passage of time (Belk 1988). Age-defying practices are becoming increasingly normalized and regarded as natural requirement of successful aging. From the consumption of hair-coloring products, hair loss remedies, skin-care products, non-cosmetic surgical procedures, to cosmetic surgery, the desire to control the process of aging has been translated into a multi-million dollar industry (Thompson and Hirschman 1995).

The apparent salience of facial appearance in people’s thinking about aging should come as no surprise. Facial appearance has a particular significance in perceiving apparent bodily aging. It is regarded as central in revealing a person’s ‘true’ identity (Negrin 2000); a semiotic space for self-identification that is perceived to reflect qualities of social and sexual attraction especially amongst women (Coupland 2007). In light of the existing youth culture and beauty ideals, women perceive the appearance of facial wrinkles and other visible signs of skin aging as a threat to their self-identity, sense of social currency and self-esteem (Clarke 2002). In fact, a study of 24 women who underwent cosmetic surgery concluded that the steady growth of cosmetic surgery is a result of body discontent including undesired visible signs of aging, all of which seems to stem from the media idealization of women in western culture (Goodman 1996).

Standards of ageless models and actors set by media are unattainable and distant from the average person (Bloch and Richins 1992). However, the proliferation of anti-aging products and services and the development of medico-technical possibilities marketed to diminish signs of skin aging has made women increasingly believe that they can to a large extent, stem the signs of passage of time using an array of products and services ranging from moisturizing creams and facials to drastic procedures, such as surgery. Consequently, the market for anti-aging products and services has been growing rapidly for the past decade. Yet, no research has focused specifically on this type of consumption. Some interesting work has been done in the marketing literature about the body consumed, (Askegaard, Gertsen and Langer 2002; Joy and Venkatesh 1994; Sayre 1999; Schouten 1991, Thompson and Hirschman 1995). However, this work has mainly looked at appearance enhancement in general and cosmetic surgery aimed at general “corrections” to the body, and not specifically related to the quest for an ageless face.

The objective of this study is to gain insight into the underlying reasons for women’s concern with visible signs of facial aging and gain a deeper understanding of the deliberation behind their consumption of supposed age-defying products and services. I view behavior as goal-directed and conceptualize goals as various possible selves individuals strive to become or avoid (Markus and Nurius 1986). The sense of self is integral to the experience of aging because it allows us to make meaning of our experiences as we age and provide continuity in the face of age-related challenges and changes (Frazier and Waid 2003). Particularly, possible selves are the motivational basis for specific hopes, fears and fantasies that individuals have about themselves (Markus and Nurius 1986).

Possible selves provide a theoretical framework for understanding the meaning of aging and how the experiences of aging are integrated into one’s sense of self (Herzog and Markus 1999). I also draw on the symbolic interactionism school of thought as I explore aging as perceived and experienced by women in their everyday lives and use the informants’ experiences to contribute to our understanding of their deliberate consumption of anti-aging products and services (Mead 1934; Ryff 1987). We acknowledge that how women interpret aging and the meaning they give to a wrinkled face is to a large extent driven by their cultural context and social interactions. Based on the theory of symbolic interactionism, social and inter-personal processes emerge in the possible selves’ repertoire through the process of social comparison and interpersonal influence (Frazier and Waid 2003). Thus, an exploratory approach is taken using the informants’ accounts of their experiences to contribute to our understanding of the ‘why’ behind their concern with visible signs of skin aging and their desire to stem the signs of the passage of time. Another aim is to explore the role that the social context plays in creating women’s desired and undesired possible selves and providing them with their motivation potency.

BACKGROUND

Possible selves are specific future-oriented self-representations that motivate and guide behavior (Markus and Wurf 1987). They are visualized images of the individual having achieved a goal. Thus, they function to individualize global motives (Markus and Wurf 1987). They can be positive (hoped-for possible selves) or negative (feared-possible selves). Hoped-for possible selves are vivid representations of what we strive or hope to become in the future (e.g., fit, successful, eternally young, beautiful, loved). On the other hand, feared possible selves are representations of what we strive to avoid becoming (e.g., fat, a failure, old looking, ugly, lonely).

Previous research indicated that women’s possible selves mainly revolved around physical selves (33%) (e.g., wrinkled, young-looking, fat, in good shape) (e.g., Cross and Markus 1991) and indicated that consumers are able to identify products, services and activities relevant to approaching hoped-for possible selves or avoiding feared possible selves (Morgan 1993; Patrick et al. 2002). Nine ethnographic interviews with men and women who had undergone or were considering cosmetic surgery also suggests that approaching and avoiding hoped-for and feared positive possible selves motivate physical appearance enhancement (Schouten 1991).

So, where do these positive and negative possible selves originate from and what provides them with their motivational potency? According to the concept of possible selves, the repertoire of our possible selves develops from our past experiences, media, and social interactions (Markus and Nurius 1986). Media produces
a cultural system of beliefs that evokes a set of established meanings and social images women use for self-assessment (Hirschman and Thompson 1997). It provides aspirational models of possible ageless futures and promotes fear and insecurity about aging appearance (Belk 2001; Nabi 2002; Stevens and Maclaran 2005). A recent analysis of media texts such as magazines, television programs and advertisement as well as features on skin care products (Coupland 2007) revealed an emerging media discourse that pressures women and even men to resist outward signs of aging - the problem - and assume responsibility to stay young-looking and defy the ugly age through the use of marketized solutions. Thus we expect that women’s hoped-for possible selves are created by the media such as young-looking celebrities in television shows and skin-care advertising models.

Consumer culture has also created stereotypes and stigmas associated with the word “old” and what has been called “the rejected body” (Wendell 1996). The rejected body partly refers to the bodily appearance that is feared and/or rejected because it represents deviations from a society’s cultural ideals of the body (Morell 2003). Thus we explore the role that media and the social context are playing in creating both desired and undesired standards to be approached or avoided.

DATA COLLECTION
In-depth interviews were conducted with 20 women ranging in age from 40 to 60. A relatively narrow age range was chosen to permit meaningful analysis. Participants were intentionally sampled for the specific perspectives they may have, in particular, those regarding age and concern with physical appearance generally. All interviewees were New Zealanders of Anglo-European descent. The informants had different social, educational and occupational backgrounds. The laddering technique (Pieters, Baumgartner and Allen 1995) was used to uncover the participant’s deep motives for dealing with their wrinkles and was facilitated by asking informants a series of “why is this important to you” type of questions. Probing interviewing techniques were also used to gain insight into how women interpret and feel about visible signs of aging. Informants were interviewed in their homes or in other places where they felt comfortable. The purpose of the interview was described as an exploration of some aspects of women’s consumption behavior. Interviews took approximately one hour to complete. All were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim and a thematic analysis was conducted. The author and a graduate student trained in qualitative data analyses identified and coded themes separately. Differences were debated and lead each coder to re-read the transcripts to verify the themes discovered in the first iteration. The goal was not to find identical themes, but to comment on the plausibility of each other’s themes, thereby strengthening the interpretation (Malterud 2001) and ensuring trustworthiness (Wallendorf and Belk 1989).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
Findings are discussed next in the light of existing literature. Although our interpretation is generated from a wealth of data, for the sake of parsimony a limited number of quotes are used here for illustrative purposes.

Possible selves and motives to deal with visible signs of skin aging
Participants’ expressed reasons for using moisturizing crèmes or other anti-aging products or services suggest that they were avoiding or approaching possible selves. For example, Pat (aged 42, married, accountant, has used anti-aging creams, Botox);

I don’t want to look very wrinkly when I grow older. When I think that I might look like my mother… I hate it, there is nothing wrong with my mother, you understand what I mean, but I hate looking old, I don’t want to become invisible…. Do we ever see old women presenting programs on TV or on the cover of magazines? And if yes, how many; maybe only to make fun of them. You know when you look old and walk in the street, men do not notice you. It is as if you no longer exist.

And Janette (aged 50, lives with a partner, secretary, has used anti-aging creams and chemical peels);

I always try to look younger, look my best really. It’s hard, we can’t change the fact that we are aging, but at least I can try to age gracefully, I mean look younger than my age, it is so flattering, isn’t it?

Becoming invisible in the dating and mating game appeared to be one of the most concerning dreaded possible selves that middle-aged women strive to avoid. This comes as no surprise in a culture that places so much emphasis on appearance and equates youthfulness with beauty and seduction and their loss with deficiencies in femininity and sexuality (Scrib 1994). Women’s preoccupation with appearance enhancement in general has long been linked to the idea of the male gaze and their primary concern with men’s appraisal (Coupland 2007). In this context, women’s prime concern becomes losing physical desirability and as a result becoming ‘invisible’. The invisibility defining aging seems to be reflected in the underrepresentation of older adults on television programs and their almost total exclusion from ads for glamorous merchandise such as fashion, cosmetics and leisure products (Lee, Carpenter and Meyers, 2007).

Although most informants appear to have both, hoped-for and feared possible selves, most of them appear to have either more salient feared possible selves (avoidance strivers) or hoped-for selves (approach strivers). In the language of Markus and Nurius (1986), the avoidance strivers are people whose working self-concepts are more frequently dominated by feared possible selves. On the other hand, the approach strivers are people whose working self-concepts are more frequently dominated by hoped-for selves (Markus and Wurf 1987).

A series of probing and laddering questions about why approaching or avoiding these possible selves is important identified two distinct classes of underpinning goals or motives. Approach strivers had more fulfillment type goals (e.g. enjoy life, achievement, self-esteem), while women who are avoidance strivers had more security type goals (e.g., prevent social disapproval, financial security, and secure long term relationships). For instance, throughout the interview, not wanting to look wrinkled and old were mentioned frequently by Mila (aged 41, married, receptionist, has mentioned anti-wrinkle creams, facials and microdermabrasion) as reasons for dealing with skin aging. When first asked about the reasons why she is dealing with skin aging, a feared possible self was salient. She stated: “I don’t want to have a wrinkly and sagging skin in a few years. I would hate to look older than my age…” She then added in answer to a probing question: “I don’t know… because we don’t want people around to see how old we are”. As identified from the series of laddering questions, security goals, in particular, secure long-term relationships appear to underlie her concern with skin aging.

You feel more confident. Every woman cares about how she looks, not necessary to attract men, but I don’t know… It is
important for my family. I don’t want my grandchildren to be scared of my old look; I want them to be proud of me. And you know if I don’t look after myself, my husband might start looking outside. I’m sure he won’t, but he might. So it’s really to keep the family together…It makes life easier I think…bearable…at least you know you won’t be lonely when you’re old and you’ll find someone to bring you a glass of water if you cannot do it for yourself.

However, for Amanda (aged 53, separated, lecturer, has used anti-wrinkle creams and Botox), mostly positive standards to be approached were mentioned by her throughout the interview: “I just want to still look younger than my age or at least my age…” As identified from the series of ladderling and probing questions fulfillment type of goals appears to underlie her concern with wrinkles too. When asked about why looking younger is important she explained:

Who doesn’t want to look young? By looking young I mean looking reasonably attractive, not necessarily seduce people around… I’m just doing it for me. I also don’t have any expectations in terms of career. So, it is purely to make me feel good, have the pleasure of having cheerful and outgoing people around me…When you feel good you attract nice cheerful people and then you do nice things together, and I guess that would make anyone happy, that’s how I personally enjoy myself.

According to the concept of possible selves, the repertoire of possible selves is developed from past experience and the social context. Where do these age-related possible selves come from and what role do media and the social context play in developing these desired and undesired possible selves and providing them with their motivational energy?

The role of social context in forming and enhancing desired and undesired possible selves

The role that society and especially media play in creating idealized youthful images and standards and increasing women’s concern with visible signs of aging clearly emerged from the data. Most participants regardless of whether they are ‘approach strivers’ or ‘avoidance strivers’, blamed the media and society for women’s obsession with youthfulness. They accuse media: in particular, TV and advertising for creating youthful idealized images, which are embodied by women. For instance, Diane (aged 52, has used anti-wrinkle creams and photofacials) said:

For some reason the images we see on TV, movies and magazines of the people out there and so called as being beautiful are young, I feel quite strongly about the media obsession with youth. I feel angry in a way about it…..have you seen the makeover program ‘ten years younger’ last night on TV? Did you see how that woman looked after they injected Botox and dermal fillers in her face? How would you expect women not think of doing the same? We are pressured to try everything we can afford. Why a woman would want to look her age when it is possible to look younger. A friend of mine saves money to do those Botox injections every three months. I don’t blame her.

Jane (aged 49, has used anti-wrinkle creams) explained:

There is so much emphasis on it in the media. It is unfair that there is a lot of pressure on women in the media. You see many movie stars always looking youthful and trying to retain their beauty and attractiveness and those people in the make-over programs feeling transformed and they feel much better about themselves. I feel like everything in TV and media is about staying young. You cannot get jobs, achieve in life without being young. I feel older people are becoming invisible and they are desperately trying to look visible by doing Botox and surgery.

And Rose, 53-year-old used anti-wrinkle creams and Botox;

Beauty in our society is so much placed upon youthful appearance, and as a result no one wants to be perceived as old. It is an awful world, I have no choice but to present my self nicely, you don’t want people to perceive you as old…I believe if we lived in a country where no one would care about it and you were judged about intellect, you wouldn’t care about it… If no one worried about it, no one would have worried about looking old.

Marketers provoke women’s envy by showing young looking celebrities and models enjoying life as well as the admiration of others (Belk forthcoming). The advertising industry has resounded with its portrayals of young looking women as independent, healthy, sexy, attractive, admired, happy and fulfilled. Women compare themselves to transformed models. These represent their hoped-for or desired possible selves (Belk forthcoming). They develop a strong desire to possess youthful attributes that these models possess and which they lack, and think of the possible ways to become in turn enviable. Thanks to marketized solutions, in particular recent developments in rejuvenating technologized treatments, women are increasingly discouraged to put up with frustrating destructive feelings of envy, and rather assume the responsibility to stay young-looking or “turn back the clock”.

In addition to young-looking celebrities, interviews revealed that some of the identified hoped-for possible selves are past younger selves participants hope to look like again and visualized images of their old-looking mothers or other family members regarded as negative role models appearance wise. For instance, Sandra (aged 60, has used anti-wrinkle creams, laser resurfacing and injectable fillers) noted:

The other day I felt bitterness when I looked at some of my pictures twenty years ago, and I wondered if I could ever look like that again. Of course, it is impossible no matter what I did… but when I saw my son’s mother-in-law after she had a facial surgery …she looked, I would say, ten years younger at least. So with all those advanced surgical procedures, I guess everything is possible.

Marylin (aged 43, married, real estate agent, has anti-wrinkle creams, rejuvenating facials) said:

The other day one of the family friends told me that I’m starting to look like my mother … and I have to admit I started thinking Oh I don’t want to look like aunty Joelle …she didn’t look after herself and she looks older than her age. And I’m sure she wouldn’t have if she did.

And Rose (aged 46, married, factory job, has used anti-wrinkle crèmes):

When I look at my mother’s lines and sagging skin and think that I might look like her in less than twenty years, I feel I need
to take my skin aging more seriously and do more than what I’m currently doing to prevent that. My mother never used a cream, not even a moisturizing cream, but she had a reasonably healthy lifestyle and never smoked, but that was not enough apparently.

It appears from interviews that the media play a significant role in forming youthful ideals for women, thus, are likely to activate positive standards or hopped for possible selves. However, these youthful attractive images are likely to be reflective of male desires projected upon women and that women adopt as their own to comply with society’s expectations (Schrift 1994). They are most probably coercive standards dictated by the social environment such as the media and social pressure. This makes us wonder whether these ideals of youthfulness are standards women intrinsically desire to attain, or rather are more of coercive standards that women feel they have to attain, and thus are more related to avoiding feared possible selves. Interestingly, women who appeared to be more motivated by hoped-for possible selves seem to be more accepting of the ideals created by the media than their counterparts who strongly criticised them. For instance, Amanda for whom desired possible selves were mentioned throughout the interview acknowledged the role the media and society play in creating pressure on women to look good and conserve their youth. But, did not criticise it and took it as a fact of life. When asked about where women’s concern with youth comes from she stated:

We are women, and we are expected to present ourselves nicely. It is a fact of life. It has been the case for thousands of years. We should be sexy and attractive to men. You see those actresses who are 10 years older than you looking 10 years younger and you wish you can become like them.

This finding is consistent with the internalization and integration processes argued for in the self-determination theory (Ryan et al. 1996). According to the authors’ contention, extrinsically motivated behaviours can become increasingly self-determined when the values underlying them become internalized by the individual. When these are accepted as personally important and meaningful, they become integrated within the core self. Deci and Ryan (1991) proposed that this tendency toward integration is promoted by the social context but is largely dependant on people’s nature and their fundamental psychological needs.

How women react to idealized images is also likely to depend on the outcome of a social comparison process. Comparison appears to be a basic human motive, and social comparison theory (Festinger 1954) can be applied to the notion that consumers compare themselves to models portrayed in ads (Richins 1991). Most social comparison theories assume that upward social comparison (comparing one’s self with a superior) causes dissatisfaction and feeling of inadequacy whereas downward social comparison (comparing one’s self with a worse-off) (Kemmelmeier and Oyserman 2001). Since women compare their more ‘mediocre selves’ with those idealized for ever young-looking models or celebrities ‘superiors’, one would expect that the outcome of the social comparison process might cause anxiety and result in the salience of feared possible selves to be avoided rather than ideal hopped-for selves to be attained especially if one perceives herself as far away from those ideals or doesn’t have high expectations of attaining them. However, a woman who perceives herself as relatively close to those ideals might find herself thinking of attaining them. Overall, it seems hard to draw a conclusion about whether contextual determinants cause one or the other possible self to motivate and guide behavior. Although media and advertising seem to be emphasizing youthful ideals for women, how women react to these is likely to depend on the extent these are internalized and perceived as easily attainable.

Revising possible selves to better cope with failure

Within the lifespan literature, a number of theories and findings imply that a recalibration of one’s possible selves may be a key to continued well-being and successful aging (Herzog and Markus 1999). That is, an important factor in adjustment to aging is the revision and reformulation of possible selves. This notion of possible self reformulation was used by some of the informants as an attempt to deal with ongoing disappointment with their inability to preserve their youthful looks. For instance, Jennifer, 58-year-old, not only lowered her goals by lowering her expectations but also, shifted her attention to hoped-for possible selves in domains other than physical appearance, in particular ‘the wise me’ and ‘the healthy me’.

I had been using “Clinique” products until last year and I had Botox three times in the last two years. You have no idea how much money I spent on creams and serums and you know that you have to re-inject Botox every three months. But I stopped all that when one morning I looked at myself and didn’t like what I saw...I can’t keep doing this all my life. We can always try but I think we cannot change the fact that we are aging. I think what women are trying to do is ridiculous. Life is not about appearance only. The main thing is to be healthy and happy with what you have achieved in life. We certainly lose beauty as we grow, but we gain in wisdom and experience. I like my job and I have wonderful grandchildren and nice and caring friends, what else do I want?

CONCLUSION AND RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The present study identified possible selves as motives to deal with skin aging and demonstrates the role of possible selves in motivating consumption. Through conceptualizing goals and ‘anti-goals’ in hoped-for and feared possible selves respectively, this research constitutes another step towards personalizing goals and emphasizing the role of the self-concept in motivating and guiding consumer goal-directed behavior.

This study also suggests that hoped-for and feared possible selves are created by the media and women’s social contexts. However, it seems hard to draw a conclusion about whether contextual determinants cause one or the other possible self to motivate and guide behavior. Although media and advertising seem to be emphasizing and creating youthful ideals for women, how women react to these is likely to depend on the extent to which these are internalized and perceived as easily attainable.

The preoccupation with preserving youthful bodies as influenced by the media has been mainly a female preoccupation (Sayre 1999) and in most cultures, physical signs of advanced age are more harshly judged in women than in men (Clarke 2002). However, in western cultures, the male body has been increasingly sexualized and displayed in media (e.g., cinema, TV and advertising) as an object for female appraising gaze (Coupland 2007). There is in fact a growing cultural expectation that men should attend to grooming and use products and services traditionally seen in the domain of female bodily grooming such as facial moisturizers (e.g., revitalizing creams Q10 for men) and Botox facial injections. A future possible direction for this research is to explore men’s concern with bodily aging and identify the most worrisome aspects of it as well as how these are culturally constructed and influenced by the media.

Bodies and standards of beauty are socially and culturally constructed and the cultural context influences how women interpret aging and what meanings they attribute to apparent youth loss. Culture also influences the emergence of possible selves in later life.
and how these are used and negotiated to protect one’s sense of self in the face of age-related physical challenges and changes (Frazier and Waid 2003). A future research focus that explores women’s concern with apparent bodily aging in different cultural contexts is likely to provide valuable insights into what role culture plays in constructing our hoped for and feared possible selves as we advance in age. It may also aid in identifying other perspectives on aging. For example, Nicole Sault (1994) notes that some cultures are less apt to view the body as an integral part of self. Just as our shadow is not regarded as self, we may be able to take a similar view of our bodies. This can be good or bad however. To the extent that the body we see in the mirror is not coterminous with our self, it may come to be seen as an Other that is either a friend or a foe. Rather than doing battle with the enemy in the mirror, perhaps we need to learn to embrace this other as a friend.

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