DISCOURSES OF AGEING AND GENDER

the impact of public and private voices on the identity of ageing women

CLARE ANDERSON
“Anderson’s book is an important contribution which surveys and critiques discourses surrounding gender and ageing, presenting a rich and persuasive account of the contradictory views of the mid-life woman found across public and private domains, and the damage such discourses can wreak, even in our post-feminist age. The work is a call to a greater appreciation of the experience of gender across the lifespan, and the critical role language plays in its construction and representation.”

—Mel Evans, University of Leicester, UK

“Anderson expertly lays out the complexity of being an older woman subject to the demands of ‘youth’ and a very particular understanding of ‘beauty’. Her motif of the mirror illuminates perfectly the conflict between public demands and private voices and shows how women are forced to reconcile society’s demands with their own lived bodily experience. The breadth of data and analysis lays bare the difficulty of being an older woman in a body that is closely scrutinised, often critiqued and frequently erased from public view.”

—Annabelle Mooney, University of Roehampton, UK

“Discourses of Ageing and Gender offers a useful and original contribution to the fields of language and gender, feminist scholarship, discourses of health and ageing studies. It enables a productive re-examination of the construction and embodiment of gender identity. By exploring themes such as the discourse of the ‘lifecourse’, the young/old binary, the mirror as metaphoric and literal lens for exploring the ‘cultural gaze’, and chronological ‘age-and-stage’ ideological frameworks, the work offers nuanced ways of conceptualising the cultural pressures that specifically affect women. Anderson’s analysis of both public and private voices provides a compelling illustration of the extent to which cultural narratives of ageing and femininity are institutionally entrenched, and how difficult it is for women to resist these oppressive cultural narratives.”

—Jodie Clark, Sheffield Hallam University, UK
Clare Anderson

Discourses of Ageing and Gender

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Gender and Age in the Mirror

There is a moment, Frida Furman argues, when ‘the aging female body comes into deep conflict with cultural representations of feminine beauty’ (1997: 5), when as Kathleen Woodward comments, ‘all mirrors are potentially threatening’ (1991: 67). A consequence of the tension between the prevailing model of normative femininity (i.e. based on youth/beauty/sexual desirability) and the ageing female body is that there is no accepted linguistic or visual trajectory for accommodating age and ageing within the cultural rules governing the performance of femininity. By way of illustration, in a recent interview in *The Sunday Times* (31 December 2017), the classicist Mary Beard, whose struggles with visibility are well documented (and discussed more fully in Chapter 8) characterises the female experience as ‘either you’re ribbed for looking a mess or you’re attacked for being vain’. Indeed, what the cultural mirror reflects back to the collective gaze, often via the media as the lens of cultural attitudes, renders the ageing female body, paradoxically, ‘both invisible and hypervisible’ (Woodward 1999: xvi). I take
the notion of the many-faceted mirror as a leitmotif for this book: my central focus is the investigation of the language used about and also by, ageing women, as it is reflected through the cultural ‘labyrinth of distorting mirrors’ (Hazan 1994: 19). In this introductory chapter I outline in broad terms the nature and scope of the book and the questions I will address. I begin by briefly describing the cultural context which gives the book—and the research on which it is based—its raison d’être, and which has shaped my thinking both as a researcher and as an older woman. I develop this discussion more fully in Chapter 2.

My study focuses on two discourse domains and the relationship between them. The first is discourse at a macro level—the public voices—exemplified by the following quotation which shows how ageing womanhood is reflected in the cultural mirror: the social commentator Rush Limbaugh’s public speculation about Hillary Clinton,

“Does America… want to watch a woman of Mrs Clinton’s age, age before their eyes in office?” (Rush Limbaugh, quoted in The Sunday Times, 15 February 2015)

The second is language used at an individual level—the private voices—illustrated by this comment from a mid-life female respondent in one of the interviews I collected for this study:

…. I feel they’re [sc. colleagues] all so much younger and I’m kind of irrelevant but I do find outside that I notice quite a lot of attractive older men with white hair and I think there didn’t used to be all these men with white hair… but I can see that you just didn’t even see those people…. you become quite invisible. (Female respondent, aged 56)

She expresses the complex action of the subjective gaze, simultaneously turning inwards in the evaluation of self and outwards in its judgements of others. Both quotations highlight the unease generated in public as well as private domains by ageing—and by the ageing female body in particular—and much of this collective unease is rooted in the notion of visibility.
A central argument I make in this book is that the greater visibility of older/ageing women reveals a fundamental paradox at the heart of cultural attitudes towards ageing women. Even as it gives greater prominence to older women, current culture struggles to accommodate the reality of the ageing female body, as illustrated in the quotation about Clinton; the comments of the 56 year-old woman shown above suggests that there is also a profound effect on individual experience of ageing. The ambivalent nature of the visibility conferred on older women comes at a time when there is arguably a greater platform for older women in professional and public life than ever before; a changing social context has reconceptualised the midlife period of the lifecourse, pushing back its chronological boundaries (see Chapter 2). As a consequence the trajectories of women’s lives may be changing; for example, a greater number of women may be working for longer so that more older women are remaining in the workplace, some of them occupying more senior/high status positions—although figures on representation of women at board level suggest that gender equality is still far from being achieved. Yet still, the issue of the visibility conferred on ageing women, particularly by the media, remains deeply problematic. At a macro level, the public voices of mass-mediated communication remain deeply ambivalent about the ‘cultural work the aging, gendered, body is expected to perform’ (Wearing 2007: 278).

Hurd Clarke and Griffin, in their study on beauty work as a response to ageing, observe that for the women in their study:

perceptions of invisibility were grounded in their acute visibility as old women. The possession of physical markers of ageing rendered the women more visible as objects of discrimination… (2008: 669)

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1Research by Dr. Jude Browne (Director of the University of Cambridge Centre for Gender Studies) shows that only 17.4% of directors of FTSE 350 companies are female (Source: Cambridge Alumni Magazine, October 2014 and www.gender.cam.ac.uk). Furthermore, cf. media “shock” at the failure of Jeremy Corbyn, the new leader of the Labour Party, to include any women amongst his top cabinet appointments (September 2015).
There is a growing acknowledgement that this phenomenon affects many midlife women, as can be seen in the developing genre of autobiographical accounts of women’s midlife experiences e.g. Jane Shilling’s (2012) *The Stranger in the Mirror*, and India Knight’s (2014) *In Your Prime*. Furthermore, recent works such as Jeanette King’s (2013) *Discourses of Ageing in Fiction and Feminism: The Invisible Woman* and Helen Walmsley-Johnson’s (2015) personal account *The Invisible Woman: Taking on the Vintage Years* suggests an increasing determination to tackle the fraught issue of older women’s in/visibility. Despite this increased engagement with women’s ageing, as King also argues, historically there has been a lack of attention to these issues by feminist theorists—Germaine Greer’s (1991) classic text *The Change* being one of few exceptions. Whilst there may be greater representation of older women in news and media discourses, it is often ambivalent and contradictory, expressed through linguistic and visual strategies designed to encode covert negative evaluations, as I discuss in Chapter 5. Robin Lakoff wrote about the value to be gained from exploring ‘the language used by and about women’ (Lakoff 1975 [2004]: 37); equally important is the far less well-explored area of ‘the language used by and about ageing women’ (my italics).

Kathleen Woodward observes that ‘along with race, gender and age are the most salient markers of social difference’ (1999: x). However, theorisations of ageing as a socio-cultural (rather than a medical/biological) phenomenon have lagged significantly behind critical engagement with gender (see Woodward 1999, 2006; Twigg 2010). Consequently, the reciprocal impact of gender and age(ing) at a linguistic level remains under-investigated and under-theorised, so my work highlights a genuine gap in terms of academic enquiry. In the broader fields of gender and language/linguistics there is an absence of work which looks specifically at older women (as opposed to women in general), and most significantly, of studies which address (older) age as well as gender. Eckert’s (1997) work on how age intersects with individual language practice through the lifecourse does not factor in gender, and papers in the *Journal of Women and Aging*, one of very few journals focusing on women’s ageing, offer some perspectives on language but in the context of social/psychological/medical/attitudinal aspects of ageing, rather than
being specifically linguistic in orientation. Furthermore, within the expanding field of embodiment theory there is also a call for a greater emphasis on empirical insights to counterbalance the priority given to theoretical perspectives, although there is little research that to date, focuses on ‘the voices that emanate from bodies themselves’ as Nettleton and Watson observe (1998: 2). Yet the interview data gathered for my study is a powerful testament to the importance of listening to how the real voices of lived experience construct the relationship between gender and age/ing—‘the often unexamined links’ (Wearing 2007: 284)—in order to understand the heterogeneous nature and complex personal impact of ageing in social, emotional and physical terms. This book, and the research on which it is based, fits into this gap by exploring two significant but under-researched intersections: the point where age and gender as identity categories collide ideologically, socially and linguistically; and equally importantly, the often problematic relationship between public discourses and private voices—the complex terrain where different power agendas, individual desires and cultural expectations come together. In focusing on the reciprocal mirrors of gender and age/ing in public and private discourse, this book aims to contribute principally to the field of language and gender studies, although the limited number of studies which deal specifically with the language used by/about older women highlights the need and potential for a subfield within the broader field of language and gender, to which this book would also contribute.

In her (2003) preface to the original (1975) text of *Language and Woman’s Place*, Robin Lakoff comments ‘we have come a long way (baby)’ (2003 [2004]: 19), paraphrasing a 1970s advertising slogan to reference the progress made by—and for—women since the publication

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2There are exceptions, such as DeRenzo and Malley’s (1993) paper on ageist language in skin-care advertising, and Brôna Murphy’s (2010) study on female talk, although its focus is more on young women. The most notable exception is Justine Coupland’s considerable body of work analysing the language of and about ageing/older women, particularly in the context of anti-ageing skincare advertising and other advertising communication and most recently her (2013) exploration of discursive constructions of the ageing female body in the context of dance, which I have drawn on extensively in my analysis.
of *LWP* in terms of equality of opportunity and awareness of the language of gender stereotyping. However, as she also acknowledges:

like the sentiments expressed in the commercial, the changes in gender stereotypes may look encouraging but, when inspected more closely, are often depressing. (ibid.)

Lakoff contended that ‘language uses us as much as we use language’ (2003 [2004]: 39). My study seeks to understand, forty years after the publication of *LWP*, how a group of women uses language and how language uses them. In doing so I seek to apply the sociological premise which argues for ‘the importance of seeing the general in the particular’ (Lucal 1999: 786), i.e. not generalising the experiences of a particular group of individuals, but using them to examine critically the discourses structuring ageing and gender in the current cultural context. Somewhat depressingly, my analysis suggests that evaluations of female ageing, embedded in the day-to-day language of both private and public voices, continue to be freighted with ambivalence, anxiety, distaste and denial. As long as the cultural mirror (see Chapter 7) struggles to accommodate the reality of the ageing female body, what is reflected back to ageing women is a stark binary: external judgements of the “wrong” sort of visibility, or the imposition of invisibility. Lakoff’s statement that ‘we have come a long way (baby)’ remains open to serious challenge.

**Theoretical Context of This Study**

The notion of discourse(s) is central to this book; Wodak and Meyer (2009) note that the variety of approaches taken to discourse analysis in the field brings numerous ways of defining it. Litosseliti (2013) also argues that discourse is a broad term that resists easy definition, ‘often left undefined, vague or confusing’ (2013: 47). It is therefore important to provide a working definition of discourse/s as I use it in the course of the book. In my analytical approach I draw a distinction between two levels or orders of language, the macro and the micro, in order to examine their interconnectedness. As Fairclough states:
... ‘micro’ actions or events including verbal interaction, can in no sense be regarded as of merely ‘local’ significance to the situations in which they occur, for any and every action contributes to the reproduction of ‘macro’ structures. (2010: 38)

In the context of this book, the ‘macro structures’ are the discourse/s generated by institutions, corporations, governmental bodies etc., as well as the advertising and media industries, which I focus on in Chapters 4 and 5. Discourse in this sense signifies the written and spoken language which encodes the ideas, language and assumptions that constitute prevailing culture, and which is inherently ideological in that it does not simply represent the world, but as Litosseliti argues, ‘put[s] forward certain viewpoints and values at the expense of others’ (2013: 49). In doing so it constructs a reality according to a particular set of interests. One example which I discuss throughout the book is the prevailing cultural discourse of ‘age-as-illness’, often employed in lifestyle media communication, in which the process of ageing is pathologised, constructed as a group of “symptoms” which can potentially be “cured” (i.e. by investment in anti-ageing products). Connected to the macro discourse but distinct from it, is language at an individual level, the ‘micro actions or events’ which describe the linguistic strategies, resources and patterns of language use which make up people’s everyday talk (see Chapters 6 and 7). This is where cultural discourses are absorbed, reconstituted, navigated, evaluated. I locate this discussion within my wider analytical approach in Chapter 3.

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3Occasionally in the course of the in-depth linguistic analysis of respondents’ talk in Chapters 6 and 7 I use the term discourse in its most basic sense to signify a stretch of connected sentences or utterances, but this is clear from the context, so there is no risk of confusion. Discourse in an interactional sense, i.e. as a resource used to achieve particular interpersonal goals in specific social contexts such as conversation, is not the main focus of this study. Nevertheless, the extensive body of work on gendered models of language in interaction (i.e. Lakoff 1975; Holmes 1995, 1998; Brown and Levinson 1978; Cameron 2001; Coates 1998; Trudgill 1998; Tannen 1994; O’Barr and Atkins 1980) provides important background context to the principal areas of exploration in this book.
Drawing on the extensive commentary in this field (e.g. Fairclough and Wodak 1997; Wodak and Meyer 2009; Fairclough 2010; Litosseliti 2013), discourse is understood here as:

a form of social practice…. socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned – it constitutes situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people. (Fairclough and Wodak 1997: 258)

In that discourse can be seen as constituting social realities, it can also be regarded as a mechanism of power that can create and perpetuate the inequalities that are observable, for example, in the (often negative) evaluations applied to ageing women in some media commentary. This is exemplified in the quotation about Hillary Clinton (shown above) in which she is negatively positioned by the discourse of the unwatchability of female ageing. If, as I argue below, the performance of gender and age is socially and discursively constructed, then an individual’s sense of gender and age identity is a product of the discourses they absorb and inhabit. This is borne out in second of the two quotations shown at the start of this chapter, the 56 year-old female respondent’s comment which suggests that she has absorbed another prevalent discourse of ageing—that ageing brings personal invisibility. It would, however, be over-simplistic as well as inaccurate to talk about a single homogeneous discourse; in terms of the particular focus of this book, the discourse of age-as-invisibility takes its place amongst many other discourses of ageing, as well as relating to a multiplicity of other discourses concerned with women, men, appearance, health etc. Therefore, as Litosseliti notes, it is ‘more appropriate to talk about multiple discourses’ (2013: 48), and to see each discourse as a conjunction of agendas, assumptions, beliefs and evaluations; people go about the complex, daily business of constructing and maintaining self-identity ‘through the choices we make from different discourses available’ (Litosseliti 2013: 61).

Investigating discourses of age(ing) and gender has naturally led me to investigate the ideologies that underlie them. The cultural theorist John Thompson argued that ideology and language are inextricably interconnected:
...to study ideology is, in some part and in some way to study language in the social world. It is to study the ways in which language is used in everyday social life, from the most mundane encounter between friends and family members to the most privileged forums of political debate. (1984: 2)

He emphasised the importance of analysing ‘language used in everyday social life’ (ibid.: 99) in a way that also takes into account its role within the wider structure of society. I draw on his approach in seeking to understand how the private voices—the language of everyday life—and the public voices of wider society interrelate. My analysis of individual language use focuses primarily on the linguistic resources women use to construct and articulate gender and age identity, whilst the investigation of public discourses critically engages with dominant cultural attitudes towards age, ageing and gender, what Gullette terms the ‘master narratives’ (1997: 9), whose power has given life and currency to the assumptive question concerning Hillary Clinton. My purpose is to uncover and understand the ‘ideological formations’ (Fairclough 2010: 42) underlying these master narratives, which reflect wider power structures and serve the particular interests of the social actors (i.e. institutions, media and brand corporations, individuals) in a specific social context. A key aspect of the workings of ideology within the current cultural environment, which seems particularly pertinent to age and gender, is what Fairclough calls the process of ‘naturalisation’ (2010: 31) whereby ideologies come to be accepted and evaluated as non-ideological, ‘common sense’ formulations. Therefore a principal aim of this study has been to ‘denaturalise’ (ibid.) and hold up for examination the ideological formations that give rise to prevailing discourses of age/ing and gender.

Overview of Analytical Approach

My study has a theoretical starting point, following Thompson’s thinking (see above) and a linguistic one, drawing on Michael Halliday’s premise that language and social context are interrelated:
By their everyday acts of meaning, people act out the social structure, affirming their own statuses and roles, and establishing and transmitting the shared systems of value and of knowledge. (Halliday 1978: 2)

There is also a critical starting point, what Fairclough terms the ‘social wrong’ (2010: 235) of the continuing cultural problematisation of female ageing, in which the ageing female body is the particular focus of a cultural gaze which simultaneously scrutinises, polices and ultimately denies it, leaving no culturally endorsed pathway for women to construct an age identity with confidence. This state of affairs, which has affected me at a very personal level as an older woman, has driven the questions I have chosen to explore through my data: how women use language to evaluate their subjective experience of ageing, and its impact on their appearance; the extent to which public discourses of ageing shape and influence their individual experience; what insights can be derived about the personal experience of ageing from the way these women talk about it; and how ageing women are represented in media and advertising communication. I also wanted to explore, albeit in a limited way, a comparison between how women are represented in media and beauty discourses versus men.

The wide-ranging nature of this study has demanded a breadth and diversity of data to draw from to enable a sufficiently broad yet detailed analysis of the intertwined relationship between private and public discourses. I use three datasets, all concerned with ageing and gender: the first is spoken data from a series of qualitative interviews carried out primarily with women, with some men included for comparative purposes (the private voices); the second, a range of anti-ageing skincare advertisements and the third, texts taken from lifestyle media and a TV documentary. These latter two datasets, which represent the public discourses of ageing, I use primarily to explore how ageing women are portrayed in media and advertising communication. The anti-ageing skincare advertisements broadly represent the brands and discourses which define and dominate the market my respondents would be buying into; similarly I selected texts from lifestyle media which were relevant, newsworthy at the time and also coherent with themes emerging from the interview data so that I could track more directly the relationship between
‘women’s actual thoughts’ on a particular issue (Ringrow 2016: 2) alongside media commentary on it.

The multi-disciplinary, wide-ranging nature of this study has required different methodological approaches and analytical tools. In developing my analytical approach, I chose to draw on a combination of different theoretical and linguistic frameworks: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as an overarching theoretical framework; Evaluation as a broad area of linguistic enquiry, together with Appraisal Theory as a systemised framework for analysing it; and Multimodal Analysis as a framework for analysing visual modes of communication. I explain my analytical approach more fully in Chapter 3. However, there is a key point to be made concerning my fundamental approach to the data: I have drawn on these frameworks and analytical techniques as a means of enabling a deeper understanding of the data, rather than with the aim of using the data to prove the validity of a theoretical model or an analytical approach. Therefore, whilst the linguistic and theoretical frameworks I have worked with have generated useful and relevant ways of looking at the data, and introduced systematic structures for analysis and interpretation, I have chosen not to apply them rigidly in order to avoid artificially constraining the complex flow of ideas and recurring themes involved—particularly those emerging from the real voices of the people in the study. In short, the data has been allowed to tell its own story.

Content of This Book

Chapter 2 establishes the wider cultural context for this study, discussing the principal ideas and approaches from a wide-ranging body of scholarship in the fields of language and gender, age and lifecourse studies, sociology, culture and media studies and identity theory. Chapter 3 details the analytical frameworks I have applied to the data. Chapters 4 and 5 focus on powerful public voices, and consider the notion of female beauty as seen through the media mirror. Chapters 6 and 7 analyse the private voices of ageing from the qualitative interview data: Chapter 6 explores the discourses of ageing, and Chapter 7 focuses on
how the ageing appearance is constructed in the intimacy of the ‘mirror moment’. Chapter 8 examines women who break the cultural “rules”, exploring how they polarise public attitudes to ageing and hold a mirror back up to wider culture. Finally, Chapter 9 discusses conclusions and implications arising from this study and considers opportunities for further research.

References


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In Chapter 1 I established the broad nature and scope of the book. This chapter describes the cultural and academic contexts that have shaped the work I have undertaken. As I argue in Chapter 1, an investigation of gender and age is by its very nature a multi-disciplinary undertaking. The relationship between these two identity markers is complex, and with regard to linguistic exploration, a largely under-explored and under-theorised area; Julia Twigg’s comment that ‘beyond 40 there is silence’ (2010: 485) refers to this lacuna. This study therefore draws on a wide range of areas of scholarship, bringing together relevant ideas and theoretical perspectives from diverse domains: sociolinguistics, cultural theory, gender studies, social gerontology, identity theory, sociology, media studies and feminist discourse analysis. In the following section I look at the broad cultural context; I then explore the principal theorisations of gender, moving on to consider the nature of identity and the complex role of the body as a focus for cultural attitudes towards ageing and appearance. The final section summarises the key themes emerging from the discussion.
Lakoff’s contention that ‘language uses us as much as we use language’ (1975 [2004]: 39, see also Chapter 1) expresses the complex and reflexive relationship between micro and macro discourse domains (see Fairclough 2010). She argued that the language people use to construct gendered and age identities both produces, and is produced by, the cultural environment. It is therefore important to situate the analysis I undertake in this study in the context of the fluid and shifting conditions which characterise postmodern culture (see Giddens 1991), and which have given rise to prevailing cultural attitudes towards age(ing) and gender. The importance of age as a component of identity elicits considerable commentary from within the domain of cultural studies as well as the wider humanities. Twigg writes that ‘age is one of the master identities, a key dimension of difference’ (2013: 2) whilst commenting that it remains relatively neglected as an area of academic and sociological enquiry.

Woodward also observes

we have invented courses in colleges and universities that study gender, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity and class. But not age. (1999: x)

More recently Twigg too calls for a critical examination of the relationship between gender and age, drawing a parallel with the level of academic engagement which gender has received, which has meant that forty years after the rise of second wave feminism the centrality of gender is recognised in all domains of society:

A similar shift in understanding needs to occur in relation to age. It too is one of the key structuring principles of society […] It intersects with other social categorisations in significant ways, so that the ways in which ageing is experienced and understood are closely affected by cross-cutting identities, particularly gender and social class. (2013: 3)

Furthermore, as I argue in Chapter 1, the dominance of medicalised discourses of ageing over social/cultural understandings has had
significant effects at the most fundamental level of language in the vocabulary used to describe and evaluate ageing at the level of cultural as well as individual discourse. As Gullette comments:

> The system that maintains the decline meanings of midlife ageing depends on an enormous range of subtle and blatant coercive discourses: we inhale this atmosphere every day […] thinking it’s normal air. (1997: 5)

However, even if in the present cultural environment, perceptions of age and ageing may be starting to shift,¹ the intersection of age and gender remains inherently problematic territory, freighted with a cultural unease which appears rooted in the difficulty of accommodating the older female body both discursively and visually. Many commentators (see Sontag 1978; Woodward 1991, 1999; Twigg 2013; Dolan and Tincknell 2012; Gullette 1997; Furman 1997) argue that cultural ambivalence towards age(ing) finds a focus in the ageing female body, and is expressed through conflicted and conflicting discourses. Rosalind Gill, in her work in the field of feminist media studies, offers an overview of contemporary representations of gender in which she comments on ‘the extraordinary contradictoriness of constructions of gender in today’s media’ (2007: 1) which mean that discourses of ‘girl power’ sit alongside a pervasive re-sexualisation of the female body, but where the continued invisibility of older women in public contexts persists. Gill argues that ‘feminist ideas have become a kind of common sense, yet feminism has never been more bitterly repudiated’ (ibid.). Along with the media, gender relations and feminism itself is in a state of flux. She argues that this complex cultural environment, a ‘postfeminist era’, poses particular challenges for the construction of gender and age

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¹Examples of gradual shifts in attitudes to women’s ageing can be observed in the domain of skin-care advertising, in the work of the Dove brand’s Campaign For Real Beauty (see Chapter 4), and in the launch of the Charter Against Ageism and Sexism in the Media (July 2013) as part of the New Dynamics of Ageing (NDA) programme, an initiative orchestrated by the University of Sheffield.
identities. According to her analysis, postfeminist media culture is characterised by a number of recurring themes:

the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; … the entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas; a marked sexualisation of culture. (2007: 255)

These themes coexist with—perhaps perpetuate—historical exclusions related to race, age, ethnicity, sexuality etc., and Gill’s thinking provides a useful theoretical context for analysing my respondents’ personal and often difficult experiences of ageing as gendered subjects (I discuss this fully in Chapters 6 and 7). The problematic intersection of gender and ageing can be better understood by examining other powerful intersections which shape the cultural landscape, in particular three dominant forces in postmodern, postfeminist culture: first, the cultural appropriation of ageing and the institutionalisation of the lifecourse; second, the ideological binaries which structure current culture; and thirdly, the impact of consumerism and the mass-media on how gender and age are constructed.

Whose Life Is It Anyway? Cultural Appropriation of Ageing and the Institutionalisation of the Lifecourse

Study of the lifecourse has become a legitimate object of academic enquiry. A growing, interdisciplinary body of scholarship has generated a number of theorisations of the lifecourse: for example the cultural theorist Amanda Grenier defines it as ‘…an overall trajectory across the entire period of one’s life’ (Grenier 2012: 8); Featherstone and Hepworth’s conceptualisation is of an individual’s psychological and chronological progression through ‘an ordered sequence of stages […] during the course of their lives’ (1988: 371). Grenier focuses on the notion of transition—the movement between the stages and experiences which make up the lifecourse—to structure her examination
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of current perceptions and attitudes towards ageing and old age. She argues that the transitions that mark progression through the life-course (i.e. childhood, middle age, old age; marriage, retirement etc.) have become increasingly institutionalised in contemporary society by the imposition of what she terms the ‘standard models of change’ generated by the powerful institutions and organisations which structure society. The power of the state, as Featherstone and Hepworth argue, has given rise to a view of the lifecourse as something that can—should—be controlled and somehow standardised. They further argue that previously private spheres of life are now increasingly absorbed into the public domain so that individual experiences of ageing are increasingly mediated through culturally constructed stages and transitions, with discernible impacts on the way ageing is talked about and evaluated in individual discourses (see Chapter 6). Interestingly, the rise of social media, one of the defining aspects of twenty-first century life, has further blurred the distinction between private and public domains. As a result, the transitions which shape personal experiences of ageing and crucially, the language practices which express them, have become appropriated by culture’s normative discourses of ageing, creating as Grenier argues, a tension between accepted models of ageing and lived experience:

In several domains, accounts from older people highlight how lived experience can vary from, or clash with, dominant understandings of ageing and late life. (2012: 11)

These tensions can be directly tracked in people’s everyday talk, as shown by the analysis of my interview data in Chapters 6 and 7.

Chronological Age as a Social Construct

One manifestation of the tension between private and public ownership of the lifecourse lies in the significance given to chronological age in contemporary culture. Whereas historically the centrality of the family provided a broad structure for the lifecourse through naturally
occurring rites of passage such as the achievement of independent adulthood, marriage and parenthood, modern society views the lifecourse in terms of rigidly constructed stages (i.e. childhood, young adulthood, middle age, old age) which are delineated and defined by chronological age. Grenier discusses the dominance of a socio-cultural model of ageing based on ‘age-and stage-based criteria’ (2012: 7), whereby socially constructed chronological transition markers are ‘firmly embedded in socio-cultural and organisational practices of policy, programming and service’ (ibid.: 7). The language of age-and-stage based thinking has been widely appropriated by the media and advertising industries to become one of the cultural ‘master narratives’ (Gullette 1997: 9). The cultural meanings attached to different ages/age categories, particularly where they intersect with embedded cultural discourses of age-as-decline, as I argue in the final section of this chapter, shape the way people use language to evaluate their personal experience of ageing. As Gullette goes on to argue:

Decadism makes visible and collective what might be evanescent moments of panic. One of these public birthdays may even trigger the requisite feelings. “Fear of fifty” is being standardized. (1997: 4)

As Gullette’s comment implies, the cultural tendency to age-and-stage thinking brings with it an attitudinal as well as a linguistic tendency to homogenise age categories at the expense of acknowledging the diversity of individual experience. Eckert argues that adulthood as a whole—including the cohort of the elderly ‘has been treated more or less as a homogenous age mass’ (1997: 65). Whilst Hazan (1994) considers the implications of imposing uniform and stereotypical visual characterisations of old age on older people. Featherstone and Hepworth comment on the ‘deficiency’ (1988 [1991]: 382) of the vocabulary of ageing available to elderly people for expressing the diversity of their subjective experiences of ageing (see also Faircloth 2003), however, it could also be argued that this lack of linguistic scope and subtlety begins far earlier in the lifecourse, in the fluid conditions of the ‘new middle age’ (Featherstone and Hepworth ibid.: 385).
The ‘New Middle Age’ and the ‘Unrelenting Body’

Justine Coupland, also reflecting on the link between language and the socially constructed nature of age categories observes that

> [o]ften language gives pause for thought, if only because it confronts us with the great diversity of stances, experiences identities and evaluations that are projected in the name of age-categories, like being ‘middle-aged’. (2009: 852)

As Coupland’s comment suggests, the term ‘middle-age(d)’ is an example of a chronological age category which has come to embody a complex cluster of cultural judgements and expectations. Featherstone and Hepworth (1991) argue that middle-age has traditionally been viewed as a relatively fixed period of maturity located between young adulthood and old age, but discursively more associated with ageing than youthfulness. However, their (1988) theorisation of a reconstructed middle-age offers a challenge to age-and-stage based thinking. They argue that the broader historical process of the ‘modernisation of ageing’ (1988: 385) brings with it a relaxing of rigid chronological demarcations, so that the ‘new middle age’ becomes an extended, fluid, period in the lifecourse, characterised by personal development, activity and growth, transcending the rigid age-boundaries which have traditionally delineated young and older adulthood. Significantly, their conceptualisation of the redefined middle-age, now more loosely described as ‘mid-life’, ‘has more in common with youth than age’ (ibid.: 383) ideologically, visually and linguistically. This alignment with the values of youthfulness, a significant theme in both the private voices and public discourses explored in this study (see Chapters 4–7), suggests that contemporary mid-life is powerfully defined by ‘a new vocabulary of motives’ (Featherstone and Hepworth 1988 [1991]: 384) focused around discourses of body maintenance and improvement (see also Hepworth 2003; Coupland 2003). Grenier’s notion of ‘the unrelenting body’ (2012: 92), emblematic of cultural emphasis on continued activity and productivity as the prerequisites of successful ageing, can be seen as an obligation as well as an aspiration of the new middle-age.
Mid-life in contemporary society is particularly complex terrain; the (often conflicting) language practices which define it are uneasily situated between the discourses of youth and old(er) age; those in mid-life are caught in a complicated transition between being no longer young but not yet old. This transitional territory may no longer be as rigidly delineated by chronological boundaries, but nonetheless remains powerfully defined by a fundamental paradox particularly directed towards women, that the process of ageing presupposes maintaining the values and appearance of youthfulness. It could therefore be argued that the new middle-age is as subject to cultural appropriation in contemporary society as traditional conceptualisations of middle-age have historically been, despite Featherstone and Hepworth’s contention that

… the quest for a new public language to challenge and destabilise traditional cultural images of middle age for both women and men is a significant feature of the culture of mid-life as it has emerged in the West since the Second World War. (1988: 383)

As a further paradox, although mid-life may be less defined by chronological boundaries, the lifecourse itself continues to be defined by age-based thinking, driven by institutions and fuelled by the media and advertising industries.

In the next section I build on the discussion of age categorisation to explore a wider argument about cultural attitudes towards youth and age. Woodward states that:

…. in our culture, these distinctions [sc. age categories] ultimately and precipitously devolve into a single binary – into youth and age. Age is a subtle continuum but we organize this continuum into “polar opposites”. (1991: 6)

The argument I make here is that the youth-age polarity still pertains, that it is in fact one of the dominant forces governing contemporary socio-cultural attitudes to ageing. It is embedded in the cultural evaluative infrastructure and drives the polarisation that characterises many cultural discourses of ageing and gender. The consequence is a
continuing a cultural binarism which, as I will discuss, has a profound impact on individual attitudes and judgements.

**Young and Old—‘The Greatest Opposites’: A Culture of Binaries**

One of Sigmund Freud’s preoccupations concerned the gulf of understanding (as he saw it) separating young from old. In a letter to a friend, he commented that

‘Young’ and ‘old’ now appear to me to be the greatest opposites of which human life is capable. (letter from Sigmund Freud to Ernest Jones, May 3 1928, cited in Woodward 1991: 6)

Woodward takes the Freudian idea of age-opposition in order to make broader observations on the impact of the cultural dichotomisation of youth and age, offering the psychoanalytical concept of splitting\(^2\) as an analogy for the way in which contemporary culture forms its attitudes towards ageing and represents ageing discursively and visually. According to her argument, dominant culture’s representations of ageing in which ‘youth, represented by the youthful body, is good; old age, represented by the aging body, is bad’ (1991: 7) can be interpreted, analogously, as a form of collective splitting which has its genesis in what she terms ‘our culture’s denial and distaste for ageing which is understood in terms of decline, not in terms of growth and change’ (1999: xiii).

The menopause is a highly significant focus for cultural binarism (see Chapter 5); in her writing on mid-life and the menopause, Gullette states that

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\(^2\)As described by Woodward, splitting is a psychoanalytical concept observed in young children for whom it operates as a defense against ambivalence; ‘unable to tolerate feelings of ambivalence, the infant separates or splits what is most important into two representations – into the good and the bad. The infant phantasises [...] two mothers instead of one – a good mother who is loved and a bad mother who is hated’ (1991: 7).
this lifecourse decline narrative requires as its pivot a critical moment, and event. The event crudely divides all women’s lives into two parts, the better Before and the worse After, with the menopause as the magic marker of decline. (1997: 98)

In creating this division in the lifecourse, as Gullette suggests, the power of culturally constructed menopause discourse further embeds the opposition of youth and age by artificially imposing an evaluative watershed on individual experiences of ageing, making the construction of gender identity even more problematic. The menopause heralds the end of reproductive capability and with it youthfulness and the possibility of sexual activity and sexual desirability. The new phase, post menopause, is defined by absence: of youthfulness, attractiveness and sexual desirability. Ann Kaplan captures the profound impact of these artificial polarisations on two other areas of significance for this study: the construction of identity and the performance of gender:

As a woman’s appearance begins to lose its youthfulness, there may be a crisis of identity: I am either good, beautiful, whole and to be loved; or bad, ugly, fragmented, and unlovable, according to the degree to which my appearance fits into prevailing cultural discourses about “ideal” female beauty. (1999: 174)

The crisis of identity Kaplan describes is a symptom of the binarism that structures wider society’s attitudes and evaluations to such an extent that it is normalised in the collective consciousness and in the language; clusters of values are created around the ‘blunt binary of young and old’ (Woodward 1999: xvii). As a consequence the cultural equations of “youth-beauty-health-sexual attractiveness” and “older age-ugliness-decline-desexualisation” appear as largely unquestioned ‘polar opposites’ (see above). The interview data in my study shows how the powerful, covert messages generated by consumer culture inscribe the mirror in which women monitor and evaluate their ageing appearance everyday. As I discuss in Chapter 7, the way women talk about the “mirror moment” reflects its literal as well as symbolic significance. It is at once where the real, lived experience of ageing takes place, and also the site
where the evaluations of the subjective gaze and the judgements of the cultural/media lens intersect—moments commonly described in the language of negative evaluation and anxiety.

**Discourses of Consumerism: ‘The Finest Consumer Object’**

The dual forces of consumer culture and the mass media continue to be overwhelmingly powerful in shaping the cultural landscape, determining how age/ing and gender are viewed and understood and reflected back in the opposing mirrors of youth and age. The rise of consumer culture and the development of consumer advertising as a form of mass media communication have been extensively explored (see Featherstone 1982; Williamson 1978; Baudrillard 1970 [2010]; Chaney 1996; Scanlon 2000). What has proved particularly significant for this study is the emergence of the body as the central focus of these discourses of consumerism, the vehicle for the visual representation of its messages. Jean Baudrillard describes the body as ‘the finest consumer object’ (1970 [2010]: 129), however such relentless objectification of the body can be seen as an expression of deeper cultural ambivalence. Gill questions the usefulness of notions such as ‘objectification’ within a post-feminist context in which ‘far from being objectified, many women are presented as active, desiring sexual subjects’ (2007: 38). Nevertheless, the momentum of consumer culture which dictates that ‘the inner and outer body become conjoined’ (Featherstone 1982 [1991]: 171) means that increasingly the (sexual) body becomes the vehicle and expression of individual self-identity, as discussed by the sociologist Chris Shilling (2003):

> their [sc. ‘modern individuals’] sense of self [is] reflexively understood in terms of their own embodied biography. (2003: 4)

According to Sandra Bartky, discourses of ‘body work’ (Featherstone 1982 [1991]: 178) position the body (and the female body in
particular) as inherently deficient, and are the means by which culture appropriates the body, the relationship of the individual to their body, and by extension the way in which individuals construct their self-identity:

the fashion-beauty complex produces in woman an estrangement from her bodily being: on the one hand she is it and is scarcely allowed to be anything else; on the other hand, she must exist perpetually at a distance from her physical self, fixed at this distance in a permanent posture of disapproval. (1990: 40)

Within the context of this ‘managed narcissism’ (Baudrillard 1970 [2010]: 131), imposed on the body by the discourses of ‘the fashion-beauty complex’, the female body—and its complex role in the construction of gender and age identity—has become the particular object of evaluation for the cultural gaze.

**The ‘Mass-Mediated’ Female Body: Femininity and Women’s Magazines**

The appropriation of the female body by the conglomeration of discourses generated by advertising, beauty/cosmetic branding and women’s magazines is arguably one of the great cultural changes of the last 50 years (see Williamson 1978; Bartky 1990; Talbot 1995). The act of feminising the body, the accomplishment of femininity, is made contingent on the consumption of the products necessary for its achievement, what Woodward terms ‘the insignia of [the] gendered body’ (1991: 3). In this way, Talbot argues, femininity itself has become ‘a mode of consumption’ (2010: 151), a discursive construct produced by the vast machinery of commercial, advertising and mass-media discourses. Moreover, these public voices, as conduits of cultural ideologies, have the power and communicative reach to shape the construction of gender identity at the most fundamental level of lived experience, determining how women evaluate and talk about their bodies and by extension their sense of feminine selfhood. Women’s magazines are particularly influential in this regard and there has been considerable
exploration of their role and influence in the construction of femininity (e.g. Winship 1987; Ballaster et al. 1991; Twigg 2010; Talbot 1995, 2010; Machin and van Leeuwen 2008). Talbot writes that

this discursively organised social space called femininity is articulated in commercial and mass-media discourses - especially in the magazine, clothing and cosmetics industries. Such discourses shape the social practices that form women's identities and relationships. (1995: 144)

Similarly, Marjorie Ferguson argues that women's magazines have created a ‘cult of femininity’ (1983: 5), in which readers are positioned as adherents. Since its emergence as a genre in the mid-eighteenth century, the woman's magazine has been intimately interconnected with cultural notions of gender and gender display; indeed it could be argued that the discourse of the women's magazine has developed, as Ballaster et al. state (1991: 44), in a ‘dynamic process of exchange’ with shifting ideological stances towards gender. Women's magazines can therefore be considered as ideological texts, powerful repositories for cultural ideals of femininity, establishing a context for women's experiences and significantly, generating the linguistic frameworks for expressing and evaluating those experiences at an individual level. Gill suggests that the wider body of critical commentary on women's magazines ‘points to them as a locus of ideological messages that serve to legitimise and naturalise unequal relations, and which offer a narrow and restrictive template of femininity’ (2009: 347). There is still a relatively limited range of feminine identities offered to women in women's magazines; these take the form of age-related identity categories as Ballaster's (1991) study illustrates (e.g. ‘mother’, ‘homemaker’, ‘ambitious career woman’) although the foremost of these—appearance—remains the key index of postfeminist femininity.

Across the demographic span of the readership of women's magazines, starting with publications targeting adolescent girls (see McRobbie 2008), there are commonalities in the ideological approach taken towards the female body and the construction of femininity. The overarching rhetorical strategy is that of ‘body work’ as I discuss above, through which the female body is presented as inherently ‘deficient’, ‘an object in need of transformation’ (Bartky 1990: 40), and demonstrably
a lifelong work in progress. This translates to the level of language where the conceptual metaphor\(^3\) of ‘femininity-as-work’ is often invoked; this presents as an unquestioned truth the notion that the accomplishment of femininity is a task requiring continuous investment and surveillance. As Dorothy Smith comments, ‘the texts of the discourse of femininity index a work process performed by women’ (1988: 44). Femininity is therefore the product of an acquired skill or learned craft (Davis 1995), an economic investment in ‘physical capital’ (Bourdieu 1978: 830), a science (Coupland 2003) or an achievement acquired through (necessary) suffering (Davis ibid.). In this way the female body and the performance of femininity have become cultural commodities: the body is discursively positioned as ‘cultural plastic’ (Davis 1995: 17), and femininity as the expression of gendered identity which can—must—be procured by acts of consumption. Women’s magazines position the consumer/reader through a range of often covert linguistic strategies (see Jeffries 2007) encoded in specific language features (pronouns, lexical choices) which assume inclusion in a shared belief system as Talbot (1995) notes, and frame the culturally generated ideal of femininity as a taken-for-granted, shared aspiration—even an obligation.

It is generally accepted that the normative codes of femininity institutionalised in women’s magazines and other areas of the mass media are oriented around the values of youthfulness. It is also increasingly acknowledged that within the cultural ideal of femininity, within its visual and linguistic vocabulary, there remains little place for the ageing female body. In her analysis of Vogue magazine Twigg states that:

> Reflecting the values of the fashion world, it [sc. Vogue] has remained preoccupied with the youthful and transgressive; remarkably little work has been undertaken that addresses older people or the processes of ageing. Beyond 40 there is silence. (2010: 485)

Discursively, the ‘virtually invisible subject of older women’ (Woodward 1999: x) and the literal ‘erasure of age’ which Twigg (2010: 475) observes in the airbrushed representations of older women in the pages

\(^3\)As defined by Lakoff and Johnson (1980).
of Vogue, are symptomatic of wider cultural ambivalence towards ageing, in particular as it affects women. Feminist scholarship offers some challenge to the dominance of theorisations based around heteronormative conceptualisations of gender display, for example Davis states that ‘those designated by the dominant culture as Other (old, homosexual, disabled, fat, and/or female) become imprisoned in their bodies’ (1995: 51); however there remains a seeming reluctance to engage with the ageing female body as an area of sociological enquiry, or to include age in continuing debates on intersectionality, as Twigg (2010) notes. This perhaps suggests that the potency of the impact of ageing on women’s sense of feminine selfhood and identity construction remains somewhat underestimated within academic as well as wider discourse domains. The implication for women is that the relationship between gender identity and the process of ageing may be more conflicted and problematic than ever. Femininity, which is culturally required, must accommodate the ageing body, which is culturally denied.

Susan Sontag (1978) argued that cultural attitudes have made ageing more problematic for women than for men, with the result that older women are doubly marginalised. What my analysis of the private voices of the mid-life women in my study also reveals, however, is the lack of a credible, culturally accepted trajectory for ageing femininity, a phenomenon that may represent one of the greatest challenges to mainstream consumer culture. The anxiety-laden language they use in their private mirror moments indicates the struggle to reconcile the fundamental conflict between the inevitability of physical ageing and the cultural orientation to youthfulness as a prerequisite of femininity (see Chapter 7).

**Gender and Age: ‘Troublesome Dichotomies’**

The problematisation of the relationship between gender and age has characterised debates within the field of language and gender studies since Simone de Beauvoir’s now well-known comment that ‘one is not
born but rather becomes a woman’ (1949 [1997]: 295). Her words suggest a view of gender as a constructed entity, an act of volition, even an act of choice, which is separate from biological sex—a view also argued by the feminist scholar and theorist Judith Butler (1990). This way of thinking about gender has contextualised key debates in this field concerning the (often problematic) relationship of gender to sex and sexuality; what has been somewhat lacking, as I argue in Chapter 1, is theorisation of the relationship between gender and age.

**Language and Gender: ‘Women’s Language’**

The reciprocal relationship between language and gender has been a focus for scholars, linguists and sociologists since the rise of second wave feminism, in large part inspired by Robin Lakoff’s (1975) pioneering work *Language and Woman’s Place (LWP)*. Her work builds on the central premise that meaningful linguistic exploration could exist ‘beyond the level of the sentence’ (1975 [2004]: 18). In connecting language-in-use with wider cultural ideologies concerning the representation of women, Lakoff’s work paved the way for much subsequent linguistic and sociological exploration, which has structured approaches to language and gender since the publication of *LWP*, but which, as I am arguing, has not tended to accommodate age within its analytical scope.

Following Lakoff, it is generally accepted not only that language and gender structure each other, but that both are constituted through social practice (see Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003; Talbot 2010; West and Zimmerman 1987), and embedded in institutional frameworks. Lakoff identified the notion of ‘women’s language’ (1975 [2004], passim), a term she used as a short-code for her argument that women use language differently from men in ways which reflect and perpetuate the dominance of patriarchal constructions of gender; in other words that women’s language encodes powerlessness. O’Barr and Atkins’ (1980) study of the speaking styles and linguistic resources used by courtroom witnesses specifically challenges Lakoff’s notion, arguing that some of the language features associated with women’s language are in fact used by low-status witnesses of both genders. Their conclusion, that power rather than gender is the dominant influence on language use, lead them
to question whether what has come to be termed ‘women’s language’ should more accurately be seen as the language of powerlessness and therefore for that reason, as not gendered. Cameron and Kulick’s (2003) more nuanced exploration of this question suggests that in a male-dominated society there is a taken-for-granted correlation between ‘power and masculinity/powerlessness and femininity’ (2003: 57), which means that within the confines of this dichotomous structure, similar language features may index both variables. However, a principal argument I make in this book is that in the current cultural context where youth is idealised and age devalued, there may be an equally significant correlation between powerlessness and *ageing* femininity: ageing becomes another index of powerlessness, intensified by the reciprocal negative impact of ageing and femininity. These questions remain to be explored, however, in that no real body of work currently exists which focuses specifically on the impact of age and gender on language practice.

If there is a lack of theoretical engagement with the language used by ageing women, there is a little more commentary on language used about ageing women. In the fields of literature and visual arts, the phenomenon of the invisible older women is well documented; I have already referenced Twigg’s (2010) analysis of the absence of older women from the pages of Vogue magazine, and in analysing the role played by dress in the cultural polarity of youth and age, she comments that ‘for older women, however, and to some degree older men too, the struggle is to be seen at all’ (2013: 4). Significantly, the experience of the older women in this study (see Chapters 6 and 7) bears out the reality of invisibility as a consequence of the ageing process in that ageing, lack of visibility and personal powerlessness are seen as existing in a causal relationship.\(^5\)

Forty years ago Sontag wrote that

there is a double standard about aging that denounces women with special severity. (1978: 73)

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\(^5\)By way of exploring the notion of in/visibility and ageing, the ‘Look At Me!’ study, part of the NDA Project launched at the University of Sheffield in 2009, used group workshop situations to explore the impact of media representations of older women on participants’ own experience of ageing.
If as many scholars argue, femininity in the current cultural environment remains to some degree an index of powerlessness, then it could also be said that the effect of age/ing renders this a ‘double marginality’ (Woodward 1999: xi). In terms of language practice, the need remains for a more subtle understanding of gender and the role of language in the construction of gender, which means accommodating age(ing) as a factor in the theorisation of gender, and connecting cultural discourses of ageing—what Gullette terms ‘decline ideology’ (1997: 9)—with gender ideology. Given the current demographic profile of the UK population,6 the relationship between discourses of ageing and gender is clearly an increasingly important aspect of lived experience, despite its relative neglect as an area of academic enquiry. There has arguably never been a more timely moment to address this neglect and in doing so to address a significant gap in socio-cultural understanding.

**Decoupling Gender and Sex**

Gender theory has relatively recently shifted significantly from a conceptualisation of gender as a state of *being* which people are born with, to an understanding of gender as an act of *doing* (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003; Talbot 2010), an ‘accomplishment’ (West and Zimmerman 1987: 126) which individuals perform continuously in what Butler terms ‘a stylised repetition of acts’ (1990: 191). This notion of gender is enabled by another theoretical shift that decouples gender from sex, and by extension, sexuality. In this view, sex is interpreted as a function of biology, determined by ‘reproductive potential’ (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003: 10), and gender as a product of culture, discursively constructed. The conceptualisation of gender and sex as separate entities, set in train by de Beauvoir’s notion of ‘becoming’ (see above), challenges theorisations based on biological determinism, and

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6The Office for National Statistics (2014) states that one third of adults are currently aged 50 and above, and that there are now more people in the UK aged 60 and above than there are under 18 *(source: ibid.*); furthermore women account for a higher proportion of older (65+) age groups than men due to a slightly higher life expectancy.
has brought with it a more wide-ranging exploration of gender which questions the taken-for-granted nature of the ‘gender order’ (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003: 33). The most radical exemplification of this idea is Butler’s theorisation of gender as liberated from the seeming fixity and binary nature of sex to become ‘a free-floating artifice’ (1990: 9) in which

man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one. (ibid.)

These conceptualisations of gender give rise to a more complex understanding of the role of language in the construction of gender (and age) identity. So if as Eckert and McConnell-Ginet argue, ‘language is continually constructed in practice’ (2003: 4), then gender and age, and other markers of identity which are constituted through language, can be seen not as fixed and invariant entities but socially situated activities, constantly negotiated and re-negotiated within the fluid context of day-to-day interaction, as argued in West and Zimmerman’s (1987) classic analysis ‘Doing Gender’. They state that the performance of gender is not only a complex process, but one which

is undertaken by women and men whose competence as members of society is hostage to its production. (1987: 126)

By the same token, it can also be said that “doing ageing” as part of a performance of gendered identity is equally complex and perhaps even more subject to cultural judgements. Diane Railton and Paul Watson in their (2012) analysis of the pop icon Madonna, suggest that Butler’s notion of gender as the product of repeated performances enacted on the body can equally be applied to ageing:

Footnote: Coupland et al.’s (1991) studies of intergenerational talk support this, suggesting that ageing, like gender, is also to some degree a socially situated activity, discursively constructed in the moment.
...age is similarly contingent – an effect performed across, or a particular stylisation of, the body. (2012: 198)

The cultural mirror is inevitably—relentlessly—turned on gender, along with other categories of identity, judging its performance against deeply embedded normative attitudes (see Butler 1990; Talbot 2010; Cameron and Kulick 2003). Interestingly, alongside her radical theorisation of gender as freed from the constraint of the sexed body, Butler too concedes that gender performance must take place ‘within a highly rigid regulatory frame’ (1990: 15), that constraint is part of the fabric of cultural discourses that are

predicated on binary structures that appear as the language of universal rationality. Constraint is thus built into what that language constitutes as the imaginable domain of gender. (1990: 12)

However, in recent years there has been a growing interest within academia as well as the media, in gender performances which disturb normative codes of gender, i.e. as enacted by trans- and inter-sexed individuals. In terms of academic enquiry, Butler’s (1990) foundational analysis of drag, which conceptualises it as a conscious mechanism of subversion—even inversion—of hetero-normative codes of gender performance, continues to inform a growing body of LBTG research within the field of gender studies. In the wider media domain, Channel 4’s 2011 documentary My Transsexual Summer used the experiences of a group of transsexual people to bring to the wider public domain an exploration of the complex issues surrounding gender performance, sex and sexuality. The documentary contributed to a more nuanced understanding of gender by exploring the choices made by these individuals regarding (degrees of) membership of the culturally acceptable domain of gender, and the ‘gender work’ needed to achieve this. In 2015, the transition of American reality television star Bruce Jenner into a transgender woman, Caitlin Jenner, accomplished under the full media and public gaze, became a global event—although interestingly Jenner’s status as an ageing transgender woman (she is 65) has not so far been the subject of media commentary. More recently (April 2018)
the trans model and activist Munroe Bergdorf presented the first in a series of programmes in Channel 4’s ‘Genderquake Season’, which aim to explore different aspects of the gender debate. These media initiatives have dramatically increased awareness of issues relating to more complex gender performances, perhaps signalling a wider acknowledgement of the need for greater acceptance and understanding of changing attitudes to gender. Nonetheless, a number of commentators argue that age troubles the domain of gender even more profoundly than such challenges to the gender binary. Woodward comments on the ‘cultural distaste’ (1999: xiii) surrounding the ageing female body; writing about fashion, Twigg argues that ‘ageing has thus become a disruption in the visual field’ (2010: 475), and Wearing considers the performance of femininity by an ageing body in terms of ‘risk’ (2007: 284). In order to understand more deeply the complex interrelationship of ageing and gender, I now examine the notion of femininity as the visible enactment, or accomplishment of gender.

**Femininity: A ‘Slippery Subject to Grapple With’**

‘Femininity’ and ‘masculinity’ have become encapsulations of a whole constellation of cultural meanings about what is “acceptable” gender display, and act as focal points for the collective judgements that determine whether individuals conform to—or transgress—prevailing cultural gender ideologies. My focus here is primarily on women’s experiences, therefore this part of the analysis is concerned with femininity—‘the gender-ideal against which women’s behaviour was judged by society at large’ (Cameron and Kulick 2003: 47).

Theorisations of femininity generally conceptualise it as an abstract notion, a discursive construct; Talbot (1995) suggests that the word ‘femininity’ represents not a single idea but a conjunction of different discourses, ideas and social practices. Dorothy Smith (1988) argues that the notion of femininity is at once an indeterminate and non-unitary

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8Bruce/Caitlin Jenner’s transformation was revealed by means of a full-body glamour shot on the front cover of Vanity Fair (June 2015).
phenomenon, whilst Susan Brownmiller views it as ‘a slippery subject to grapple with’ (1984: 19). However, despite the fluidity and abstraction surrounding it, the achievement and performance of femininity is a fundamental component of women’s self-identity, concretely enacted on the female body. As Bartky comments

to have a body felt to be “feminine” […] is in most cases crucial to a woman’s sense of herself as female […] To possess such a body may also be essential to her sense of herself as a sexually desiring and desirable subject. (1990: 77)

Femininity is at once abstract and concrete, at once a discursive construct, a socially-constructed ‘doing’ (West and Zimmerman 1987: 126) and an embodied performance which, as Smith states, is ‘what actual individuals are doing in the everyday settings of their lives’ (1988: 38). However, the ‘doing’ of femininity must also be undertaken in the context of the powerful and rigid cultural rules that determine the requirements for its successful performance. Contemporary mass media representations continue to use a visual vocabulary that conflates youth and beauty as the index of successful femininity. This signifies a prevailing cultural ideology in which ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ (Mulvey 2009: 19) is still, seemingly, required of women who must construct their gendered identity under the scrutiny of ‘the male gaze, the youthful gaze, the dominant-culture’s gaze’ (Furman 1997: 5) and, increasingly, of the female gaze (see Chapter 7 of this book).

I make the point above that cultural binarism dictates that youth/beauty is (still) the defining model of femininity, against which all performances of femininity are judged. Naomi Wolf discusses an example which shows the extent to which this cultural model is institutionalised in language practice: a standardised description favoured by US mail order catalogues selling clothes to professional women, is ‘businesslike yet feminine’ (1990: 42) in which ‘yet’ is the linguistic manifestation of a fundamental cultural dualism which sees the notion of ‘businesslike’ as an ideological and visual contradiction to highly regulated, appearance-based rules of normative femininity. Writing about language and
female leadership, Holmes’ (2007) study gives another perspective on the ‘businesslike yet feminine’ ideological formulation. She describes the ‘unavoidable double-bind’ afflicted women in leadership positions whereby ‘if she talks like a manager she is transgressing the boundaries of femininity: if she talks like a woman she no longer represents herself as a manager’ (Jones 2000: 196, cited in Holmes 2007: 58). Bartky sees the female body in terms of Foucault’s (1979) conceptualisation of power: as an instrument of the cultural forces of discipline and control which are ‘increasingly charged with the production of a properly embodied femininity’ (1990: 79), its dissemination through the mass media and ultimate imposition on women’s ‘docile bodies’ (Foucault 1979: 138). The consequence, according to Bartky, is that normative femininity is even further regulated; the ideal female body as the focus of these discourses is constructed through language and images as youthful, beautiful, sexually desiring and desirable, and presumed to be heterosexual. It is worth noting that these perspectives, although generated in the 1980s/1990s, remain relevant to the current cultural context, perhaps a reflection on how little cultural attitudes towards femininity and ageing femininity have changed. I discuss this more below.

It is widely accepted that the combined momentum of cultural discourse, the power of consumerism and the mass-media supports and sustains normative femininity in transmitting these messages to the women they target. However, the nature and extent of women’s choice to participate in the process remains a matter for debate: women are simultaneously viewed as being ‘trapped’ (Featherstone 1982 [1991]: 179) by the prevalence of images of idealised female bodies which typify the cultural visual repertoire or, as Smith argues, are seen as willing and active collaborators in the construction of their feminine identities:

we must not begin by conceiving of women as manipulated by mass media or subject passively to male power, but recognise when we speak of ‘femininity’ that we are talking about how women’s skills and work enter actively into textually-mediated relations which they do not organise or produce. (1988: 39)
The question of how far women are co-constructors of discourses of femininity remains key to understanding the construction of the feminine self, and further illustrates the duality inherent in cultural attitudes towards the way women perform gender. Gill talks about the ‘naturalised myth’ (2007: 260) of female empowerment by which paradoxically, women are presented as autonomous agents who nonetheless “choose” to conform to a narrow interpretation of acceptable feminine appearance built around the attributes of youthfulness i.e. slim, firm, groomed body, wrinkle-free face. If, as Smith suggests, women are ‘active and creative subjects’ (1988: 39) who choose to undertake the beauty work necessary to meet the required standards of femininity, they are, as Bartky argues, also choosing to subscribe to ‘feminine narcissism’ (1990: 37); whilst this is required of women by the external gaze, it is also negatively evaluated by the same cultural voices which construe it as ‘feminine vanity’ (ibid.). On the other hand, as the feminist scholar Kathy Davis argues, discourses which position women as ‘cultural dopes’ (1995: 56) enslaved by the practices of femininity and the pressures of beauty norms are viewed as equally problematic. In particular, feminist theorisations of gender struggle to reconcile the binary nature of these external judgements, which Bartky terms ‘the gaze of the Other’ (1990: 27), which position women either as accomplices in, or as the ‘passive products’ (Smith 1988: 39) of, the discourses of the ‘fashion-beauty complex’ (Bartky ibid.: 40). As Davis comments:

it is difficult to explain why women who have managed to defy social conventions in other areas of their lives are unable to resist the norms of beauty. (1995: 43)

Davis uses her analysis of cosmetic surgery to explore the paradox of what she terms ‘the feminine beauty system’ (1995: 56) which is constructed around the centrality of beauty to the cultural ideal of femininity. She argues that women’s participation in the systematisation of feminine beauty, itself freighted with contradictions, is a complex and often conflicted process. Women are caught in a particular double-bind in which desire to conform to standards of feminine beauty and desire to resist its pressures are equally powerful. According to Davis this
paradox is exemplified in women’s often ambivalent relationships with cosmetic surgery, given the greater possibilities for body control and transformation it affords. This ambivalence comes through strongly in the interview data I gathered for this study, which shows that for women of all ages, but particularly the mid-life cohort (see Chapter 7), the resistance-conformity dilemma exerts a profound influence over the daily reality of self-evaluation in front of the mirror, and is often fraught with genuine anxiety. There is real conflict in these women’s simultaneous desire for emancipation from the pressures of powerful external expectations regarding the performance of femininity, and the concession (however unwilling) to their irresistible force. This is directly visible in their language, through linguistic features such as the frequently occurring use of ‘should’, which I explore in Chapter 7.

I have been arguing that shifting cultural attitudes to ageing and the reality of an increasingly ageing population is forcing changes in attitude in some areas of public discourse; there are examples in recent media commentary of attempts to engage with the challenge age(ing) presents to the performance of gender, such as Channel 4’s (2013) documentary *Fabulous Fashionistas*, which explored the lives and fashion choices of a group of women aged 73–90 (see Chapter 8). Nonetheless, as I suggest in the next section, accommodating the disruption ageing brings to the performance of femininity remains one of current culture’s greatest challenges.

**Ageing Femininity**

Bartky contends that ‘there is, of course, nothing new in women’s pre-occupation with youth and beauty’ (1990: 80). However cultural ambivalence towards ageing and its impact on the (female) body means that the rigid linguistic and visual codes which continue to define normative femininity in contemporary Western culture, have if anything, intensified the conflict between expectations of gender performance and attitudes to ageing, so that age(ing) has become one of the most feared—and least understood—disruptions to gender identity. This has profound, and generally negative effects on the way femininity
and sexuality (in the sense of sexual attractiveness) are interpreted and judged in the current cultural context.

Much of the collective unease surrounding the intersection of ageing and femininity is focused on the visible impact of ageing on the female body, often expressed through ambivalent representations of older women in magazines and other mass-media discourses such as skincare advertising. As I explore in Chapter 4, the ageist ideologies encoded in these texts are often covert, present at a subliminal level in the way semiotic resources are selected by the advertisers and used to construct the message. That evaluations of ageing and its visible signs are dealt with in this manner is perhaps emblematic of the way in which ideology structures communication in the current cultural environment, by naturalising ageist attitudes (see Fairclough 2010 and also Chapter 1) and presenting them as unquestioned truths. Although the momentum of demographic change means that older women are now more visible in advertising and the media, this greater visibility is itself an ambivalent phenomenon. Sadie Wearing examines the discourses of television makeover shows in order to illustrate the duality of cultural attitudes to the performance of gender and ageing. She argues that:

A further complexity lies in the competing presence of two, apparently contradictory, discourses on aging in postfeminist culture. On the one hand, we find a vibrant, even utopian, celebratory insistence that age need not mean loss – of femininity, of fun, of “girlhood”, perhaps finally of “self”. At the same time, however, a more cautionary note is sounded, which suggests less that age “need not” and more that it “must not” be allowed to relax the hold of “youth” on the body…..(2007: 286)

The cultural gaze that finds the spectacle of the ageing female body distasteful is also, as Wearing suggests, suspicious of efforts made to resist the visible signs of ageing. For the cultural/economic forces driving the commercialisation of femininity, whose success is predicated on the consumer equation of youth = beauty, ageing represents ‘a disruption in the visual field’ (Twigg 2010: 475). At the same time, a reconfigured, more fluidly defined mid-life (see above) has opened up a consumption community of Third Age people (see Grenier 2012), the so-called ‘baby
boomers’ nine (see Gilleard and Higgs 2000) whose expectations regarding lifestyle and consumption are more centred on youthfulness than age. This new group of consumers, as Twigg observes, ‘do not perceive themselves as old and see no reason why they should be treated as such’ (2010: 483), nor, it could be argued, represented as such in mass media discourses. Therefore as I note above, one of the principal challenges for beauty and cosmetic corporations as well as media and advertising industries must lie in the complex navigation between the (lucrative) needs of a growing cohort of mid-life consumers and the constraints of underlying, embedded attitudes towards ageing which remain as Woodward states, ‘profoundly ambivalent, and primarily negative’ (1991: 8). At the heart of this collective unease lies the notion of sexuality (used here in the sense of sexual interest/desire) and the dilemma of its role as a component in the performance of ageing femininity.

Ageing, Femininity and Sexuality

It is sometimes said that women of a certain age constitute a ‘third sex’; and in truth, while they are not males, they are no longer females. (de Beauvoir 1949 [1997]: 63)

In describing women of a certain age as ‘a third sex’, de Beauvoir pinpoints what is perhaps the most profoundly problematic dimension of the way in which cultural attitudes structure age and gender in terms of the body. Cultural discourses tend to characterise the process of ageing as one of loss. Amongst the general catalogue of physical losses, perhaps one of the least documented is the desexualising effect of ageing which may not be the same thing as the process of ‘degendering’ discussed by Catherine Silver in her (2003) paper on (de)gendered identities in old age, where she describes the post-menopausal female body as no longer ‘attract[ing] “the gaze” of men’ (2003: 386). Alice Freed, reflecting on

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This term is used to describe the generation born between 1945 and 1965 who, according to Gilleard and Higgs ‘helped shape the post-war ‘youth culture’ (2000: 9) and who are a powerful economic force behind the development of anti-ageing technologies.
the distinction between ‘degendering’ and ‘desexualising’ suggests that the latter term more accurately describes the taken-for-granted expectation that older women, whilst still presenting as female, are no longer evaluated or represented as objects of sexual interest (September 2014: personal communication). Similarly, Peter Oberg writes that ‘older women are rarely portrayed as sexual, and sexual desire in older women is usually a point of ridicule’ (2003: 116). Furman’s (1997) study of beauty parlour culture also demonstrates that the way in which older women evaluate their bodies is in constant tension with representations of youthful, sexually desirable femininity. As Christopher Faircloth contends, in Western culture where the male body is considered to be normative and the female body, by comparison, as “other” (2003: 6), an older female body that can still be sexual may be doubly “othered”.

Elizabeth Markson, in her analysis of the ageing female body in film writes:

the postmenopausal body, having lost its reproductive (and by implication, sexual) charm, neither is the object of the appreciative male gaze nor does it fit into contemporary cultural discourses about “ideal” female beauty. (2003: 80)10

A central theme of Gullette’s work is that menopause is a culturally constructed ‘discursive phenomenon’ (1997: 98, see also Greer 1991 and Chapter 5 of this study) before it is a physical/biological one; it desexualises women so that as Silver argues, ageing women are perceived to be ‘useless sexual objects’ (2003: 387). Railton and Watson’s (2012) analysis of Madonna characterises her as a transgressive icon of ageing femininity, challenging cultural requirements of the performance of ageing femininity largely because she remains sexualised. This illustrates the rigid and yet contradictory nature of the cultural “rules” which are enshrined in the discourses of mass-media publications (see Chapter 5).

10The American comedian Amy Shumer highlights the negative correlation of sexuality and ageing in her Youtube sketch ‘the last fuckable day’ (22 April 2015) which shows a group of (attractive) actresses “celebrating” their liberation from being objects of sexual interest on film because they have crossed the threshold of 50.
These powerful sites of identity production are where the work of constructing what Railton and Watson refer to as the cultural ‘blueprint’ (ibid.: 199) for successful female ageing takes place. The requirements of ageing femininity as laid down by these public voices are based primarily around the complex series of balances involved in the maintenance of an appropriate appearance. Older women must, seemingly, contrive to disguise the signs of ageing without appearing too young whilst maintaining an appropriately youthful appearance, and remain attractive without appearing overtly sexualised. The problematic status of the ageing female body, caught between cultural expectation and biological reality, suggests that for women, as Wearing notes, ‘the achievement of a stable and coherent gendered identity over time’ (2007: 286) is a highly complex and uncertain task. Woodward delivers something of an exhortation that ‘the feminist aging body, entailing gender and sexuality as the continuing site of identity, need not be a contradiction in terms’ (2006: 177). However, the argument I make here is that this contradiction will persist whilst the ideological, visual and linguistic repertoire of contemporary culture is unable to accommodate a notion of ageing which permits both sexual desirability and femininity, and a notion of femininity which can meaningfully encompass the ageing female body. Wearing’s analysis of ‘the complex psychic processes that may accompany the production of gendered identities as we age’ (Wearing 2007: 285) suggests that for individuals as well as for prevailing culture, ageing is experienced and viewed as the foremost threat to this process.

**Ageing and Identity**

In the old person that we must become, we refuse to recognise ourselves.
(de Beauvoir 1970: 4)

De Beauvoir’s statement captures the challenge which ageing presents to identity construction whereby the self and the ageing body come to be viewed as separate entities, distanced from each other by the inevitability of ageing, depersonalised (‘the old person that we must become’)
and powerfully denied at the most fundamental level of subjective awareness (‘we refuse to recognise ourselves’). Her words point up the tensions inherent in the notion of identity: it is at once an abstract, fluid and theoretical framework for articulating the nature of the inner self (see Caldas-Coulthard and Iedema 2008) and at the same time is experienced physically as an embodied and gendered phenomenon (see Giddens 1991; Shilling 2003; Nettleton and Watson 1998). The process of ageing destabilises identity construction at a theoretical level as well as that of embodied experience; understanding the significance of this reciprocal impact means acknowledging that ageing, gender and identity are as intertwined theoretically as they are in terms of lived experience.

‘Identity Trouble’\textsuperscript{11}

Much of the scholarship in this field explores identity at a theoretical level. Jay Lemke’s conceptualisation of identity emphasises its non-unitary, multiplex nature; far from being a fixed entity, it is portrayed as constantly changing and developing. He argues that a fundamental tension exists between identity as the expression of an individual’s inner state and its appropriation by the cultural forces of modernism. Paraphrasing Foucault he states that:

\begin{quote}
modernism has found more and more ways to take the inner soul, which was private, [….] and make it into a more public terrain of identity, under surveillance and subject to control by outside interests. (2008: 32)
\end{quote}

Not only is what was private now made ‘public terrain’, but the naturally fluid and multi-dimensional nature of identity is increasingly subject to pressure to conform to the ‘stereotypical pseudo-identities’ (2008: 32) generated by advertising and consumer discourses, institutions and particularly through the increasing power of lifestyle identities

\textsuperscript{11}This title is taken from the (2008) book \textit{Identity Trouble} edited by Carmen Caldas-Coulthard and Rick Iedema.
(see Chaney 1996). According to Lemke, the tension between the culture of ‘pret-a-porter, ready-to-wear’ (2008: 34) categorisation and the complexity of identity puts the different components of identity in conflict with each other in ways that threaten the stability of self-hood:

…the frequently noted contradictions between our subjective identities, who we are to ourselves and our projected identities, who we wish to seem to be to others. (2008: 20)

In Lemke’s model of identity, the subjective identity is ‘who we are to ourselves’ (2008: 20) whilst the projected identity represents the self which is prepared for and presented to the ‘gaze of the Other’ (Bartky 1990: 27). The interview data I analyse in this study indicates a third, and equally influential component, which is the received identity, which I define as the identity offered to/imposed on individuals by mass-media discourses, and which plays a complex role alongside the other components of identity.

My analysis of the voices of lived experience suggests that the process of ageing may have a more complex impact on self-identity than perhaps has been acknowledged in the literature, where identity markers such as gender, ethnicity and class have tended to be the focus of academic enquiry. Woodward describes the ‘profound cultural ambivalence’ to ageing (1991: 8) which dictates that there is little understanding—and only uncertainty—at a cultural as well as an individual level about the process of building what Gullette terms the ‘age identity’ (1997, passim). Her use of the term ‘age identity’, deliberately juxtaposing ‘age’ and ‘identity’, is intended to subvert commonly held cultural perceptions which have struggled to accommodate the notion of age and the possibility of continuing identity construction. Lemke explores the notion of identity production through the lifecourse, making a distinction between the idea of ‘identity-in-the-moment’ and ‘identity-across-the lifespan’ (2008: 23). His conclusion, that it is recurrence which links identity-in-the-moment to longer-term identity, recalls Butler’s theorisation of gender identity which, as discussed above, she expresses as ‘the stylised repetition of acts through time’ (1990 [2006]: 191). As Wearing also observes, what can be theorised about performance of gender identity can also be applied to age:
the centrality of the temporal, the necessity for constant repetition, and the possibility that repetition will “fail” are highly suggestive for considering the relationship between age and gender. (2007: 285)

Looking at the relationship between age and gender in this way gives insight into how these two significant markers of identity might structure each other both in the moment and across the lifespan. The same mechanisms of cultural regulation which according to Butler, ‘police the social appearance of gender’ (ibid.), mean that the impact of the ageing process renders the performance of gender unstable. Ageing disturbs the iteration of the normative codes of gender, particularly in terms of appearance. Wearing suggests that there is a moment when the older female body ‘is diagnosed as problematic’ (2007: 286) by the evaluative gaze of mass-media and consumer culture and deemed an inadequate vehicle for the performance of gender. Furthermore, as I have already observed, the uneasy co-dependence of age and gender means that prevailing cultural attitudes struggle to accommodate the notion of an age identity that meaningfully incorporates the performance of gender. The result—and the risk—is the ‘spoiled identity’\(^{12}\) of the older woman. For women in particular as they age, the relationship between gender and age is not a theoretical struggle but intensely embodied, often anxiety-ridden daily work, enacted on their bodies in full glare of the ‘gaze of the Other’.

**Identity as Embodied**

Chris Shilling’s notion of the ‘absent-present body’ (2003: 179) indicates the historical tendency in this field to make the body the subject of discussion rather than the object of analysis. According to his argument, it is as a result of the ‘theoreticism’ (Netleton and Watson 1998: 2) of the 1990s, and in particular the theoretical approach of Judith

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\(^{12}\)This term is taken from Erving Goffman’s (1963) work *Stigma. Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. It is used in this context to describe the threat which age(ing) is perceived to present to the acceptable performance of gender.
Butler, that the body lost its status as a physical entity. A shift in analytical focus has advocated the need to ‘bring the body back in’ (ibid.: 176) to sociological, philosophical and cultural sciences discourses of the body. Shilling’s perspective forms part of a growing domain of body theory that acknowledges the centrality of the body to identity but also to everyday lived experience (see Giddens 1991; Nettleton and Watson 1998; Caldas-Coulthard and Iedema 2008; Woodward 1999, 2006). Further, the thrust of contemporary scholarship not only views ‘identity as an embodied and socially situated phenomenon’ (Caldas-Coulthard and Iedema 2008: 6), but invests the body with an active role. Giddens argues that

in conditions of high modernity, the body is actually far less ‘docile’ than ever before in relation to the self, since the two become intimately coordinated within the reflexive project of self identity. (1991: 218)

Similarly, Shilling’s notion of ‘the body as a project’ (2003: 5) suggests a reflexive relationship between self-identity and the body in which an individual’s sense of self is understood and expressed through the body, via regimes of body control. The relationship between the inner self and the body is complex, as is the role both play in identity construction. Theorisations which position the body as the instrument of agentive projects of self-identity (see Giddens 1991; Shilling 2003) also recognise that bodily control, expressed through the discourses of body maintenance and improvement, is a symptom of ‘culture’s grip on the body’ (Bordo 1993: 17), rather than an expression of individual agency. As Shilling observes, ‘the body has become a project to be moulded in line with people’s self-identities’ (2003: 5) but also, in the appearance-driven consumer environment of current culture, the ‘malleable entity’ (ibid.) which must also express the cultural ‘project of the self’. As Giddens comments:

Appearance, to put the matter bluntly, […] becomes a central element of the reflexive project of the self’. (1991: 100)

Justine Coupland and Richard Gwyn suggest that in the context of the consumer-driven culture of the twenty-first century, ‘the body has new
work to do’ (2003: 4), that there are new and more complex demands placed on the body as it mediates ‘between self-identity and social identity’ (2003: 2), both the property of individuals and the object of cultural appropriation. There is an inherent tension in this culturally driven fusion of inner and outer, of private and public which means that the body has, in effect, become the identity. Paradoxically, it is the body—the object of endless manipulation—that appears to provide a firm foundation on which to reconstruct a reliable sense of self in the unstable environment of high modernity. Claire Carter, writing about the impact of anti-ageing and health discourses on women’s gendered identity notes that the rise of consumerism has ‘amplified the body’s significance to a point where it is increasingly seen as a ‘central paradigm for the self’ (2014: 3). Goffman too states that the body is central to ‘the presentation of self in everyday life’ (1959 [1990], title page), and the context of everyday life is increasingly governed by the imperatives of consumer culture which dictate that ‘unprecedented value is placed on the youthful, trim and sexual body’ (Shilling 2003: 3). The female body must therefore be controlled in order to conform to this culturally accepted model of femininity and Carter’s research reports that increasingly, women use body practices of fitness—which she describes in terms of discourses of ‘healthism’ (ibid.: 2)—‘in the service of normative femininity’ (ibid.). But the female body must also perform as an object of display (see Wearing 2007; Bartky 1990; Coupland 2003) for the surveillance and judgement of the cultural gaze; at the level of individual lived experience as well as cultural perception, the body has become the ‘physical capital’ on which social competence and individual worth are judged. Coupland argues that for women, the body is also the location of their ‘symbolic capital’ (2003: 129), and cultural judgements of the body are, and remain, fundamentally gendered. There are numerous examples in day-to-day media discourses of the more rigorous evaluative mechanisms

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13The term ‘physical capital’ is a concept developed by Pierre Bourdieu (1978) through which he analyses the role of the body in post-modern society, conceptualising it as a ‘possessor of power and status’ (Shilling 2003: 111), and which plays a complex role in sustaining wider power structures and social inequalities. Its use here relates Bourdieu’s concept to the notion of appearance as a component of ‘physical capital’.
that are applied to women as opposed to men, which suggest that it remains a taken-for-granted aspect of contemporary Western culture that women are still judged on the basis of appearance to a greater extent than men.

The Ageing Body

Cosmetic surgery has become an increasingly sophisticated tool in the ‘project of the self’, no longer merely as an instrument of repair, but as medical technologies advance with increasing rapidity, the seemingly endless possibilities it offers reinforce the status of the body, and the ageing body in particular, as a commodity which can (and must) be continuously ‘restyled, reshaped and rebuilt’ (Davis 1995: 17). Expectations of the body as the vehicle of self-identity have intensified as technologies have developed which allow ever-greater degrees of control over the body. Davis characterises the body in the consumer culture of late modernity as an entity ‘which can, and perhaps is increasingly expected, to ‘be endlessly manipulated [….] to meet prevailing fashions and cultural values’ (1995: 17). However the possibilities for transformation offered by technology come with increased pressure to undertake such regimes of bodywork. As Shilling argues

We now have the means to exert an unprecedented degree of control over bodies, yet we are also living in an age which has thrown into radical doubt our knowledge of what bodies are and how we should control them. (2003: 3)

Of ‘the tribulations of the self’ (Giddens 1991: 181) that threaten the integrity of self-identity in contemporary society, the process of ageing is arguably the most potent. Carter reports that for many of the women in her study ‘aging symbolises a loss of control over their bodies’ (2014: 9) engendering feelings of personal responsibility for regulating the body by improving health and fitness in order to ward off ageing. Cultural preoccupation with—appropriation of—the body creates a focus for the ‘…obsession in western culture on the appearance of the body as the dominant signifier of old age’ (Woodward
C. Anderson

1991: 10), and this has important implications for ageing and identity. This collective obsession is frequently reinforced at a cultural level, for example via the rise over the past two decades of television makeover shows (see Coupland and Gwyn 2003; Wearing 2007) which as I discuss above, disseminate complex and contradictory attitudes towards ageing. Not only that, the notion of a unified self where the body is accepted as a vehicle for the expression of the inner self, has also been appropriated by mass media discourses and transformed into the cultural myth of ‘being in one’s prime’. This notion, which pervades the language of popular culture, delineates a limited period of young adulthood, generally extending from mid-twenties to mid-thirties, which is characterised, if not idealised, as the moment when, briefly, the (youthful) body and the self are harmoniously unified in the production of self-identity. However, these same discourses position this as a peak which is succeeded by an inevitable decline, physically, but often also in terms of personal and professional relevance. This culturally constructed sequence of peak followed by decline is very powerful in shaping women’s expectations of the ageing process (see Chapter 6). Through the course of the mid-life period onwards, a different cultural narrative heralds the start of the breakdown of the unity of body and self. The visible signs of ageing, discursively constructed as ‘bodily betrayals’ (Featherstone 1982 [1991]: 178) signal a different relationship between body and self-identity, one which is particularly problematic for women in their day-to-day lived experience not least because of the way it is dealt with in public discourses.

Cultural Representations of the Ageing Body

The texts and images through which culture constructs its attitudes to ageing serve to illustrate Gullette’s statement that ‘whatever happens in the body, human beings are aged by culture first of all’ (1997: 3). Many commentators suggest that cultural attitudes to ageing are based on repression; taking a psychoanalytical perspective, Woodward argues that repression and denial are symptomatic of deep personal and collective anxieties about death but also of being designated unworthy of
the cultural gaze. Carolyn Heilbrun describes this phenomenon vividly in her (1991) essay ‘Coming of Age’ (cited in Woodward 1999: xiv): ‘we will watch ourselves grow invisible to youth worshippers and to the male gaze’. Woodward contends that the cultural desire to deny the reality of ageing both structures, and is structured by the way the ageing body is talked about and represented in cultural discourses:

The aging body as imagined and experienced and the aging body as represented structure each other in endless and reciprocal reverberation. (1991: 5)

Paradoxically, although the collective desire may be to repress and deny ageing, images of the ageing body are ubiquitous in day-to-day life, therefore the attitudes they encode are inescapable; the power of the cultural visual repertoire creates and perpetuates stereotypes of ageing in ways which directly influence individual expectations and experience of ageing. Hazan argues that the images with which culture surrounds ageing/older people mean that the stereotypes they express can become self-fulfilling and as Faircloth observes, the visual semiotic resources which express cultural expectations of the ageing appearance and behaviour become the yardstick by which ‘we actually assess whether we are old or not’ (2003: 18). Faircloth further argues that through the implicit evaluations contained within the “reality” they represent, many of the images of age and ageing in current culture provide a visual focus for deep-seated collective and personal fears and anxieties. Woodward notes the paucity of representations of ageing which express ‘tolerance’ (1991: 8) or genuine acceptance, and this is further illustrated by recent mass media and advertising discourses in which apparent celebration of age disguises the covert message that its visual signs must be effaced for the judgement of the cultural gaze.14 Ann Kaplan uses her (1999)

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14Examples of this phenomenon are too numerous to include in detail; however an article about the former model Twiggy (The Sunday Times, 8 June 2014) ‘Still out there at 60’ exemplifies the widespread use of the qualifying ‘still’; Dolly Parton and Cher are headlined as ‘warriors in the war on age’ in an article in The Guardian (15 May 2014) whose purpose is ostensibly a negative evaluation of the increasing use of cosmetic surgery to efface the “natural” signs of ageing.
analysis of three iconic ageing women in cinema and television portrayals to develop her premise that ageing is experienced (at least by white Western women) as ‘trauma’ (1999: 171). She argues that through representations of ageing which portray the ‘abjection’ of the body altered by its effects, culture attempts to deal with its fears:

much is at stake in aging, therefore, both for women experiencing age as “trauma”, and for a culture fixated on youthfulness and so terrified of death that it erects defenses that are not, ultimately, in anyone’s interest. (1999: 190)

The Biomedical Narrative of Decline

Hepworth (2003) writes that the biological model of ageing, which originated in the scientific and medical discourses of the mid-nineteenth century, transformed perceptions of the body making it the object of ‘scientific scrutiny’ (2003: 90) interpreting disease as a symptom of ageing so that

the modern aged body was separated out from the body of youth and other stages of life as a degenerative or dying body (ibid.)

One of the consequences of this medical-professional gaze has been the emergence of the notion of the separation and separateness of the ageing/aged body. This has had a wide-ranging cultural impact, fuelling the cultural binarism which positions health and old age as polar opposites (see above). The medicalisation of ageing has created what Hepworth terms the ‘biomedical model of decline’, which remains a powerfully influential force in current culture, as the prevalence of commentary in both academic and wider media domains attests. This is an essentially reductionist model of ageing:

15Marlene Dietrich, Melanie Klein and Marguerite Duras.
....The fixation of the professional gaze upon the ageing body excluded visions of ageing as a complex ‘polysemic’ moral process [...] The result was that the diverse human experience of ageing was gradually reduced to a single biomedical model of decline as defined by the unifying, disciplinary scrutiny of an expanding band of medical experts. (2003: 90)

Although the culturally constructed decline narrative is inescapably bound up with biology, Gullette’s (1997) constructionist perspective draws a distinction between the decline of the physical body and the cultural ideology of decline that Hepworth argues is used to make a ‘wide range of spurious links between variable biological changes that take place as the body changes’ (2003: 99). Nonetheless, Gullette’s view is that the cultural decline narrative is a mechanism for problematising the “normal” decline of the body in old age, a means of connecting a diverse range of bodily changes to ‘an imaginary story of comprehensive and universal decline’ (Hepworth 2003: 99). The impact of the catch-all effect of the decline narrative can be directly tracked in the language used by the women in this study as they evaluate their experience of ageing, particularly in the intimacy of the mirror moment (see Chapter 7), in which every bodily change is attributed to the process of ageing, and as a result universally negatively evaluated. The legacy of this ‘unifying, disciplinary scrutiny’ has shaped the language of ageing and therefore cultural attitudes to ageing in other significant ways, blurring the perceptual and linguistic boundaries between decline as part of the “normal” process of ageing and decline as a consequence of disease. In addition to being reduced to a unitary process of decline, ageing has also been pathologised by these discourses with far-reaching effects: the culturally generated ‘age ideology’ which conflates the language of ageing with the language of illness\(^\text{16}\) has become another ‘master narrative’ (Gullette 1997: 9), creating cultural as well as individual expectations that if ageing is like illness then it can be “cured” by regimes of body

\(^{16}\)This is exemplified by some of the discourses concerning Alzheimer’s disease (i.e. Gubrium (1986) Old Timers and Alzheimer’s: the Descriptive Organisation of Senility).
work and lifelong investment in the ‘body project (Shilling 2003: 4). The discourses of consumerism, particularly as they are directed towards women, play a complex role: as the lens of cultural attitudes they perpetuate the master narrative of age-as-decline and at the same time the notion of ageing as curable—or at least controllable. In the appearance-based resistance narratives that characterise mass media communication, bodywork not only represents ‘the skilled practices and routines [of] accomplishing femininity’ (Smith 1988: 45), but also presents the female body as ‘the forever imperfect actuality […] to be groomed, dressed and painted’ (ibid.: 53). Femininity itself is invoked as a weapon against ageing and in this way discourses of youthfulness/health/beauty/femininity are more firmly conjoined, further reinforcing collective perceptions of the antithetical relationship between beauty and ageing.

The current cultural environment has in many ways been shown to be a complex and uncertain environment in which to grow older. Commenting on Gullette’s work, Hepworth argues that the distinction she identifies ‘between ageing bodies and a culture that ages’ (Hepworth 2003: 10) is emblematic of a fundamental cultural conflict between ideologies of ageing: the biological model which characterises ageing as a process of decline, and the social constructionist model, which Gullette and other commentators (see Woodward 1999, 2006) argue strongly for, which constructs age and ageing more positively as a process of change and personal growth. That said, it could be argued that cultural attitudes towards ageing are in the process of shifting - albeit gradually - detectable in the greater prominence given to positive role models of ageing women in different domains of public life, and in a more positively constructed vocabulary of ageing. Examples include the 2007 advertising campaign by the Dove brand (see Chapter 5); the 2013 Channel 4 documentary on the Fabulous Fashionistas discussed in Chapter 8; and initiatives such as the 2013 launch of the Charter

17Interestingly, this debate has recently been taken up by the media; an article in The Sunday Times (11 July 2015) speculates whether ageing is a normal bodily process or ‘is old age merely the name we give to the diseases and breakdowns we accumulate as we grow older?’. 
against Ageism and Sexism in the Media. An additional corollary of the shift in the cultural landscape as I note in Chapter 1, has been a developing sub-genre of mid-life acceptance narratives,\(^\text{18}\) for which Gullette’s (1997) work *Declining to Decline*, which contains a substantial amount of autobiographical material, may have been a forerunner. However, it could equally be argued that even these changes in cultural attitudes and the broadening visual and linguistic vocabulary of ageing have yet to bring about substantive changes in individual attitudes to ageing. The private voices analysed in this study show how powerfully the decline narrative dominates individual responses to ageing, as I explore in Chapters 6 and 7. In fact cultural discourses dictate how individuals interpret and evaluate the signs of ageing on their own bodies to the extent that it is a moot point whether individuals can be said to have ownership of their own ageing process, and this may be particularly true for women.

**Summary**

My review of the theoretical and cultural context for my study suggests that despite some shifts in cultural attitudes, the continuing dominance of the decline narrative means that at the level of lived experience, ageing remains a powerful source of ‘identity trouble’. Identity, theorised as a multiplex, non-unitary category of difference, is constantly under threat of submersion by age, culturally constructed as ‘a category of similarity and uniformity’ (Hepworth 2003: 99). Furthermore, the reciprocal impact of gender and age identity is characterised by uncertainty and unease, both in terms of personal evaluations and public discourses. The uncertainty which surrounds individual projects of the self is perpetuated and reinforced by the contradictory nature of cultural discourses of ageing in which the ageing body as a signifier of decline sits

\(^{18}\)Jane Shilling’s (2012) autobiographical account *The Stranger in the Mirror: A memoir of Middle Age*, and India Knight’s (2012) fictionalised account *Mutton*, and most recently Helen Walmsley-Johnson’s *The Invisible Woman* (2015) are examples of this growing sub-genre.
alongside the ‘unrelenting body’ (Grenier 2012: 92) on which models of successful ageing are based. The so-called ‘makeover culture’ which has become a feature of television and media discourses over the last decade is a symptom of the deep-seated cultural paradox which seemingly celebrates age/ing whilst simultaneously requiring its visible signs to be effaced. In a cultural environment in which the body has become the identity, the trajectory for the construction of female age identity remains uncertain. In visual and linguistic representations of ideal female beauty, a beautiful body is a youthful body, so the ageing female body remains the focus of collective ambivalence. It is problematised in the resistance narratives of mass media and advertising communication, and policed by rigid cultural “rules” which govern the performance of ageing femininity, imposing on women a complex series of balances which must be achieved if their ageing bodies are to conform to the conventions of ageing femininity: acknowledgement, disguise, acceptance and resistance. It can still be argued that ageing in the current culture remains a more difficult process for women than for men. Moreover, the pervasiveness of ‘the biomedical model of decline’ (Hepworth 2003: 90 see also above) and its linguistic impact on most domains of everyday life leaves both women - and men - little opportunity or inducement to reconceptualise their own ageing process. Therefore gender and age remain ‘troublesome dichotomies’, structuring each other ideologically and discursively in ways which challenge the role of both.

The next chapter sets out the analytical frameworks that I have drawn on in analysing the different datasets.

References


As I explain in Chapter 1, the wide-ranging, multi-disciplinary nature of this study and the breadth of data involved have required a combination of methodological approaches and analytical tools. Detailed descriptions of the datasets themselves are included in the relevant chapters, but it is timely to reprise the overview I give in Chapter 1: Chapters 4 and 5 address the public discourses of ageing through analysing a range of anti-ageing skincare advertisements (Chapter 4) and articles about different aspects of ageing taken from lifestyle media (Chapter 5). Chapters 6 and 7 focus on the private voices, examining spoken data from a series of qualitative interviews carried out primarily with women, but including some men as a basis for comparison. The purpose of this chapter is to outline the general linguistic and theoretical frameworks I draw on in analysing this data.

**General Linguistic and Theoretical Frameworks**

In developing an approach to analysing my data, I chose to draw on a combination of theoretical and linguistic frameworks: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as an overarching theoretical framework;
Evaluation as a broad area of linguistic enquiry, with Appraisal Theory as a systemised framework for analysing it; and Multimodal Analysis as a framework for analysing visual modes of communication. As I make clear in Chapter 1, these different approaches have informed and supported—rather than driven—the process of data analysis and interpretation.

**Analysing Discourse**

Whilst Fairclough’s (2010) model of CDA has been a significant influence on my approach, this is not, and does not set out to be, a CDA study. However, as I discuss in Chapter 1, the notion of discourse is central to the nature of investigation I undertake in this study: a focus on the relationship between the public discourses that encode cultural attitudes to gender and ageing, and the private voices of people’s lived experiences. The CDA model sees discourse as existing in a complex set of relationships between discursive practice and social reality. Importantly for the purposes of this study, CDA offers a structure for examining discourses in terms of these networks of relations. Fairclough argues that:

> ‘discourse’ might be seen as some sort of entity or object, but is itself a complex set of relations including relations of communication between people who talk, write and in other ways communicate with each other, but also […] describe relations between concrete communicative events (conversations, newspaper articles etc.) […] but there are also relations between discourse and other complex ‘objects’ including objects in the physical world, persons, power relations and institutions. (2010: 3)

This approach enables the analysis to go beyond the text, as Litosseliti observes, ‘to look at the relationship between text, discursive and social practices as mutually dependent and mutually constitutive’ (2013: 49). In the context of this study, the notion of discourse as dialectic has provided a useful rationale for the methodological approach I take to the
data, in that the way the datasets are structured expresses the complex relations ‘between discourse and other complex “objects”’. Analytically, this means the ability to understand how discourses of gender and age structure each other in the enactment of the complex realities of power relations, and their effects on social practice as realised in the construction of individual gender and age identities.

The investigation I undertake here draws on the foundational ideas of CDA to structure the analysis, i.e. that there is a reciprocal relationship between language and ideology; that discourses are inseparable from the social context which produces them; that discourse is a product of the ideologies of the dominant culture, and therefore as Jeffries contends, ‘all discourse is ideologically saturated’ (2007: 8) as well as ideologically situated. Fairclough argues that over time the ideologies encoded in discourses become normalised, unquestioned, viewed as non-ideological representations of “the way things are”. The critical component of the CDA approach lies in the impetus to challenge what Fairclough terms the dominant ‘ideological-discursive formations’ (2010: 30) contained within social institutions. If, as Fairclough argues, ‘opacity is the other side of the coin of naturalisation’ (ibid.: 38), then it is probable that in the course of everyday language practice individuals are typically unaware of the ideologies shaping the stances they construct, or of the wider power structures served by those ideologies. So as I state in Chapter 1, a principal aim of this study is to uncover and ‘denaturalise’ ideological representations of reality through analysing the complex relationship of the ‘micro events’ of private voices to the ‘macro structures’ of public discourses.

**Identifying Evaluation**

Michael Stubbs stated that ‘whenever speakers or writers say anything they encode their point of view towards it’ (1996: 202). The notion of evaluation, which has now generated a considerable body of scholarship, incorporates a variety of linguistic concepts and features such as stance, affect and modality. Hunston and Thompson (1999 [2003]) argue that
evaluation should play a central role in descriptions of spoken and written language, defining it as

…. the broad cover term for the expression of the speaker or writer’s attitude or stance towards, viewpoint on, or feelings about the entities or propositions that he or she is talking about. That attitude may relate to certainty or obligation or desirability or any of a number of other sets of values. (2003: 5)

These perspectives have shaped my analytical approach to the data. I have taken the view that identifying and investigating linguistic features of evaluation, expressed as attitude, stance and feelings, is a means of gaining a deeper, more nuanced understanding of private voices as well as public discourses of ageing.

The importance of evaluation goes beyond its immediate function as the vehicle through which speaker/writer opinion is expressed, and beyond its interest to linguists as a feature of language in use. The view I take in this study is that evaluation is what links discourse to other ‘objects’ (see Fairclough 2010 and above), and individual talk to wider discourses. Hunston and Thompson state that

every act of evaluation expresses a communal value-system, and every act of evaluation goes towards building up that value-system. This value-system in turn is a component of the ideology which lies behind every text. Thus, identifying what the writer thinks reveals the ideology of the society that has produced the text. (2003: 6)

Fairclough suggests that speakers may be, and perhaps typically are, unaware of the ideological positions they are reproducing, whereas in written discourse evaluative stance may be more consciously constructed—albeit covertly expressed. Therefore investigating how evaluation functions in spoken discourse is a means of uncovering and examining the ideologies which underlie everyday language practice. It is now widely recognised in the literature¹ that as Hunston and

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Thompson states, ‘evaluation is a key linguistic concept’ (2003: 8) in the exploration of how ideologies are built up and absorbed over time into ways of talking about and looking at the world.

**Applying Appraisal**

Looking at how the linguistic resources of evaluation are used in the conversational interviews conducted for this study has provided a structure for understanding the impact of cultural attitudes towards ageing at a personal level, particularly as they intersect with attitudes to gender. As my analysis will show, the process of constructing a stance towards ageing is complex, given that ageing is at once an intensely personal and a culturally/institutionally appropriated phenomenon (see Chapter 2). Martin and White’s (2005) system of appraisal is an approach to discourse analysis that focuses on linguistic mechanisms of evaluation, providing a framework for systematically examining these linguistic resources. Whilst the system of appraisal was initially developed as a framework for analysing written texts, Eggins and Slade’s (1997) work demonstrates that it can equally—and productively—be applied to spoken texts. This has proved a useful and relevant approach to the interview data, however as with other the analytic frameworks, I have not applied it rigidly, but have drawn on it as a one of a number of approaches.

Stubbs views ‘all utterances […] as in some way stanced or attitudinal’ (1996: 92), which is also my own starting point. The following brief summary of the appraisal model demonstrates how this approach translates into a system of analysis I have applied to this study. The appraisal system is concerned with speaker/writer subjectivity as it is expressed through the linguistic resources speakers/writers use to construct a personal stance towards a given proposition. This involves language that construes degrees of alignment and distance, encodes approval/disapproval, and enables different—and differently graded—emotions to be communicated. The notion of ‘stance’ as employed by Martin and White and used in this study, follows Conrad and Biber’s (1999) explanation:
the term ‘stance’ [is used] as a cover term for the expression of personal feelings and assessments in three major domains. (1999: 57)

The domains identified by Conrad and Biber map onto Martin and White’s categorisations (see below): epistemic stance (i.e. the un/certainty or reliability of a proposition); attitudinal stance (i.e. speaker feelings and judgements); and style stance (i.e. manner of expression). Martin and White situate their system of appraisal within Halliday’s (1978) model of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (see also Halliday and Matthiesson [2004]) which theorises the notion of semantic choices which connect a text to ‘the context of situation’ (1978: 139), conceptualising each sentence as a microcosm of the organisation of the semantic system which produces it. Halliday states that:

What is revealed in a single sentence, or other unit of lexicogrammatical structure, is its origin in the functional organization of the semantic system. […] A piece of wording – sentence, clause phrase or group – is the product of numerous micro-acts of semantic choice. (1978: 150)

Whilst Halliday’s model, and its (by now well-documented) modes of meaning, or ‘metafunctions’ (1978, 1985, Halliday and Matthiessen 2004: 29 and passim) is necessary background for understanding the detailed structure of the appraisal system, its principles are more directly relevant to Kress and van Leeuwen’s system of visual grammar, which I have drawn on in the analysis of multimodal texts (see below).

Martin and White structure their appraisal model in terms of three interrelated domains of meaning: Attitude, which deals with feelings, emotional reactions and judgements; Engagement, dealing with the construction of stance and attitudes; and Graduation, concerned with degrees of amplification of feelings. Each domain is further divided into more specialised sub-systems: e.g. Attitude is composed of three ‘regions of feeling’ (2005: 35): Affect, which describes resources for the

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2In addition, Biber and Finegan’s (1989) paper ‘Styles of Stance in English: Lexical and Grammatical Marking of Evidentiality and Affect’ provides detailed analysis on adjectival, verbal and modal stance markers.
expression of emotion; *Judgement*, dealing with moral assessments of behaviour (i.e. honesty, decorum); and *Appreciation*, which deals with aesthetic assessments (i.e. beauty). Each sub-system is realised by specific language features and forms the basis of a highly systemised linguistic map for the resources of evaluation. This has enabled me to analyse the interview data systematically, identifying and comparing recurring patterns of language in order to achieve a detailed analytical basis for more nuanced interpretation. In this way it has been possible to distil varied and diverse expressions of evaluation in the data into a range of concrete linguistic categories: a given stretch of discourse within an individual account can be mapped according to semantic domain (i.e. *Attitude*) and further broken down for deeper analysis into sub-system (i.e. *Affect, Judgement, Appreciation*) and the classifications of language features which realise them. The detailed linguistic classifications I have applied to the interview data, based on Martin and White’s sub-systems, have been included in Appendix A (see Tables A.1–A.5) together with an example of the analytical grids created for each interview text (see Table A.6). I have also applied the analysis of *Attitude* to a continuous stretch of discourse, showing how it has allowed me to access both a ‘top-down’ perspective (prosodic realisation) as well as a ‘bottom-up’ perspective (lexical realisation) (Martin and White 2005: 70). Looking at the prosody in a continuous stretch of discourse has proved useful in identifying positive/negative linguistic patterning, so that the cumulative effects of individual lexical realisations can be used in the analytical process. The combination of top-down and bottom-up perspectives allows a more fine-grained level of analysis to be applied to each interview text, allowing patterns of meaning, as well as specific linguistic features, to be compared within and between texts.

**Analysing Multimodal Texts**

As already discussed in Chapter 1, the texts I use to explore the public discourses of ageing are all multimodal texts. Therefore the analytical approach must acknowledge their polysemic nature as Litosseliti (2013: 96) advises, and enable the different communicative modes involved
(i.e. verbal, visual, auditory etc.) to be deconstructed systematically. It is important to understand the different role each communicative element performs in the creation of the message so that the meaning rather than merely the effect of the communication can be analysed with precision. This demands a system for analysing individual semiotic modes in a text that also allows them to be interpreted in the context of the social structures which have generated them. What this means in the context of this study, to paraphrase Jeffries, is the capability to analyse the techniques used by advertisers/media corporations ‘in persuading women and girls to accept certain ideological constructions of their bodies’ (2007: 29), and in doing so, as Fairclough argues, to connect such ‘micro events’ to the ‘macro structures’ (2010: 38) of cultural attitudes to ageing.

I have drawn on van Leeuwen (1996) and Kress and van Leeuwen’s (2006) system of visual grammar in my analysis of these multimodal texts, setting it, as they do, within the theoretical framework of social semiotics (van Leeuwen 2005; Kress and van Leeuwen 2006), and interpreting them within—and as a product of—a specific ‘context of situation’ (Halliday 1978: 139) and the power structures that define it. Kress and van Leeuwen argue that whoever has the power to control and regulate the use of semiotic resources (i.e. advertisers, media corporations) also has the means of controlling prevailing ideology; images can therefore be seen as expressions of ideology:

[... ] we see images of whatever kind as entirely within the realm of the realisations and instantiations of ideology, as a means – always – for the articulation of ideological positions. (2006: 14)

This approach—which they describe as ‘reading between the lines of texts’ (ibid.)—is particularly relevant to my study as it provides a systematic means of analysing the role of different semiotic modes in constructing the ideological positions encoded in texts. It incorporates perspectives from two domains of linguistic development: critical linguistics and Halliday’s systemic-functional model of linguistics (see below). van Leeuwen draws a parallel with developments in linguistics in which the focus has shifted from ‘sentence’ to ‘text’ and from ‘grammar’ to ‘discourse’ (2005: xi); in a similar way social semiotics has
moved from a focus on the ‘sign’\(^3\) to the notion of semiotic ‘resources’. Halliday defines grammar as ‘a means of representing human experience’ (1985: 101) and grammatical rules as a means to this end. Similarly Kress and van Leeuwen argue that the way in which meanings can be expressed across different semiotic modes articulates wider cultural structures of meaning. They conceptualise their system of visual analysis as a ‘grammar of visual design’ (2006: 2), applying Halliday’s theorisation of ‘metafunctions’ to the analysis of visual compositions. Halliday’s model identifies three modes of meaning or ‘metafunctions’ (1978, 1985, 2004) which are simultaneously present in all utterances: the textual, concerned with the flow of the discourse, and creating ‘cohesion and unity’ (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004: 30); and the ideational, which construes human experience in terms of actions and events and who is enacting them. The third metafunction—the interpersonal—is of particular relevance to this study, as it is where social relations are negotiated and where ‘appraisal of and attitude towards whoever we are addressing and what we are talking about’ (ibid.: 29) are located. An example of the application of Kress and van Leeuwen’s system of visual grammar to two multimodal texts analysed in this study has been included in Appendix A (see Table A.7). I have applied the system of visual grammar more directly than I have the other frameworks discussed above. As already noted, it allows precise and systematic analysis of different semiotic resources used in each text (i.e. compositional structure, visual modality, use of colour and typeface, depiction of the social actor) but at the same time allows freedom of interpretation of the cultural and ideological significance lying behind the semiotic choices. In conjunction with the system of visual analysis, I have drawn on Matheson’s (2005) work on transitivity in the textual analysis of magazine articles and advertisements (see Chapters 4 and 5) which has allowed a more delicate analysis of the techniques used by writers and advertisers in positioning—even manoeuvring—the reader with

\(^3\)The sign, as defined by the semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure (1972) is the result of the union between the signifier (i.e. an observable form such as colour) and the signified (i.e. the meaning which is signified, for example ‘tranquility’).
regard to the authorial stance of a text through linguistic strategies such as use of imperative verb forms and inclusive pronouns.

The following four chapters focus on the data analysis, starting with analysis of skincare advertising in Chapter 4 and media discourses in Chapter 5, then moving to the qualitative interview data—the private voices—in Chapters 6 and 7. Chapter 8 presents two case studies featuring older women who break the cultural “rules” in the way they choose to perform as older, visible women.

References


I think it [sc. advertising] gives me hope that I can beat it all I use all of these products and I don’t think they make any difference ((la)) … and I continue to buy them it is like this just bizarre cycle [F11-54]

This extract, taken from an interview with a 54 year-old woman in my study typifies the complex and often contradictory views many of them hold towards the media in general, and anti-ageing skincare advertising in particular. This chapter aims to explore society’s attitudes towards female beauty and how this might relate to ageing, through the lens of beauty and cosmetic advertising. I examine representations of ‘ideal’ (i.e. culturally approved) femininity through a selection of branded skincare advertisements, and consider the impact of anti-ageing messages on the cultural script of beauty. Its companion Chapter 5 considers how older women—and the process of female ageing—are represented and evaluated in lifestyle media discourses. I compare my findings with male-targeted anti-ageing advertising, and one of relatively few articles dealing with male ageing. I relate my analysis to prevailing cultural meta messages regarding gender, ageing and language.
Overview of Data

The public discourses I analyse in this and the following chapter are made up of two datasets: anti-ageing skincare advertisements, and texts taken from lifestyle media. I use these datasets primarily to explore how ageing women are represented in media and advertising communication and what gender and age ideologies they encode, and to a more limited extent to compare the ways in which women are represented versus men. In the course of analysing the spoken data, it became clear that there were a number of themes which recurred consistently in respondents’ talk and appeared to have particular salience across the sample. These were specific (i.e. the menopause) and there were also more general preoccupations, i.e. how ageing women are represented versus young women and how older women are positioned, particularly in skincare advertising. I therefore selected advertising and media texts that in some way addressed these themes. The issues of particular interest to people in my study were also a focus of media interest at the time, so that in examining respondents’ perspectives on a particular issue alongside the media commentary on it I could then start exploring the relationship between public discourses and private voices in a meaningful way.

In creating the datasets I have tried to represent different discourse genres¹ (e.g. advertisements, newspaper journalism, magazine articles), whilst acknowledging that the number of texts is inevitably limited by the scope of the study. Nonetheless, I take the view that there is enough of an analytical ‘critical mass’ to form a basis for more generalisable insights. These are all multimodal texts, i.e. combining different communicative modes (verbal, visual etc.), which therefore require an analytical approach that allows them be deconstructed systematically so that each communicative element and its role in creating the message can be analysed with precision. For this analysis I draw on Kress and van Leeuwen’s (1996) system of visual grammar which is described

¹van Leeuwen (2005) and Jeffries (2007) offer useful perspectives on genre which there is insufficient space to discuss fully here.
more fully in Chapter 3. The first dataset I consider is anti-ageing skincare advertising.

Anti-Ageing Skincare

The Ambivalent Consumer

As I discuss in Chapter 2, the media-as-mirror confronts women of all ages with a series of ideal representations of femininity which become more difficult for women to navigate through the process of ageing. This is borne out by many of the women in this study, whose reactions to advertising and behaviour as consumers is often conflicted and contradictory. Although such contradictions are visible in the language they use, this is often unacknowledged by the speakers, as exemplified by this 45 year-old woman who describes her reactions to a skincare advertisement from the Garnier brand:

… they’re talking about the science they’re trying to blast blast people with research I would maybe look at seeing you know if they’d done a test well they’ve only done 72% of 150 women I’m sorry that’s not impressive for me if they said they’d done a million women… then I would probably go out and buy it…[F8-45]

Her unhedged dismissal (‘that’s not impressive for me’) of what she sees as flimsy claims encodes discernment and agency, emphasising the positioning she has clearly constructed for herself as a canny consumer who sees through such pseudo-scientific product claims. However this stance is belied immediately after this comment, as she narrates her history as a consumer:

L’Oréal yeah I’ve definitely used L’Oréal I’ve definitely used Garnier…I used it when I was a teenager until I think I went on to Clinique and then on to Clarins and I think maybe now I’m at a certain age…I should there maybe is another cream that I should go on to now…[F8-45]
The linguistic sequencing (‘I went on to…and then on to…I should go on to now…’) describes a continuous and dedicated experience of skincare consumption starting in her teenage years, in which different brands mark and accompany her transition from one lifestage to the next, reflecting the personal relationship many women in the study feel they have with brands. It is clear that she regards her consumption journey as far from over as she approaches ‘a certain age’ (‘maybe there is another cream I should go on to now…’). Her use of ‘should’ (which I explore in Chapter 7) is an unconscious acknowledgement of her fundamental ambivalence as a consumer—common to many women in the study—in which resentment of the pressure of advertising and desire to conform to its messages, are equally powerful forces. Only the 54 year-old woman whose words begin this chapter openly acknowledges the irrationality of her behaviour as a consumer. She is a marketing professional and provides a unique dual perspective: as a marketer she employs an analytical lens on the workings of advertising; as a consumer she is able to draw on an awareness of her own emotional relationship with the advertising message:

... I look at it [sc. advertising] and I go this stuff works it works on smart people like you and me y’know this very simple formula of promise of hope of scientific study beautiful women and it sells a lot of shit....

[F11–54]

The language of emotional engagement (‘I love it... it gives me hope... it is just like this bizarre cycle...’) sits discursively alongside the language of business analysis (‘this very simple formula’.... ‘it sells a lot of shit’), echoing Williamson’s description of one of the functions of advertising as providing the consumer with ‘formulae for emotions’ (1978: 30). She is unusual both in her detachment and ability to deconstruct the messages of which she is also the target. The data suggests that for the men and the women in my study the influence of advertising is complex; they are simultaneously evaluating advertising messages, working to construct a stance with regard to these external pressures, and navigating a complicated and ambivalent set of attitudes as consumers. Bethan Benwell and Elizabeth Stokoe comment on similar findings
within their own empirical research carried out with consumers, which leads them to ‘re-evaluate the consumer as a contradictory and ambiguous entity’ (2006: 202).

In her classic analysis of how advertising works, Williamson argues that advertising has a significance beyond the obvious function of selling products, possessing ‘…another function which replaces that traditionally fulfilled by art or religion. It creates structures of meaning’ (1978: 12). This she argues, is brought about by the connection advertising creates between objects and people, in which values are assigned to objects and translated through the process of advertising into ‘a set of values which have meaning for people’ (ibid.), engendering consumption patterns through which people ‘classify, order and understand the world’ (ibid.). Machin and van Leeuwen (2007) contend that this symbolic exchange between consumer and product is the basis of the lifestyle identities through which consumers construct self-identity.2 The 45 year-old woman’s account of her own consumption patterns (see above) shows how she connects choice of skincare brand and lifestage as she attempts to deal with her own ageing process. A 23 year-old woman connects even more explicitly her consumer behaviour and her need to ‘order and understand the world’:

I dunno you are more aware of sort of certain things as you get older and like I know I’m only 23 but you do I’ve noticed the areas that sort of get a bit wrinkly now you just think ooh…when should I start looking after my skin and like it’s interesting that I even think when should I start like it’s a definite decision that I will go into the whole anti-wrinkle cream thing…[F2-23]

Her choice of language shows she is consciously navigating the complex process of constructing her feminine identity, already framed by her within the context of her ageing appearance (‘I’ve noticed the areas that

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2The notion of consumer driven lifestyles as the basis of identity construction in post-modern society is extensively explored in David Chaney’s (1996) work Lifestyles.
sort of get a bit wrinkly now’), balancing this with an acknowledgement of external expectations, contained within her use of ‘should’, which will define the consumption decisions of the next stage in her lifecourse (framed as ‘the whole anti-wrinkle cream thing’). For her, skincare products are the transition markers to a different lifestage, acknowledged in the language (‘it’s a **definite decision** that I will go into the whole anti-wrinkle cream thing’). Mary Talbot positions such experiences as a consequence of the rise of ‘consumer femininity’ (2010: 138, see also Chapter 2), which powerfully shapes women’s lives early on in the form of the ‘material and visual resources they draw upon to feminize themselves’ (ibid.). She contends that whilst consumer femininity may be a media construct, women are willing collaborators; one consequence of this is the nature of the relationship women establish with their own bodies:

> in participating in consumer femininity, a woman constructs herself as an object requiring work, establishing a practical relation with herself as a thing. (2010: 167)

This finds an echo in this young female particiant’s use of detached and depersonalised words such as ‘areas’ to describe her skin.

One of Jean Baudrillard’s central tenets is that as consumers, people are driven by the ‘quest for differentiation’ (1970: 61), however my interview data suggests that the respondents in my study are driven by the desire to belong to consumption communities even as they struggle against their pressures. The relationship between their evaluations of skincare advertisements and their behaviour as consumers raises the question of agency: the extent to which as consumers, they are co-constructors of the process of advertising. Williamson argues that creation of meaning in advertising depends on the active collaboration of the reader/viewer, through a process she terms ‘appellation’ (1978: 44), in which readers/viewers are directly addressed by the advertisement and constituted as ‘active receivers’ of its message (ibid.: 41). By accepting the subject positioning it offers, the reader completes what Williamson describes as ‘the circuit of meaning’ (ibid.: 40). There is a fundamental paradox inherent in this process, however, produced by
a phenomenon she terms the ‘alreadyness’ (ibid.: 44) of advertising. The reader is addressed by the advertisement as if s/he were already its subject, summoned the assumed intimacy of this ‘alreadyness of facts’ (ibid.). The implication of Williamson’s argument, therefore, is that the active subjecthood and freedom of choice claimed by most participants in this study is an illusion, that in fact consumers are ‘freely invited to create ourselves in accordance with the way in which they have already created us’ (ibid.: 42). Similarly Talbot comments that ‘concepts, preoccupations and anxieties are presented as though they already exist in the readers’ daily lives’ (2010: 153).

Chapter 7 discusses the importance of appearance in women’s identity construction, and the influence of the external gaze on the private evaluations of their “mirror moments”. The assumed judgements of ‘the gaze of the Other’ have even greater resonance as ageing progresses, materially affecting how women view their bodies. Diane Barthel, writing about women’s fear of age, comments that ‘much of the self-hatred engendered by advertisements is directed toward signs of ageing’ (1988: 141). Nowhere has this become more evident than in skincare advertising where as Coupland argues, ‘these texts become the locus of new discourses about ageing, culture, physiognomy, control and identity’ (2007: 39). Participants expressed extremely strong views on skincare advertisements generally, and anti-ageing advertising in particular, which revealed deep tensions between an inherent cynicism regarding stereotypical representations of women, and a desire at some level to conform to such stereotypes (see Chapter 2 and below). In selecting the advertising texts for this dataset it was important to reflect brands that seemed to have significance for participants whilst broadly representing the brands and discourses that define and dominate this market. I was also mindful of the need to generate a representative sample, so applied van Leeuwen’s principle of ‘inventorizing’ (2005: 6) i.e. building up a collection of texts in order to be able to identify ‘the set of semiotic choices that typify a given context’ and create a ‘semiotic register’ (ibid.: 14). However, the limited scope of this study means that whilst this data serves the purpose of allowing qualitative comparisons of different communicative approaches to anti-ageing, it does not claim to be a quantitatively valid dataset.
Market Overview

The global personal care market is vast, currently valued at $300 billion, and steady growth is forecast. Skincare remains the dominant category in personal care in terms of size and predicted growth ($16.3 billion by 2016). Within this category anti-ageing skincare is growing in importance, which is likely to drive innovation that focuses more on product benefits (e.g. stem cell innovations, use of the sub-dermis fat layer in skin rejuvenation), and technology in the form of anti-ageing devices. However, consumer trend analysis within the anti-ageing sector indicates that the market may be out of step with consumer need; Imogen Matthews’s report ‘Older Women: The Forgotten Demographic’ (2012) suggests that whilst women aged 45+ spent £2 billion on cosmetics and toiletries in 2011, there is widespread scepticism amongst this age cohort regarding anti-ageing product claims as well as lack of engagement with the younger models featured in skincare advertising. Matthews adds that ‘skincare brands should focus on providing skin comfort and moisturising and drop anti-ageing claims. They should use less aggressive language such as pro-ageing or healthy ageing’. Other commentary endorses these findings: Marc Beasley, author of the report ‘Marketing and Mature Audiences’ (2012) states that ‘older women, it seems, are less concerned with looking younger, as seems to be assumed by the cosmetics industry, and more concerned with looking healthy and feeling comfortable’.

Brand Overview

The selected advertisements represent the dynamics of the skincare market in terms of brands, consumer trends, segmentation, price points, and distribution channels, and the advertising campaigns themselves,

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3 Source: Euromonitor International.
4 This trend is borne out in the 2004 study commissioned by the Dove brand, into women's attitudes to beauty and wellbeing; 'The Real Truth About Beauty: A Global Report'.
5 Source: In-Cosmetics Marketing Trends Online Presentation, April 2013.
as well as having relevance for participants as I outline above, reflect recurring themes within the market: the gendered nature of anti-ageing advertising; the problematisation of “early” ageing; discourses of science’ and emerging counter-discourses (see below). Whilst the majority of advertisements are aimed at female consumers, I include a limited selection of male-targeted advertisements to provide a point of comparison, and to incorporate perspectives from the rapidly growing male skincare market. The female-targeted advertising texts are from the campaigns of L’Oréal Paris, Lancôme, Estée Lauder, Clarins and Boots; the male-targeted advertisements from the L’Oréal Paris and Sisley brands.

L’Oréal Paris and Lancôme, although both owned by the same parent company, occupy different market positionings: L’Oréal Paris is a mass-market high street brand, whilst Lancôme occupies a premium positioning and is only available through department stores. Both brands segment their product offers to appeal to a relatively wide consumer age span (20 to 50+). Estée Lauder, also operating in the premium sector, has historically targeted older (30+) consumers. The Clarins brand’s high-end market positioning is based on a specific consumer proposition involving natural plant-based ingredients; the anti-ageing advertisement chosen for analysis specifically targets younger (20+) consumers. By way of contrast, the Boots No. 7 brand has been included because it represents a different communicative approach to ageing and, in that it is a retail rather than a corporate brand, offers a different branding model. The advertising campaigns ran at different points between 2010 and 2014, and were featured in a wide range of weekly and monthly lifestyle magazines in national distribution. The magazines ranged demographically from mid-range monthlies such as Good Housekeeping and to more premium-targeted titles such as Cosmopolitan and GQ.

### Analysis of Skincare Advertisements

The analysis that follows considers these broad questions: what constructions of femininity and masculinity are communicated by these texts to the reader/viewer; what evaluations of ageing they encode; and what subject positions/identities they offer to the consumer.
Ageing as Gendered: L’Oréal

This comparative analysis examines how two advertisements created within a consistent visual brand architecture and featuring broadly similar products, use semiotic resources to create different, fundamentally gendered communication strategies for their target consumer groups. Both advertisements incorporate two visual/compositional elements that typify L’Oréal’s advertising house style: a strong and consistently applied corporate branding structure, and celebrity endorsement. The female-targeted advertisement uses the supermodel Linda Evangelista to endorse its ‘Collagen micro-pulse eye correction system’ whilst ‘Hydra energetic ice cool eye roll-on’ features the actor Matthew Fox and is aimed at a male audience.

Composition: Real/Ideal Versus Given/New

Machin (2010) describes how the positioning of different elements in a composition determines the relationship between them, creating an infrastructure of meaning for the text as a whole. Analysis of both L’Oréal texts shows that the strong compositional structure provided by the brand architecture is also an ideological construction. The L’Oréal brand name is given a very strong overall presence, appearing in three locations: at the top of each text, running across the full width of the space; in the bottom right hand corner as a smaller brand logo and on each prominently featured product shot. The visual dominance of the brand within the mix of other elements is undoubtedly the result of strategic marketing decisions taken by the brand owners; the immediate impact for the reader is that the communication of the advertising message takes place within territory delineated and clearly owned by the brand. The brand sign-off, ‘You’re worth It’, used consistently across all L’Oréal’s brand communication, is placed at the bottom of each text but given greater prominence in terms of size and position in ‘L’Oréal Matthew’, with an added strapline that reads ‘The Future of your skin
is in your hands. You're worth it’. This addition, and the way it is foregrounded in the composition is ideologically significant in that the phrase ‘in your hands’ ascribes agentive power to its male consumers in a way that is absent from the ‘L’Oréal Linda’ text. Susan Douglas analyses the changing relationship between advertising as a reflection of cultural values and the notion of female narcissism, arguing that ‘the cult of narcissism’ (2000: 270) reached a zenith in the 1980s and was encapsulated by the ‘You’re worth it’ message. She writes:

Here we were again, same as it ever was, bombarded by the message that approval from others, especially men, means everything and without it you are nothing, and outcast, unworthy and unloved. We were right back to Tinkerbell and Cinderella, urged to be narcissistic yet ridiculed if it was discovered that we were. (2000: 270)

It is the voice of the brand which invites male consumers to take the future of their skincare into their own hands, linking active agency to self-worth and elevating ‘You’re worth it’ beyond the passive narcissism associated with female consumption as described by Douglas, to the status of reward for (male) responsibility and endeavour.

In Kress and van Leeuwen’s (1996) system, compositions fall into two basic structures, which are accorded metaphorical values: one divides the space along a vertical axis, creating a left/right zone. The other divides elements on a top/bottom axis. ‘L’Oréal Matthew’ is a one-page advertisement which uses the top/bottom structure: the top two thirds of the space is occupied by the actor’s face and the bottom third is given over to product information. The text reads:

“Last night? Never happened.”
New Hydra Energetic Ice Cool Eye Roll-On
Reduces the appearance of bags and dark circles
Refreshes tired-looking eyes
Enriched with Vitamin C
The top part of a composition is designated the ‘ideal’ zone, where aspiration, fantasy and the ideal are located. The bottom space is the ‘real’ zone in which what is factual, concrete and real is situated. Machin comments that

as with the given, in given/new compositions, it is in the ideal in top/bottom compositions that the underlying values of society are affirmed. So these are what we aspire to, what we want to be, or at least that which someone wishes to define as our aspirations. (2010: 146)

Placing the social actor’s face in the ideal zone sends a message out to the reader that this is the culturally endorsed aesthetic standard to which they should aspire. However the fact that Fox’s face shows expression lines, skin texture and fine wrinkles encodes a highly significant message regarding wider attitudes to male ageing and what constitutes an ‘ideal’ standard; visible signs of ageing are not problematic but acceptable—even desirable. In striking contrast with the message contained within the ‘L’Oréal Linda’ advertisement, this is a construction of ageing based on acceptance, even celebration which draws on embedded cultural attitudes that associate status, power and gravitas with older men. There is no overt textual reference to ageing, the product communication draws instead on the discourse of energy/sport nutrition rather than anti-ageing (e.g. ‘ice cool’, ‘hydratergetic, ‘refreshes’). In this way the anti-ageing message is presented through inference, the signs of ageing framed as temporary effects of lifestyle choices like not getting enough sleep, which result in the euphemistically described ‘tired-looking eyes’.

‘L’Oréal Linda’ is a two-page advertisement using the left/right compositional structure. The headline text reads:

New Collagen Micro-Pulse Eye
Total Eye Correction Cream
☑ Dark circles ☑ Wrinkles ☑ Puffiness

In identifying meanings for this structure, Kress and van Leeuwen draw on metaphorical associations such as the left to right sequence of reading and information flow common to Western societies.
Machin (2010) also comments on the way language builds on information, creating a natural movement beginning with what is known and progressing to what is unknown. Therefore the left/right structure is designated as ‘given/new’: the left hand space equates to the ‘given’ zone, where things which are known and accepted as part of ‘what goes without saying’ are located, and the right hand space is the ‘new’ zone where previously unknown information—and by extension new possibilities and solutions—are presented. Placing Evangelista’s face on the left hand side of the composition in the given zone is ideologically meaningful in that by doing so external standards regarding female appearance and attitudes to ageing are encoded and affirmed. In this way the advertisers seek to normalise the construction of femininity represented by Evangelista (artificially glamorous, unwrinkled, passive), so that it is received as a given, passing unquestioned into the collective consciousness. By extension, the message encoded about ageing is that its visible signs should also be airbrushed away. The covert power of the ‘alreadyness’ (Williamson 1978: 44) of these compositional choices means that the reader is recruited into an act of unconscious collaboration with the ideologies hidden there, positioned by assumption into sharing, even aspiring to, these standards and expectations. The product message, located on the right hand side of the space in the ‘new’ zone indicates that the information contained there has not been encountered before. Other visual elements combine to reinforce the sense of a new and exciting disclosure: the prominent ‘new’ flash; the dark, highly saturated background colour which as Machin (2010) suggests, has the effect of dialling up emotional intensity; the graphic device of white pulse waves radiating out from the product expresses in visual terms the ‘micro-pulse’ action of the product, but at a deeper level connotes the power of science in solving the effects of the ageing appearance (see below), problematised in the text as ‘dark circles, wrinkles, puffiness’.

**Celebrity Endorsement: ‘Alreadyness’ and Assumption**

Celebrity endorsement is a common convention in skincare advertising and is used by the L’Oréal brand across all its media activity.
As a communicative device it operates on a number of levels; in these two texts, the celebrity and the product are not inherently linked except by visual juxtaposition, but the effect is to create an assumption that they are connected. The link is supplied by the values the reader already associates with a particular celebrity (e.g. Evangelista’s youthful beauty and glamour, Fox’s sex appeal) and the meaning the product is trying to connote (e.g. the appearance of youthful beauty, maintaining sex appeal). The values and meaning attached to both Evangelista and Fox are appropriated by the brand and transferred to the product; this process of transference makes use of a relationship which already exists in the mind of readers between the celebrities as signifiers and what they signify (youth, glamour, sex appeal). In this way an eye product can be made to signify youthfulness or sexiness, thereby completing the circuit of meaning described by Williamson (1978). She contends that for the consumer the process of linking an image and a product is an act of unconscious collaboration with ideologies that are presented as established truths. This phenomenon, which Barthes describes as ‘the decorative display of what-goes-without-saying’ (1957: xix) is deliberately exploited by the subtle structural, compositional and visual devices used in these texts. Bound up in the choice of models, or ‘social actors’ in Kress and van Leeuwen’s terminology, are more deeply embedded messages concerning culturally endorsed constructions of femininity and masculinity which are reflected back to readers not only through compositional structure, but via other visual and textual devices.

Social Actors: Intimacy and Distance

Both texts use near-life size headshots of the social actors which establishes a physical proximity with the viewer, although this serves a different communicative purpose in each text. Evangelista looks upwards and into the distance, not meeting the viewer’s gaze. In Kress and van Leeuwen’s system this is an ‘offer’ image, i.e. in which no response is expected or required from viewers and consequently no intimacy or
emotional engagement is created. The lack of direct gaze connotes a lack of direct address by the social actor. She becomes the surveyed female as Berger (1972) suggests, an object presented to an external gaze which in this context is more likely to be female than male. Berger writes that

women are depicted in a quite different way from men—not because the feminine is different from the masculine—but because the ‘ideal’ spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him. (1972: 58)

It may be that the depiction of the social actor in ‘L’Oréal Linda’ represents a deliberate manipulation of the gendered gaze in which, as Paul Messaris argues, the lens is treated ‘as a substitute for the eye of an imaginary male onlooker’ (1997: 41), forcing women to ‘look at themselves as a man might see them’ (ibid.). Although Berger argues that ‘the ideal spectator is always assumed to be male’, evidence from the accounts of some women in this study suggests that the nature of the female gaze has become more complex. Whilst women may look at advertisements such as these and ‘see themselves as a man might see them’, they are also assessing the advertisements—and themselves—from the imagined viewpoint of other women. In this way the female viewer is positioned by the advertisement’s semiotic resources as part of a cycle of reflexivity that invites her both to contemplate the ideal of femininity presented to her by the advertiser and also, implicitly, to assess her own femininity against the inferred culturally approved standard. In ‘L’Oréal Linda’ this is a highly stylised, artificial, passive representation in which expression—apart from a faint half smile suggested by the model’s parted lips—and personality have been airbrushed away. What remains are the aesthetic attributes of an ideal of feminine beauty which, through the presentation of the model’s smooth and wrinkle free face, is made synonymous with youthfulness.

By contrast, in ‘L’Oréal Matthew’, the social actor meets the gaze of the viewer directly and fully. The composition of the text and the way the headshot is cropped mean that the focal point is the eyes, which seem to be on a level with those of the viewer so that their gaze is
inescapable. In Kress and van Leeuwen’s terminology this is a ‘demand’ image, in which a response is elicited—demanded—from the reader. The expression in the eyes is both knowing and intimate, humorous with an unmistakeably sexual undertone; the degree of engagement demanded by the gaze is so powerful that the viewer is both hailed and held by a connection which is compelling in its intensity. The sense of being directly addressed is reinforced by the text, which breaks into the image of the face: “Last night? Never happened.” The use of an apparently direct quotation, positioned prominently above Fox’s name, creates the assumption of his ownership of the message and the layers of meaning contained within it. As with other advertisements aimed at a primarily male audience, advertisers are aware of a secondary female audience of wives/girlfriends/sisters which influences the decision making process surrounding male grooming products in a variety of ways: as gate-keepers, endorsers, permission-givers and often purchasers. To a hypothetical female viewer, there is a suggestion of sexual conquest implicit in the combination of text and image which establishes an asymmetry of power relations, positioning her as the one exploited and ultimately denied (‘Never happened’.) For its core male target, the same combination of visual and textual elements assumes male complicity by ensuring that the message to be decoded is “have a good time and get away with it”. This is a complex piece of subject positioning which validates the values and stances of traditional heterosexual masculinity through implicitly objectifying women, whilst normalising the use of a product which has historically been located in an exclusively female domain, what Coupland terms ‘the strategies used to provide ‘securely’ masculine imagery in a traditionally feminine marketplace’ (2007: 49).

Modality: Reality as an Ideological Statement

Halliday and Mathiessen describe the function of modality as being ‘to construe the region of uncertainty that lies between ‘yes’ and ‘no’ (2004: 147). Kress and van Leeuwen transpose the concept of modality from the linguistic model to their system of visual grammar, arguing
that degrees of certainty and reality can also be expressed visually. In his analysis of Kress and van Leeuwen’s system, Machin comments that

modality is ‘interpersonal’. It is not about expressing absolute truths but about aligning listeners with some truths and distancing them from others. (2010: 48)

Therefore in the context of visual analysis, modality equates to ‘how real a representation should be taken to be’ (Machin 2010: 46). The importance of modality as a tool for understanding images lies in the ideologies that are revealed by the manipulation of reality. As Machin argues,

asking what is hidden, changed, lessened in importance, or what is enhanced, given increased salience, can tell us about the view of the world that is being created for us. (ibid.)

In Kress and van Leeuwen’s system high modality correlates with a high degree of articulation of detail and is therefore intended to reflect what could be observed in real life; by contrast low modality means a low articulation of detail which is less likely to appear naturalistic and to reflect reality.

‘L’Oréal Linda’ shows different levels of articulation of detail within the central image; different elements of the face are subject to varying manipulations of reality. The skin of the face has clearly been heavily airbrushed and retouched because no details of skin texture or even facial contours are visible; it is a highly idealised, artificial image, classified in Kress and van Leeuwen’s terminology as low modality. A high degree of modality is used on the eyes, however, so that details of eyelashes, eyebrows, even the irises themselves are highly articulated almost to the level of hyper-reality; even tiny blood vessels in the whites of the eyes have been airbrushed out, whilst the surrounding skin is impossibly smooth and free from any wrinkles or discolouration. The use of different degrees of modality within the same image is a deliberate visual strategy on the part of the advertiser both to create and attempt to reconcile, contradictions inherent in the advertising message: the high degree of articulation of the eyes themselves, signifying that this
is a truthful reflection of reality is intended to suggest the efficacy of the product, whilst the low degree of detail in the skin around the eyes is intended to convey the power of the product promise of younger-looking and rejuvenated eyes. The low modality of the face as a whole encodes an ideological message about the ageing female appearance that does not include the visible signs of ageing. The ‘L’Oréal Matthew’ advertisement also gives greatest salience to the eyes of the model; as already discussed, this is a relatively naturalistic image in which the details of eyes, eyebrow hairs, depth and colour of the irises are highly articulated. In contrast to ‘L’Oréal Linda’, however, the skin texture underneath Fox’s eyes remains visible showing individual pores and fine lines, and there are discernible lines on the skin of the forehead. Here the high degree of modality encodes a very different attitude towards the ageing male appearance, based on realism not idealisation, on achievable not impossible aspiration, in which lines and wrinkles are not shameful but are considered acceptable—even sexy. The comparative analysis of these two texts demonstrates the extent to which visual and lexical elements combine to support traditional constructions of femininity and heterosexual masculinity, perpetuating fundamentally gendered cultural attitudes to ageing.

**Ageing Begins Early: Clarins**

This advertisement features a model in her late teens or early twenties, and is clearly intended to target a young female audience with its product: ‘Multi-Active Day Early wrinkle correction cream.’ Visual and textual semiotic resources are used to ‘appeal’ the viewer (Williamson 1978: 44) through a carefully constructed assumption of intimacy.

**The Assumption of Familiarity**

A visual framing device divides the composition along a vertical axis, with the text located on the left-hand side of the space in the given zone. This is already an assumptive strategy in that by doing so it presents the information as already known and familiar to the viewer.
Syntactically, the text works to support this assumption of familiarity through a number of linguistic devices. The text reads:

Early wrinkles? No thank you!

In the opening question/answer sequence the authorial voices are made deliberately ambiguous. ‘Early wrinkles?’ could be interpreted either as a question asked directly of the viewer by an unspecified external/authorial voice (i.e. ‘do you have early wrinkles?’) or could issue from the model herself, or could equally be a question the viewer might ask of herself as she looks in the mirror (i.e. ‘do I have early wrinkles?’). According to Coupland, such ambiguity is a deliberate tactic on the part of advertisers ‘in that irrespective of the authorial voice affected, they adopt an uncompromisingly negative stance towards ageing’ (2003: 130). The response to the question—‘No thank you!’—is also assumptive, whether its provenance is the viewer or the social actor, and this act of ‘alreadyness’ creates a subject position which suggests to women in their (early) twenties that they should start worrying about the signs of ageing. The reactions of some of the younger female participants in the study suggest how ready they are to accept this subject position:

this one [sc. Clarins] appeals to me ‘cos it says early wrinkles no thank you [F2-23]

These shifting authorial voices continue through the body of the text, and appear to be a deliberate discursive strategy to create ambivalence as to who is speaking. The text begins with ‘the voice of a friend’ (Talbot 2010: 150) via the use of the direct address of ‘your’ (‘Multi-Active Day is your stay-young strategy’), employing what Talbot terms ‘synthetic personalisation’ (1995: 147)—a faux familiarity based on the assumption of ideological common ground (i.e. anxiety about the signs of ageing even in your 20s). It then shifts to one of detached expertise, in order to deliver a ‘solution’ expressed as ‘quasi-scientific discourse (Coupland 2003: 131) (‘this unique formula enhances skin’s natural resistance…’). This is what Barthel terms ‘the voice of science’
(1988: 45), arguing that it is associated with the voice of male authority (see below). The final voice is a corporate one, establishing ultimate ownership of the message in the form of a generic brand endorsement (‘Clarins. No. 1 in European luxury skincare’).

By examining the structure of the advertising message the underlying ideological assumptions can be uncovered—what Fairclough terms the process of ‘denaturalising’ (2010: 38, see also Chapter 1). This starts with the articulation of the desired state in which the importance of a beautiful body is assumed: ‘The future looks beautiful’. This is broken down into its components: ‘stay-young’ (i.e. the aesthetic standard required to enter the desired state) and ‘age-defying’ (i.e. the course of action necessary to get there). The juxtaposition of ‘stay-young’ and ‘age-defying’ establishes this as a problem-solution text (see Coupland 2003, 2007). The visible signs of ageing (‘early lines and wrinkles’) are problematised by the negatively evaluative nature of the language: ‘defying’ draws on associations with embattled resistance, and ‘correction’ connotes error and deviance from the norm. By contrast, the opposite state is described in positively evaluated terms (‘smooth’, moisture-perfected’) which implicitly suggest values associated with youthfulness. Other physical threats to the skin (‘fatigue, pollution, and UV stress’) are conflated with the process of ageing, so that the product appears as the solution to all the skin’s problems. The solution is presented as both aesthetic and efficacious, by drawing on several conflicting discourses: pseudo-science (‘this unique formula’), nature (‘age-defying plant extracts’), and beauty (‘help skin stay smooth’).

**Social Actor as Idealised Representation**

The focal point of the advertisement is the model’s face, shown at almost life size, with her neck and part of her upper chest also visible. Although the advertisement is divided vertically by a framing device, the headshot has been placed in the upper half of the space, creating a horizontal division, so that the model’s face is located in the ‘ideal’ zone as defined in Kress and van Leeuwen’s system, where culturally endorsed aesthetic standards and expectations are located. The message
transmitted to the reader is that this is the ideal of youthful female beauty and resisting the process of ageing already plays a prominent part in achieving it. The juxtaposition of the text ‘Early wrinkles? No thank you!’ with the model's (impossibly smooth) face implies her ownership of the words, further reinforcing her status as the embodiment of the brand’s—and by extension society’s—‘stay-young strategy’. She has chosen to resist early wrinkles, and implicitly invites the viewer to do the same. Her eyes and lips are given greatest salience, highly articulated in comparison with the low modality of the rest of her face which is indistinct almost to the point of abstraction, seeming by contrast to melt into the background (see below). Her eyes appear to be almost level with those of the viewer, so that the connection made by the directness of her gaze is immediate. Her expression is open and direct with a suggestion of vulnerability, reinforced by the tilted angle of the head, which appears to lean casually against a surface just out of sight. The impression is of a door she has just opened, out of which she gazes at the viewer with an air of tentative invitation. The subdued pinkness of the lips, their natural contour lines revealed by careful highlighting, further adds to the visual impression of naturalness and lack of adornment.

**Modality: Different Degrees of Reality**

Different levels of modality are used to manipulate degrees of reality in order to generate an emotional context within which evaluations of youthfulness—and by inference ageing—can be conveyed. Low modality is used in the depiction of the skin and background, creating a slightly blurred, fuzzy and indistinct effect into which details of facial features, bone structure and clothing are subsumed. The impression created is dreamlike, the soft mistiness of the visual effect adding a sense of nostalgia—perhaps summoning in the mind of the viewer the softly unfocused sepia photographs associated with long ago events. By contrast, the eyes have been given a high degree of articulation; individual eyelashes, the hairs of the eyebrows, even the reflections in the irises are visible. The intention may be to convey the truthfulness of the image as a representation of reality, but this is contradicted by the
skin immediately above and below the eyes which has clearly been airbrushed, and that all natural texture and contours have been smoothed away from the face as a whole. This could be a conscious strategy on the part of the advertisers: the dominance of the eyes and their relative naturalism may be an attempt to lend credibility and an impression of verisimilitude to the advertisement as a whole. The colour palette also works to reinforce the mood of dreamy, other-worldliness; the wash of light, pale, neutral tones has associations of tranquillity and purity, and the lack of saturation suggests peacefulness rather than emotional intensity. Through the combination of modality and colour, the visual becomes a manifestation of the ideological; the unreality that characterises the visual style of the advertisement becomes a technique of idealisation. The model’s face is invested with a luminous, ethereal quality, in which the purity and soft-focus smoothness of the skin is almost abstracted into the background, seeming to essentialise the state of youthfulness. The ‘gaze of youth’ (Furman 1997: 5) in the model’s eyes, turned upon the reader, conveys a sense of timelessness but also transience—the implication is that its smooth perfection, already vulnerable to the effects of time and ageing, must be determinedly protected from them now. The beautiful future promised by the advertising text is built on the cult of youth; here the signs of ageing have no place, as the final exhortation states; ‘Wrinkles can wait’.

The Voice of Authority: Discourses of Science—Estée Lauder and Lancôme

Barthel (1988) and Coupland (2003, 2007) contend that a common strategy amongst advertisers in this market is to make use of the discourses of science to pathologise ageing by suggesting that the “problem” of the ageing (female) appearance can only be solved by complex-sounding scientised solutions, presented as unarguable and authoritative by ‘the voice of science’ which, as Barthel argues, is often associated with ‘the male voice insofar as it speaks the voice of reason and logic, of proven fact’ (1988: 45). I analyse two advertising texts: Estée Lauder ‘Advanced Night Repair’ and Lancôme ‘Renergie
Yeux Multiple Lift’ both of which employ the ‘voice of science’ in the
discursive construction of their messages. I show how these ‘quasi-
scientific discourses’ (Coupland 2007: 45) offer a construction of fem-
ininity based on fear/denial of ageing, and a fundamentally gendered
positioning of the female body as ‘an object requiring work’ (Talbot

Product as Social Actor

The Estée Lauder and Lancôme advertisements both use a product shot
in the place of the social actor, investing it with the status and focus
usually given to the human model. Both texts require the product to
fulfil some of the communicative functions of a social actor in terms
of complexity of message: in the absence of a social actor, the product
must also communicate beauty-by-inference. There are commonali-
ties in the way both brands treat the product-as-social actor, merging
the visual languages of science and beauty. The products are displayed
against dark, richly coloured backgrounds that connote emotional
intensity, and in the case of the Estée Lauder advertisement, specifi-
cally signify the nocturnal hours when the product is supposed to do
its work. Dark backgrounds also visually reinforce the opulence of the
creams themselves, which are depicted with an almost hyper-real level of
articulation; the contours of each creamy peak are defined and empha-
sised with glossy highlighting more reminiscent of food photography
than cosmetics. The sensual appeal is powerful and complex—these
products are made to appear literally good enough to eat. The Estée
Lauder advertisement, reflecting its brand positioning (see above), is
particularly overt in its juxtaposition of the semiotics of science and
beauty. A single droplet of creamy liquid is shown suspended from the
end of the product dispenser whose syringe–like form draws on asso-
ciations with the laboratory. A graphic helix shape visible against the
blue background is intended to cue associations with science, whilst
the golden creaminess of the liquid, echoing the gold of the cap and
text, signifies preciousness and rarity, as well as its efficacy in the ritual
of beauty. A sunburst depicted behind the product signifies the start of
a new day and also rejuvenation, after the product has completed its nocturnal work of ‘repair’.

Lancôme also use colour as a powerful element in their communicative strategy. The silver/blue product packaging connotes futuristic science and technology, drawing deliberately on the clinical minimalism associated with laboratory/pharmaceutical packaging, reinforced by text which places the advertisement within the discursive domain of cosmetic surgery (‘if you are not considering a permanent lift’). The highly articulated, clinical coolness of the silver packaging forms a strong visual contrast with the abstract background against which it rests in which flesh tones, possibly connoting skin, graduate into a rich, dark purple. The subtle play of darker tones conveys texture, like soft undulations of silk, which resolve into the discernible shape of a rose located immediately behind the product. The rose is an element of the brand’s visual equity, intended to symbolise femininity. The effect of these visual devices softens and feminises the more clinical signals given by the packaging by juxtaposing the two domains of ‘science’ and ‘beauty’, whilst the contrasting use of modality and colour establishes an implicit hierarchy between them: the product-as-social actor, sharply defined and foregrounded against a much less defined background conveys the pre-eminence of ‘the voice of science’, a message reinforced by the textual dimension of the communication (see below).

‘Quasi-Scientific Discourses’

As I discuss above, compositional and visual devices such as colour are used to send a clear message to viewers about the credibility of science as the solution to the “problem” of ageing. The textual resource is also a powerful factor in reinforcing the voice of science and problematising ageing. The Estée Lauder text reads:

Is today’s world ageing the appearance of your skin too fast?
Our scientists say it’s time to take action.
Advanced Night Repair
The UK’s No 1 Repair serum women can’t live without
Inspired by 25 years of ground breaking DNA research and trusted to significantly reduce the appearance of ageing […].

The Lancôme text reads:

Our ultimate eye care: 2 formulas – 6 actions
Renergie Yeux Multiple Lift
Inspired by the latest eye rejuvenation trends, Lancôme invents Renergie Yeux Multiple Lift.
If you are not considering a permanent lift, experience our first duo for younger-looking eyes
1. Dark circles appear reduced
2. Bags appear reduced
3. Eye contour looks more luminous […].

The headline text in both advertisements locates it for the reader in the domain of the laboratory: ‘Our scientists’ (Estée Lauder); ‘formulas’ (Lancôme). The body text in the Lancôme advertisement is organised into a series of numbered points suggesting the objectivity of an ‘official’ report, and numerical references in all three texts further reinforce the impression of hard evidence which has been statistically proven (‘2 formulas—6 actions’; ‘95% gave it their seal of approval’; ‘8 natural firmers’). Lexically, it draws heavily on mainstream scientific/pharmaceutical vocabulary (‘DNA research’, ‘tested’, ‘eye rejuvenating trends’), also making particular use of obscure bio-medical terminology: ‘GF-Volumetry complex’, research on cellular communication’ (Lancôme); ‘synchronised recovery complex’ (Estée Lauder). Given the impenetrable nature of much of this terminology, it is unlikely to be truly comprehensible to potential consumers. In fact the reactions of the people in this study to most skincare advertising reveals a widely held scepticism both with regard to the motivations of the advertisers and the nature of their claims, as I discuss above. Coupland states that ‘advertisers need, then, to somehow construct messages that ‘break through’ consumers’ scepticism, or at least perhaps to construct scenarios in which consumers are motivated to ‘take control’ (2007: 41). However, as my analysis in Chapter 7 shows, whilst respondents
remain generally cynical, even hostile to such advertisements, they continue to be consumers of the products. This seeming paradox raises the question of how these quasi-scientific discourses succeed in ‘appealing’ (see Williamson 1978) the (female) consumers they target. The analysis of private voices that I present in Chapters 6 and 7 suggests a possible explanation: a strategy built on women’s fear of ageing rather than the credibility—or comprehensibility—of the scientised solutions offered. The Estée Lauder text expresses this directly in the description of Advanced Night Repair as ‘the UK’s No 1 Repair Serum women can’t live without’. The unhedged nature of this statement communicates absolute confidence and authority, despite (or perhaps due to) the lack of evidence or attribution; the uncompromising message to the reader is that ‘these women can’t live without it—and neither should you’.

In considering these advertisements in parallel, it could be argued that the more seemingly complex the solution, the more serious the “problem” of ageing is made to appear. Female consumers are offered a subject position that assumes they will find their own ageing appearance sufficiently unacceptable to call upon the full authority of science. As Smith states,

…women’s bodies are always imperfect. They always need fixing… without work they cannot approximate the kinds of appearance offered by images in the mass media. (1988: 47)

Close analysis of these advertising discourses suggests that the ideals of appearance generally offered to women do not include the visible signs of ageing.

‘Rescue and Repair’: Evaluation of the Visible Signs of Ageing

Lexically, the evaluation of ageing is strongly negative in both advertisements, either directly, as in the Estée Lauder text,

a reduction in the look of every key sign of ageing around your eyes – fine lines, wrinkles, dark circles, dryness, puffiness and uneven skin tones
or by implicit contrast with the opposite state, as demonstrated by Lancôme:

1. Dark circles appear reduced
2. Bags appear reduced
3. Eye contour looks more luminous […] etc.

That the signs of ageing are listed in such detail, as Coupland argues, ‘clearly presupposes the undesirability of visibly aged skin’ (2007: 44). This is reinforced by the use of metaphorical language such as ‘repair’ with its associations of things that are broken, and ‘Multiple Lift’ (Lancôme) which clearly draws on cosmetic surgery discourses (see below). However both advertisements qualify their product claims: ‘the look of every key sign…(Estée Lauder); ‘younger-looking eyes (Lancôme). In commenting on this finding in her own research, Coupland (2007) notes the dichotomy inherent in qualifiers such as these which focus on appearance, and a product promise based around the language of fixing (‘repair’) or more radical intervention (‘Multiple Lift’), arguing that the semantic associations thus created between ‘the look of’ and ‘repair’ suggest that ‘appearance itself can have the quality of being ‘worn out’ (2007: 44). This ideological incoherence is more striking in the Lancôme advertisement in that it clearly locates its message within the discursive domain of cosmetic surgery:

Renergie Yeux Multiple Lift
Inspired by the latest eye rejuvenation trends, Lancome invents Renergie Yeux Multiple Lift.
If you are not considering a permanent lift, experience our first duo for younger-looking eyes.

The association with the more radical solution offered by surgical intervention is clearly present in the way the brand position itself as an alternative to cosmetic surgery by seeming to offer comparable results, even though these are based on the ‘look of’, and signs of ageing which ‘appear reduced’. The implications of absorbing references to cosmetic surgery into the domain of cosmetic products are significant; as
Coupland comments, ‘these texts play a part in normalizing or naturalizing cosmetic surgery, as a means to ‘improve’ or ‘rescue’ female facial appearance’ (2007: 46). Not only that, the assumption underlying these advertising messages is that the “problem” of female ageing needs radical solutions, even if they stop short of surgical intervention.

This part of the analysis has shown that the discourses of science as they are directed at women are inextricably linked with the problematisation of ageing; these are voices of ‘moral authority’ (Coupland 2003: 132) and judgement, which establish an unequal power relationship with potential consumers who as a result must attend to and “fix” their ageing faces. Advertisers exploit the culturally generated fear of ageing by using negatively evaluative language that assumes—and reinforces—the cultural distaste for the ageing female appearance, deploying deliberately obscure pseudo-scientific terminology that emphasises the complexity of the solution and therefore the magnitude of the problem. When the discourses of science are adapted for a male audience, however, a very different ideological and communicative stance is taken.

The ‘Voice of Science’ for a Male Audience

I include this advertisement from GQ Magazine (April 2011) as a point of comparison. Whilst it shares some superficial points of commonality with the Lancôme and Estée Lauder texts analysed above, notably the absence of a social actor, at a more fundamental level it illustrates how the voice of science can be reframed to deliver a very different message about ageing to male consumers.

This is an advertorial text, a genre that combines advertising and editorial content. This is significant for my analysis because of the different relationship its ‘hybrid status’ (Coupland 2007: 49) creates between the authorial voice and the consumer. Talbot argues that in the advertorial ‘the boundary between advertising and editorial material has become blurred’ (2010: 145); as advertisements encroach further into the territory of magazine content it becomes less easy to distinguish promotional from editorial material. As analysis of this text will demonstrate,
the fluid and complex relationship between authorial voice(s), the nature of the message, and the consumers it targets, creates an ambiguity about the ownership of the ideological position it encodes, which in this case is deliberately exploited by the advertiser. The text presents a new product from Sisley, a brand owned by a French family-run company whose traditional territory has been upscale women’s skincare products. The ‘Sisleyum Anti-Age Global Revitaliser’ represents their first incursion into the male skincare market. As I argue above, an advertising text targeting men with a product from a traditionally female domain must perform a complex series of negotiations with the construction of gender identity, arguably even more so for the Sisley brand, given its traditional association with the female market.

The first paragraph of the body text references this female heritage, ‘you thought you’d only touch her Sisley once’, but only in order to frame the brand as a legitimate object of desire for a male consumer by linking it with other high status objects, ‘imagine her cracking open your last Chateau Lafite’, and even ‘an occasionally high-maintenance female’. What is of particular relevance here, however, is how the ‘voice of science’—an advertising discourse generally used to target women—is ‘reformulated into subtly different frames of meaning, taken to define ‘men’s values’ and men’s stances’ (Coupland 2007: 49). Visual and textual modes combine to achieve this subtle reformulation, including the inherently ambiguous format of the advertorial itself. The headline (‘Grooming’) designates a regular section in the magazine’s content where new products, selected to appeal to the so-called metrosexual market, are featured. ‘Grooming’ is a word now legitimised by its widespread usage in the developing male skincare market so the discursive framing of the feature already places the product in the domain

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6The term ‘metrosexual’, coined by the journalist Mark Simpson in 1994, originally described a man (especially one living in an urban environment) ‘who is especially meticulous about his grooming and appearance typically spending a significant amount of time and money on shopping for this’ (Source: Wikipedia). The term has slipped out of usage to some degree.

7The rise in awareness of the term grooming used in the sense of online sexual predation may, however, may compromise the legitimacy/desirability of its use in the context of the men’s magazine.
of “acceptable” self-maintenance (i.e. which escapes the potential charge of narcissism). This strategy is designed to create a subject position that allows a male consumer to conform to norms of culturally-approved male-ness in a traditionally female domain. In her analysis of male skincare texts and what they reveal about constructions of masculinity, Coupland observes that

the marketing strategies used [...] reveal an ideologically complex and changing version of masculinity, as it relates to the risks associated with ageing and the solutions available to counter these risks. This shifting version of masculinity is encouraged to turn its gaze to the mirror under the protection of a range of mitigating discourses which offset potential attributions of unmanly narcissism. (2007: 57)

Juxtaposed with the headline, as if presenting it to the reader, is a small image of the female editor, an attractive woman in her mid 30s, whose stance and appearance suggest confidence without challenge, and an element of glamour and sexiness without being too overt. This creates an assumption of her alignment with the magazine’s viewpoint on grooming, that what follows is written by her, in her voice—an impression reinforced by the direct address used throughout (‘you can either pick one or seasonally switch between the two’) and her personal sign-off (‘JP’). The presence of a female gatekeeper, presenting the product from a position of authority in a magazine with a primarily male readership, is ideologically significant. Here, male consumers are directly addressed through the lens of a female gaze in a way that specifically references the wider female gaze of wives and girlfriends (‘Your face will thank you and she’ll be glad you finally bought your own’). The product is explained—and endorsed—by the voice of female authority that becomes the de facto voice of science (‘it’s infused with plant extracts to combat wrinkles, stress and loss of firmness’). This is the only discursive link between the discourse of science and the signs of ageing before a subtle shift in the focus of the message frames the product proposition in terms of sensible skin maintenance:
parched winter skin and a post shave-face will like the comforting cream version, while the matt gel consistency works best during the summer months.

As with the female-targeted texts analysed above, here the social actor is also absent and the product made the central visual focus of the communication, although the language used is strikingly different from the anxiety-based discourses of pseudo-science. The product shot has been composed to suggest high-tech engineering components; gleaming silver cylindrical forms connote the speed and sophisticated technology associated with Formula 1 racing, an association reinforced by the sub-head, ‘Firing on all cylinders’. These are all examples of Coupland’s ‘mitigating discourses’, designed to support the values of heterosexual masculinity: the female (but not feminised) voice of expertise; the passing reference to ageing in favour of discourses of discerning body-maintenance; and the association of the product with ‘archetypally hyper-masculine imagery’ (Coupland 2007: 51). The message to the male consumer is that the use of products such as these is not only legitimate, but also a necessary part of pursuing the real purpose of male grooming which is to maintain sexual attractiveness for the wider female gaze.

The operation of the female gaze in this text is complex: it is a literal gaze, in the form of the image of the female editor whose appraising gaze meets the reader’s eyes directly, and also the voice of expertise which identifies both with the potential male consumer, in legitimising male grooming rituals and supporting values of traditional masculinity, and with the (imagined) female audience, by invoking a wider female perspective with repeated use of ‘she’ and ‘her’, thus keeping the hypothetical female viewpoint present throughout the text. In commenting on her own data, Coupland writes

the male gaze is never mentioned in advertisements for women… Advertisers envisage the female consumer to be more concerned with her symbolic capital in a more generalised way, with the public marketplace subsuming the male gaze, which therefore doesn’t need to be mentioned’. (2007: 55)
What she is describing is the taken-for-granted nature of the presence of the male gaze, which, according to Berger, still informs contemporary visual communication: ‘the essential way of seeing women, the essential use to which their images are put, has not changed’ (1972: 58). Paul Messaris writes that advertisements which use women to target women, ‘appear to imply a male point of view, even though the intended viewer is often a woman’ (1997: 44), echoing Berger’s observation that ‘men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at’ (ibid.: 41). Implicit in this argument is the contention that spectatorship plays a part in constructing—and perpetuating—gendered power relations; Jonathan Schroeder (1998) (cited in Chandler 1998) states that the gaze ‘signifies a psychological relationship of power, in which the gazer is superior to the object of the gaze’ (1998: 208). In the ‘L’Oréal Matthew’ advertisement analysed above, the male social actor returns the gaze of the viewer directly, establishing a ‘mutuality of the gaze’ (Lutz and Collins 1994: 373, cited in Chandler 1998), which if the viewer is male is based on an equality of power. In the female-targeted ‘L’Oréal Linda’ text, Evangelista does not meet the viewer’s gaze, looking instead into the middle distance; offering herself as the object of the viewer’s gaze in this way sets up an inequality of power relations. As I argue in Chapter 7, the reactions of women in this study to skincare advertisements and representations of women in the wider domains of the media suggest that the nature of the female gaze when directed at other women may be changing, and becoming the ‘active’ gaze (Chandler 1998: 3) more usually attributed to men, with the result that women are in equal measure surveyors and surveyed. That said, in the counter-discourses that have begun to re-shape the skincare market in recent years, the female gaze can be seen working in different ways, within a different communicative context.

**Emerging Counter-Discourses**

Over the last decade, a number of skincare advertisements have started presenting women to the gaze of other women in ways which challenge the conventions of this market, although Gill and Elias (2014) offer a
more nuanced perspective on work such as the Dove and Boots campaigns I analyse below, classifying the messages they contain as ‘love your body (LYB) discourses’ (2014: 179). They point out that these discourses, which appear to break market conventions constructed around negative judgement and surveillance of women’s bodies do not represent a straightforward liberation from tyrannical beauty standards, and may in fact instantiate new, more pernicious forms of power that engender a shift from bodily to psychic regulation…. they are much more ambivalent texts than they seem to be. (2014: 180)

Furthermore, the question remains as to the status of the ageing female body within this discursive context.

‘Real Women’: The Dove Brand

The Dove brand capitalised on a shift already happening in other domains of the media towards an acceptance of the reality of the (ageing) female body. Dove’s ‘Campaign for Real Beauty’ was launched in 2004 in response to a global study commissioned by Unilever, the brand owner, entitled ‘The Real truth About Beauty: A Global report’ (Source: www.campaignforrealbeauty.com). The findings indicated that the majority of women who participated felt that ‘the definition of beauty had become limited and unattainable’, so the mission behind the 2004 campaign was to challenge the beauty stereotypes that had come to define the visual and ideological landscape of this market, as typified by advertisements such as ‘L’Oréal Linda’. The Dove brand broke new ground by using un-airbrushed “real” women (i.e. not models) of all ages from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds, chosen to represent “normal” (i.e. less than perfect) female appearance.

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8 One example is Nigel Cole’s 2003 film Calendar Girls starring Helen Mirren and Julie Walters.
9 The report was a collaboration between contributors drawn from a number of different domains, both academic and commercial: Dr. Nancy Etcoff, Harvard University; Dr. Susie Orbach, London School of Economics; Dr. Jennifer Scott and Heidi D’Agostino, StrategyOne.
The campaign’s trademark visual style was to photograph headshots and full bodyshots of women engaging the viewer’s gaze directly in an apparently naturalistic, un-posed way, without digital manipulation, often in underwear or completely naked. In 2007 Dove launched a third phase of the campaign, a global study amongst older women (Source: www.dove.co.uk/en) which revealed that ‘91% of women ages 50–64 believe that it is time for society to change its views about women and ageing’. The resulting campaign featured women aged 50+, ‘wrinkles, age spots, grey hair and all’. Despite a certain amount of scepticism (Gill and Elias challenge the ‘iconography of ‘natural’, ‘real’ women’, questioning ‘the realness of/visual fraud of Dove Pro-Age texts’ (2014: 187)), it could be argued that the Dove brand succeeded in opening up a communicative space in which different discourses concerning the ageing appearance were possible and different ideologies about ageing could be explored.

**The Reciprocal Gaze: Boots No. 7**

More recently, Boots, the pharmaceutical, health and beauty retailer, has followed the Dove brand with the 2011 launch of the ‘Tah Dah’ campaign for its No. 7 skincare and cosmetic brand. Commentary in Marketing Magazine immediately prior to the launch stated that the Boots campaign

> aims to show that No 7 products “really work” by using images of models that have not been airbrushed or retouched and ensuring none of the models have received cosmetic surgery. (Source: Marketing Magazine online version 5 August 2011)

Furthermore, the head of the No. 7 brand, Amanda Walker, was quoted as saying

> what we want to show with the ‘Tah Dah’ campaign is a moment in time that all women have, when they know they look and, perhaps more importantly, feel, their absolute best. (ibid.)
The campaign can therefore be viewed in the context of a conscious attempt to shift ideological territory from anxiety to celebration, from idealised to real, and from negative evaluation of the ageing appearance to a discourse of acceptance. I analyse below a specific advertisement from the campaign, which features the Boots brand’s range of anti-ageing skincare products. In compositional terms this is a ‘given-new’ structure (see Kress and van Leeuwen 1996; van Leeuwen 2005), which locates the products in the ‘new’ zone and the social actor in the ‘given’ zone. As discussed in preceding sections, the compositional structure is intended as a visual expression of the underlying ideology. Placing the social actor in the given zone implicitly aligns her with externally endorsed standards of acceptable femininity—although in the case of the model featured here, this is a strikingly different representation from the ‘L’Oreal Linda’ and Clarins texts.

One half of the double-page spread is given over to the model who is shown as a three-quarter body shot rather than the more conventionally used headshot. Her upper torso, arms and hands are visible, which may be intended to acknowledge the existence of the whole woman rather than the (more usual) decontextualised face, perhaps as a counter to discourses which deconstruct the body into disembodied components (see Furman 1997 and Chapter 6 of this book). The message to the reader therefore, is that beauty does not only reside in the face but in the whole person. Furthermore, in line with the stated aims of this campaign (see above), the image appears naturalistic and not airbrushed, explicitly reinforced by the brand sign-off ‘she’s not airbrushed, she’s not retouched, she’s just No 7’. Laughter lines, facial contours, moles and skin texture are all visible, and the slightly untidy tumble of her curly hair suggests that this, too, has been left in its natural state. This is a high modality image but without the manipulation of different degrees of reality I have commented on in some of the other examples analysed above. However, it is the model’s expression that immediately draws the viewer’s gaze. This is a demand image (see Kress and van Leeuwen 1996; van Leeuwen 2005) in which the model looks directly at the viewer, establishing eye contact. Her expression suggests confidence, enjoyment and fun, with a hint of complicity with the viewer as if sharing a joke.
Her broad smile, the natural tilt of her head and position of her hands suggest the natural conversational pose of someone caught in the middle of a making a comment or telling a story. The warmth and directness of her gaze invites—even assumes—a relationship with the (female) viewer based on intimacy and candour, often regarded as characteristics of female (rather than male) friendships (see Coates and Cameron 1988; Holmes 2006; Tannen 2007). Thus the viewer is appalled by the model’s gaze and invited to appraise her, whilst the intimate power of her gaze creates the assumption of reciprocity, in which the appraisal will be supportive and positively evaluative rather than competitive.

The assumption of a personal relationship with the viewer is further reinforced through the textual mode. Two lines of text are located directly over the model’s chest, breaking into the image: ‘At 28, I knew who I was, at 38 I love who I am’. The juxtaposition of words and image, and repeated use of ‘I’ imply that these are the model’s own words and that the acceptance inherent in her disclosure of her age comes directly from a self-described journey from self-knowledge to self-worth, implicit in the apposition of ‘I knew’ with the positive affect of ‘I love’. Here, decadal age markers are used as the basis of positive, rather than negative, comparison.\(^\text{10}\) The authorial voice changes in the product-focused text on the opposite page, to become a depersonalised, although not impersonal, voice. Personal address remains a central linguistic feature via the use of ‘you’ (‘Supercharge your regime’), but its provenance is unclear. The shift in authorial voice from personal to more depersonalised endorsement is a deliberate manipulation of the textual resource, allowing the advertisers to counterbalance emotional and rational messages. Coupland remarks that such authorial ambiguity ‘appears to be positively functional for the marketing purposes of features and advertisements’ (2003: 130), in this case allowing important product information (e.g. ‘clinically proven serum’) to be transmitted by a credible, friendly voice of expertise. The same voice continues to

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\(^{10}\)The analysis of the interview data in this study (see Chapters 6 and 7) suggests that chronological age markers remain highly significant for participants of all ages, and amongst mid-life and older cohorts are generally negatively evaluated.
construct the ageing process as inherently positive through lexis such as ‘supercharge’, and ‘tailor-made’. There is no overt mention or negative evaluation of ageing and its visible signs; instead the communicative approach is about normalising the skin’s changing needs at different stages in the lifecourse (‘your regime’, ‘tailor-made for every age’). This is further reinforced by product descriptors: ‘protect and perfect’, ‘lift and luminate’, ‘restore and renew’, which call on vocabulary more traditionally associated with discourses of youth (i.e. ‘renew’) to characterise the needs of the ageing skin.

The Boots text appears to encode a very different ideology about ageing, in which the process of ageing is inferred rather than relentlessly catalogued, and positioned as the natural accompaniment to positively viewed lived experience (‘At 38 I love who I am’). However, Gill and Elias’s work provides an interesting perspective by suggesting that such ‘LYB’ discourses are inherently problematic in that ‘women must make-over not simply their bodies, but now—thanks to LYB discourse—their subjectivity as well, embracing an affirmative, confident disposition’ (2014: 190). That said, the ‘devastating fierce acuity’ (Orbach 1986: 36) of the female gaze, especially when turned upon other women, appears to be diffused by a representation of ‘real’ and achievable beauty rather than impossible standards of perfection only achievable through artifice. Consequently, a construction of ageing femininity based around acceptance, as exemplified by the Boots and Dove campaigns, and mediated through the positive reciprocity of the female gaze, appears as a credible counter-discourse, a possibility supported by the reactions of some women in this study to these advertisements. This extract is from a 54 year-old female respondent:

… this [sc. Dove ad] which I love and I think is the greatest work in beauty ever done right for women y’know one of my top campaigns ever…(F11–54)

Nonetheless, evidence from the wider body of interview data in this study suggests that these messages, however persuasive, have yet to permeate and materially influence individual mirror moments. Furthermore, my analysis of these examples of skincare advertising, albeit
on a small scale, suggests that although such counter-discourses appear to be gaining ground in the media, ageing is still more often problematised than celebrated for women through discourses which relentlessly articulate and negatively evaluate its visible signs, perpetuating the pressure to conform to stereotypes of female beauty. ‘Solutions’ to the ‘problem’ of female ageing are offered in the form of pseudo-scientific discourses which, as Coupland remarks, are delivered in a ‘much more serious, committed and fear-based style’ (2007: 54) compared to the more ironic, light-hearted and sexually knowing framing which characterises communicative approaches aimed at men.11 The way ageing is dealt with visually and discursively in the male-targeted advertisements suggests that ageing remains a fundamentally gendered phenomenon which allows the ageing male appearance to be evaluated as sexy, but in which the process of ageing is inferred rather than made explicit, its visible signs incorporated within the ‘protection of a range of mitigating discourses’ (Coupland 2007: 57). I continue to explore these themes in the next chapter, which focuses on a range of media discourses.

References


11Macdonald cites the prevalence of the ‘folklinguistic mythology’ (2003: 59) which characterises jokes and comic banter as a feature of male discourse versus the gossiping and nagging which defines female discourse.


Analysis of Media Discourses of Ageing

The previous chapter examines ways in which ageing is problematised for women in a particular domain of public discourse: mainstream anti-ageing skincare advertising. This chapter continues to explore the powerful role that public discourses play in shaping the way women construct their feminine identities, through analysis of selected texts taken from lifestyle media. In considering how older women are represented and evaluated across a range of media discourses I explore the wider question of what this reveals about underlying media attitudes to ageing, and how this both reflects and constructs the prevailing ‘age ideology’ (Gullette 1997: 3). As with the skincare advertisements, the selection of texts for this dataset was also driven primarily by themes emerging from participants’ accounts. I also sought to accommodate a reasonable span of demographic profiles and, importantly, of communicative modes, although given the complex, diverse and rapidly changing nature of the media domain this could not realistically be a truly representative dataset. It does, however, constitute a sufficient sample to allow meaningful explorations of current media attitudes. The dataset
as a whole can be considered as a series of small subsets summarised in Table 5.1, each related to a theme for analysis.

In this part of the analysis I examine in detail two age-related discourses which seem to catalyse the complex attitudes towards ageing both amongst the people in my study and in the wider media. The first area I consider is menopause discourse, as many of the mid-life female

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<th>Analytical theme</th>
<th>Selected text(s)</th>
<th>Reader/viewer age profile (where relevant)</th>
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<td>Marie Claire</td>
<td>Average reader age 33 (Source <a href="http://www.ipcadvertising.com">www.ipcadvertising.com</a>)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Good Housekeeping</td>
<td>Core reader 35–54 (Source <a href="http://www.campaignlive.co.uk">www.campaignlive.co.uk</a>)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Woman and Home</td>
<td>Average reader age 35+ (Source <a href="http://www.ipcmedia.com">www.ipcmedia.com</a>)</td>
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<td>The menopause</td>
<td>Daily Mail (28 October 2013) and (15 March 2012)</td>
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<td>Declining to Decline (Gullette 1997)</td>
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<td>Ageing femininities</td>
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<td>Median reader age 31.3 (Source <a href="http://www.cosmomediakit.com">www.cosmomediakit.com</a>)</td>
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<td>Cosmopolitan (Christmas 2012, July 2013)</td>
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<td>Daily Mail online (15 November 2013)</td>
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respondents expressed deep uncertainty about how to perform their femininity as they age, particularly post-menopause. I look at how the menopause is constructed and represented in a newspaper article, and in the work of two feminist writers. The second—and linked—area explores how notions of “appropriate” glamour and display, central to the construction of stereotypical femininity, accommodate the ageing female body.

**Menopause, Manopause and the Menoboom: Representations of Mid-Life and the Ageing Body**

In this section I continue the discussion of public evaluations of the ageing female body by considering discourses of the body in mid-life, looking in particular at the impact of menopause both as it is evaluated through the subjective gaze and also as a discursively constructed product of wider cultural discourses. My analysis focuses on a lifestyle media text, a first person narrative authored by Mandy Appleyard (*Daily Mail*, 28 October 2013), ‘Welcome to my menopause nightmare’. By way of context, I consider this text alongside the works of two influential writers on menopause: Margaret Morganroth Gullette (1997) *Declining to Decline* and Germaine Greer (1991) *The Change*. Whilst Gullette argues that menopause is a cultural construct, ‘a discursive phenomenon’ (1997: 98) through which prevailing culture ages women, Greer reintroduces the historical designation of menopause as the ‘climacteric’ (1991: 25), a Greek term meaning ‘critical period’, as the basis for her argument that menopause is a critical life event for many women, but one which women need to reclaim from its appropriation by the male researchers and writers she collectively terms ‘Masters in Menopause’ (1991: 19). However, recent media commentary appears to suggest that the mid-life—and indeed the menopause—is no longer considered to be an exclusively female domain, almost 20 years after Gullette questioned ‘how do midlife men fit in?’ (1997: 99). I therefore consider an article about the male mid-life by the author and journalist William Leith (*The Sunday Times Magazine*, 18 June 2011) as a point of comparison.
Appleyard’s personal narrative sits within a growing sub-genre (see my discussion in Chapter 1), which could be characterised as the personal mid-life narrative presented to the external gaze, a phenomenon Featherstone and Hepworth (1988) relate to the postmodern blurring of boundaries between historically private spheres of life and public domains. Both Gullette’s and Greer’s work contains autobiographical elements, as do the more recent examples already noted in Chapter 1. Appleyard’s article—and other such accounts—suggests that the way mid-life is experienced is inextricably interconnected with the phenomenon of the menopause. One of Gullette’s central tenets is that women are culturally conditioned by the profusion of menopause discourses, which she collectively terms ‘the menoboom’ (1997: 98), to accept the cultural view which conflates mid-life with menopause, creating a single narrative of decline which is fundamentally gendered, and to which all bodily changes are ascribed:

If a man breaks a bone at forty, people say, “bad luck”; if a woman does, they tut-tut “osteoporosis”. The culture fits her bone into a decline story. (Gullette 1997: 108)

Gullette argues that cultural discourses construct female ageing as a ‘life-course decline narrative [which] requires at its pivot a critical moment, an event’ (1997: 98). She contends that the power of the ‘menoboom’ positions the menopause as the ‘critical moment’ in the lives of mid-life women, so that ‘women [are] aged by culture’ (1997: 99) more profoundly than by biology. Greer also notes that menopause has become ‘big business’ (1991: 18), commenting that the proliferation of menopause literature in recent decades has led to a level of media interest that has generated a number of (generally negative) stereotypes, often rooted in the language of the diseased/deficient body, typically drawing on the semiotics of physical and emotional derangement. Greer writes that:

The menopausal woman is the prisoner of a stereotype and will not be rescued from it until she has begun to tell her own story. (1991: 18)
Interestingly, and to Greer’s point about the menopause and discourses of deficiency and disease, the Deputy Governor of The Bank of England, Ben Broadbent, recently stated that ‘the economy is at a menopausal moment’ (*The Guardian* online, 16 May 2018). When pressed, he explained that he used the term to signify that the economy is stagnating and no longer potent. Unsurprisingly, his comment has generated considerable negative commentary.

These viewpoints contextualise the analysis of Appleyard’s narrative (see below) in which she tells the story of her personal menopause experience much as Greer is advocating. The semiotic resources used to frame her experiences to readers, and the evaluative stance they construct, reveal the influence of menopause stereotypes on individual discourse. The article employs number of devices to position readers at the first point of encounter, although interestingly, the way images and text are used present a somewhat contradictory message.

The headline/introductory statements read

> Welcome to my menopause nightmare: she’s wrinkling like a prune, sweating like a bull – and going to bed with a man has never been so scary! A brutally honest yet life-affirming account of the menopause.

The text is prominently positioned, and used in combination with an image of the author that far from reinforcing the textual message, adds a visual dimension which seems to work in subtle opposition to it. A full-body image of Appleyard smiling confidently at the reader, wearing a tight-fitting cocktail dress and high heels, is placed next to a headline inviting the reader directly into her ‘menopause nightmare’. As Matheson (2005) argues, direct address has the effect of positioning/aligning the reader as the audience for a particular authorial standpoint—in this case Appleyard’s evaluation of her feminine identity. Even before the reader-as-audience has had an opportunity to engage with the article’s content, the combination of visual and verbal semiotic resources encodes a number of ideological assumptions: menopause, positioned in Gullette’s words ‘as a major life event’ (1997: 98), is discursively constructed as if it were a personal catastrophe, through
upscaled negatively evaluative lexical choices (‘hell’, ‘nightmare’, ‘scary’). By conflating physical ageing and menopause (‘she’s wrinkling like a prune and sweating like a bull’), all changes to the body are attributed to this single phenomenon, although Appleyard’s confidently smiling image implies that this is an experience with a tangible end, which is the possibility of happiness and fulfilment post-menopause (there is a further disjunction, though, with the headline which presents her menopause as a ‘nightmare’ which is still ongoing).

The article written from/about a male perspective offers an interesting basis for comparison. William Leith’s narrative, rather than using a headline as conventionally defined, is formatted as a double-page spread. The first page features a close-up of his (clearly ageing) face and the second page offers a direct quotation, presumed to be from him, which acts as a lead-into the article:

I am grey.
My skin is mottled.
I have a double chin.
I have broken veins.
I look tired, pouchy.
My teeth need work.
Still, I don’t suffer from erectile dysfunction…. 

As I discuss in Chapter 7, the detailed and deconstructed nature of this self-evaluation, with its focus on individual body parts is more commonly encountered as a feature of the female gaze on their own bodies, and of the media gaze on women’s ageing. The imagined audience may well be familiar with the female mid-life ageing narrative as a text type (see Jeffries 2007) usually constructed around negative evaluations of women’s visible signs of ageing. However, the fact that this is a narrative of male ageing, produced by the male gaze for an external gaze which may be male as well as female, changes the evaluative perspective. Unusually, readers are invited to view an ageing male body through the subjective gaze of its male owner. The unexpected nature of this incursion into linguistic territory more commonly associated with female
ageing is further reinforced by an anonymous authorial voice informing
the reader that Leith’s self-evaluation has been triggered by a personal
‘mirror moment’:

At 51, the writer William Leith is horrified by what he sees in the mir-
or. Lamenting his loss of youth, he casts a critical eye over his body and
resolves to take action. But is it too late?

The focus of Chapter 7 of this book is the insight that the mirror
moment is a defining aspect of female ageing and that men have a dif-
ferent relationship with the mirror based more on self-acceptance than
criticism. However Leith appears horrified at what he sees in the mirror
once again disrupting the reader’s evaluative perspective. The presence
of an unattributed external voice in what is clearly a deeply personal
narrative acts as a seemingly objective confirmation of the writer’s sub-
jective experience, endorsing his reaction to what is reflected in the mir-
or. There may even be an implicit comparison intended with female
narratives of mid-life ageing as discussed above, in which women writ-
ers’ subjective gaze on their personal experience of ageing is clearly
mediated by the ‘critical moment’ (Gullette 1997: 98) of menopause.
In the absence of a pre-defined cultural script regarding menopause/
midlife that he can apply to his own ageing process, Leith finds himself
adrift in a state of ‘midlife helplessness’ (Gullette 1997: 146). Although
cultural perceptions of masculinity are in the process of shifting as men
are also increasingly targeted by youth-centric discourses, there remains
a relative lack of culturally acceptable/accepted fora in which intimate
aspects of male ageing can be explored. This throws Leith’s predicament
as a mid-life man into sharper relief. That said, media commentary
on the male midlife although far less developed than the proliferation
of female menopause literature, has begun in recent years to raise the
possibility that as with women’s ageing, the male mid-life may be suf-
ficiently problematic to warrant a name and a “diagnosis” e.g. ‘andro-
pause’ (The Guardian online, 28 September 2010) and its more popular
translation as the ‘manopause’.
Appleyard’s description of the changes she perceives in her body is powerfully negative and in that sense her language can be seen as a product of prevailing cultural menopause ideology as it is expressed in menopause discourses which feature regularly in the media: e.g. menopause as the origin of all negative bodily changes; menopause as illness; menopause as the defining and dividing event in the lifecourse:

Here I am, 53 years old, wrinking faster than a plum in the sun, hair thinning, more life behind me than in front of me – and now a fresh hell of decline to contemplate.

Physical signs of ageing are not only conflated with unattractiveness, (‘wrinking faster than a plum’), but also constructed as harbingers of inevitable, nightmarish decrepitude (‘a fresh hell of decline’). She expresses her most profound insecurities about the changes to her body in terms of loss: of fertility, youthfulness, and sexual attractiveness, using personification to intensify her sense of what has been taken away from her physically:

My friend jokes that she’s been the victim of ‘The Menopause Thief’: he’s taken her figure, quite a bit of her hair, her sex drive, and what she describes as ‘my sense of myself as a woman’. I know what she means. He’s taken quite a few bits of me too.

Significantly, ‘the Menopause Thief’ is given a male persona, perhaps illustrating Greer’s argument that this essentially female physical phenomenon has traditionally been appropriated and owned by men. Appleyard’s deconstructed approach to her body (‘he’s taken quite a few bits of me too’) is also significant, typifying the relationship women have with their bodies as objects made up of a selection of parts, the sum of which is less than the whole (I discuss this more fully in Chapter 7). Furthermore, in the course of her narrative, Appleyard often evaluates her bodily changes using the language of illness:

I ran home to consult my Family Health Encyclopaedia and blanched as I read the common symptoms of menopause. Hot flushes and night sweats; [.....] palpitations; headaches [.....]
This locates menopause in the domain of disease, rather than of “normal” bodily process; the conflation of ‘symptoms’ of menopause with ‘symptoms’ of ageing not only creates a single narrative of decline but also perpetuates a wider tendency to medicalise natural bodily changes (see Chapter 2). Similarly, the common stereotype of menopause-as-madness, which Appleyard also draws on, forms part of the historical tradition of the medicalised discourses of a disordered body. Greer references a 1975 medical survey in which the (male) authors concluded that:

> it is clear that for many women the menopause is a period of disorientation, physical problems and psychological imbalance. (IHF (AKZO) survey 1975: 49, cited in Greer 1991: 19)

Appleyard unconsciously draws on these discourses to establish the context for her narrative:

> **Strange things** are happening to me in the night. I go to bed looking like the normal me, straight-haired and smoothish-faced, but I wake up… looking as if I’m wearing a fright wig…

She contrasts her state of normality, characterised by the language of order, (‘straight-haired’, ‘smooth-faced’) with the domain of ‘strange things’ which finds physical manifestation in the reference to ‘fright wig’ with its visual associations with bizarre and alarming stereotypes of madness. Whilst this is not literally a narrative of madness, and is intended to be slightly tongue-in-cheek, what Appleyard is expressing is the sense of being a stranger in her own body—perhaps intensified by the pervasive presence of these cultural meta-messages.

However, Appleyard’s greatest struggle with her changing body is rooted in culturally embedded perceptions of menopause as a desexualising force. According to Greer this is another aspect of menopause mythology, originating in the male-generated essentialist discourses which produced the cultural equation of fertility = femininity = sexual attractiveness. de Beauvoir held up the discourses of biologism that traditionally defined womanhood in order to ridicule them:
Woman? Very simple, say the fanciers of simple formulas: she is a womb, an ovary; she is a female – this word is sufficient to define her. (de Beauvoir 1949 [1997]: 35)

It is significant, however, that when writing about the menopause she too used the language of biologism:

It is sometimes said that women of a certain age constitute ‘a third sex’; and in truth, while they are not males, they are no longer females. (ibid.)

Within the complex conjunction of sex, gender and sexuality (see Chapter 2), the effect of categorising (post)menopausal women as ‘a third sex’ is to degender as well as desexualise them. Appleyard’s own experience of the intersection of ageing and sexuality is couched in powerfully negative language:

When my menopause first started, I was single and wondering whether I would ever have sex again. Even if I was lucky enough to find a needle in life’s haystack at this 11th hour, I questioned whether I could bear to be seen naked by a man now that I am sagging, receding and creasing.

Evaluating her ageing body and feelings about her sexual attractiveness, (‘I questioned whether I could bear to be seen naked...now that I am sagging, receding and creasing’) implicitly contrasts her current insecurities with earlier phases in her life, in which the unquestioned assumption is that sexual confidence is a consequence of youthfulness. The interrelationship between menopause and the notion of femininity is painfully present in Appleyard’s account of stratagems she employs in order to preserve her self-image with her new partner:

... there are some other significant physical changes going on for me. When Adam stays over, I make sure my make up is strategically placed [...] so that before he’s even awake I can [...] slather on what’s needed, this side of 50, so as not to look like a dying old crone in a Dickens novel.
Greer, however, decouples femininity and femaleness, stating that:

what women in the climacteric are afraid of losing is not femininity, which can always be faked and probably is always fake, but femaleness… (1991: 59)

However, Appleyard’s account suggests that for her, femininity and femaleness are intimately interconnected; she fears the loss of libido as much as she fears revealing her unadorned 50 year-old face. Through her ‘continuing investment in the insignia of a gendered body’ (Woodward 1991: 3) such as the make-up she ‘slathers on … so as not to look like a dying old crone’, she sustains a feminine self which is bound up with a socially constructed notion of youthfulness, and central to her sense of female self. Greer challenges the notion of femininity: ‘if femininity is real, it should amount to more than a streak of khol and a squirt of scent’ (1991: 58), subsequently dismissing it as superficial fakery, ‘a charade’ (ibid.: 59). There is an argument that Greer’s use of ‘should’ in challenging cultural stereotypes of femininity signifies a pressure to conform to a different kind of stereotype, which for her involves eschewing the ‘perpetual girlishness called femininity’ (1991: 59) for the ‘self-defining female energy’ (ibid.) of femaleness. It could be said that her argument both generalises and homogenises women’s experience.

Appleyard’s narrative, and accounts from the lived experience of the mid-life women in this study, suggests that the relationship between femininity and femaleness is complex, individual, and co-dependent; the dimension of identity where notions of gender and sexual attractiveness intersect is where the desexualising potential of the menopause is most keenly felt. It is striking that William Leith also openly expresses his own fears about loss of sexual potency (‘I am mourning the passing of the age when nature thought I was good to reproduce’), a view which cuts across cultural discourses which have historically denied male ageing; as Gullette comments ‘that men age is truly a taboo subject’ (1997: 106). Whilst in one sense the narratives of Appleyard and Leith indicate a kind of equality in that physical changes affect the ageing female and male body irrespective of gender, how both writers understand the signs
of ageing as transition markers and consequently evaluate the midlife in relation to other lifestages, has everything to do with the fundamentally gendered nature of cultural constructions of mid-life.

Appleyard’s account exemplifies a common linguistic feature of such mid-life narratives which is to conceptualise the lifecourse in terms of a binary division into ‘before’ and ‘after’: ‘before’ describes the pre-midlife period and is generally positively evaluated, defined by (relative) youthfulness, sexual and physical attractiveness and fertility; ‘after’ represents the post-midlife phase, generally negatively evaluated, viewed as the entrance into old(er) age and therefore synonymous with decline, defined by loss of libido, attractiveness, fertility. The menopause is what marks the symbolic as well as physical division between ‘before’ and ‘after’, as Appleyard’s concluding words demonstrate:

As we say goodbye to our fertility and hello to life beyond it, we are battling through a difficult lifestage…

Gullette’s premise is that it is the power of cultural discourses which construct the menopause as ‘the marker that divides a younger woman from herself growing older and divides midlife men from same age women’ (1997: 102), by creating a false and needlessly momentous division in the ‘subtle continuum of age’ (Woodward 1991: 6). In terms of life after the menopausal divide, there is a powerful “after-is-better” rhetoric (Gullette 1997: 103) in literary as well as media discourses, exemplified by Greer’s conceptualisation of life post-menopause:

The object of facing up squarely to the fact of the climacteric is to acquire serenity and power. If women on the youthful side of the climacteric could glimpse what this state of peaceful potency might be, the difficulties of making the transition would be less. (1991: 9)

The effect of linguistic encapsulations such as ‘serenity and power’ and ‘peaceful potency’ is to suggest that individual experience, with all its potential messiness and diversity, can somehow be sanitised and homogenised through the transformative power of the menopausal transition. The after-is-better discourse may even constitute as much of a
stereotype as the menopause-is-hell rhetoric; both are indicative of the depth of entrenchment as well as the binary nature of cultural attitudes towards menopause. Gullette argues that after-is-better discourses serve to ‘reinforce the marker event’ (1997: 103) as much as the pessimism which precedes it, that embedded notions of ‘before’ and ‘after’ continue the culturally constructed expectation that discontinuity and disruption to the lifecourse are inevitable consequences of menopause. Appleyard’s account, as representative of such personal narratives, suggests that even as women tell their own stories as Greer advocates, far from breaking free of such stereotypes, they actively perpetuate them, falling back on the language of culturally generated menopause discourses to provide structure and explanation for their personal experiences, both pre- and post-menopause. In this way, the menopause experience continues to be viewed as a pre-ordained sequence of ‘before’ and ‘after’ divided by a momentous transitional event. Linguistically, ‘before’ is described in the language of nightmare, illness and madness, leading up to a transition, conceptualised in spatial terms as a tangible “event”, to a post-menopausal state evaluated using the generic language of optimism, serenity and reinvention.

Based on this analysis I am arguing that menopause discourse continues to be deeply influential for the way in which women such as Appleyard, representatives of a wider female community, construct their age identity. Here perhaps lies the real complexity—and ambivalence—of menopause as a personal and cultural experience: prevailing culture encodes its attitudes to ageing women through menopause discourses; women are as disadvantaged by the pervasive presence of the cultural script which defines their experience as men may be by the absence of a correspondingly defining event. The power of the cultural menopause discourse determines that most women will evaluate their mid-life experience as the gateway to decline, whilst at the same time providing a reason and an explanation that is lacking for men, even as male ageing becomes discursively more visible. Also lacking for men is the promise of an idealised resolution to the mid-life/menopause experience. In reality, such ‘after-is-better’ rhetoric may add further pressure to a cultural script that seemingly subsumes women’s individual experiences whilst providing little context for that of men. Taken
together, the texts analysed here allow a more nuanced exploration of Sontag’s ‘double standard about aging’ (1978: 73). As cultural perceptions and expectations of masculinity shift, it may be that the double standard which has traditionally worked to the particular disadvantage of women, is also increasingly afflicting men. Gullette argues strongly for the need to challenge and override ‘both the biologism and the pessimism of the menoboom’ (1997: 103), and perhaps also, it could be argued, the counterbalancing expectation of resolution. However Appleyard’s experience, as well as that of some of the mid-life women in my study, adds a dimension of realism to Gullette’s exhortation that the menopause should be returned to its more proportional place as a component in ‘a whole life story, or better yet, since women need to be reinscribed as indelibly diverse, in many different whole life stories’ (ibid.: 102). This may be some way from being realised.

My analysis so far suggests that cultural attitudes to female ageing are characterised by ambivalence, expressed through a lack of representation of older women in public discourses. Woodward writes that ‘it would seem that the wish of our visual culture is to erase the older female body from view’ (2006: 163). Using strikingly similar language, Fiona Mactaggart, MP and secretary of the Commission on Older Women, presenting at the launch of the Charter against Ageism and Sexism in the Media (3 October 2013) commented that older women tend to be ‘disappeareded’ by media discourses. Such evaluations beg the question of how that most influential domain of the media—the woman’s magazine—represents and evaluates older/ageing women. The next section considers how mainstream women’s magazines deal with the inconvenient reality of the ageing female body in the context of dominant cultural expectations of acceptable femininity.

“Appropriate” Femininity: The Challenge of Accommodating the Ageing Female Body

The previous section discusses the postmenopausal body as an ambivalent object of the cultural gaze and also of the female gaze. Elizabeth Markson, in a paper examining the ageing female body through the medium of film, comments on that differences in the cultural view of male and female ageing:
The postmenopausal body, having lost its reproductive (and by implication, sexual) charm, neither is the object of the appreciative male gaze nor does it fit into contemporary cultural discourses about “ideal” female beauty. (2003: 80)

Her argument is that the ageing female body becomes an object of negative evaluation when it ceases to be the object of the male gaze. This part of the analysis examines the cultural script as it relates to the female body, ageing ‘under the watchful gaze of a world awash in perfect bodies’ (Faircloth 2003: 11). I use textual and visual representations of women taken from a selection of women’s magazines to explore deeper questions concerning the complex conjunction of attitudes towards gender, femininity and sexuality as they intersect with the ageing female body: how ageing femininity is represented and discursively evaluated; what this might reveal about cultural ‘rules’ governing acceptable female ageing; the different identities offered to older women; and consequently what insights can be gained about cultural attitudes to ageing women.

**The Dilemma of Glamour and Display**

The data sub-set I use here is a small scale survey of women’s monthly magazines: *Cosmopolitan* and *Marie Claire*, aimed at a younger readership and *Good Housekeeping* and *Woman & Home* targeting older readers. I looked specifically at Christmas/New Year 2012 and summer 2013 editions of these magazines, aiming to use two distinct periods in the year that have particular salience for body and appearance related discourses. The notions of glamour and bodily display are important indices of cultural requirements of femininity, and I wanted to explore how the magazines interpret these concepts for their different age profiles. I looked at the visual and ideological statements made on the magazine front covers in combination with selected editorial content from the inside pages.

The notion of glamour is generally appropriated by the Christmas/New Year issues and expressed through commonly used—and stereotypical—combinations of visual and verbal semiotic resources,
i.e. sequinned dresses and sparkling jewellery, and vocabulary choices (‘sparkle’, ‘celebrate’ ‘glamorous you’). In a similar way the concept of display—how and to what extent the body is (and should be) revealed to the external gaze—is more visually associated with the summer holiday season, expressed through a common textual/visual language involving full body shots of models wearing bikinis/skimpy beachwear combined with discourses of body improvement (e.g. ‘Beach Body Ready’, ‘Get Body Confident’). The magazines’ age profiles are significant in determining how each publication interprets glamour and display and accommodates these concepts within the construction of femininity offered to their readers. A strategy employed by all magazines in the survey is the use of celebrities as ‘exemplary women’ (Jeffries 2007: 53) on their front covers, with follow-up features in the body of the magazine. Choice of celebrity plays an important role in the communicative mix, as an embodiment of each magazine’s ideological approach to femininity. I explore this idea in two comparative case studies below.

### Nicole Scherzinger: Youthful Glamour

*Marie Claire* features Nicole Scherzinger on the front cover of its Christmas issue. Aged 34, she exactly matches the magazine’s core reader age profile. Scherzinger is also designated the ‘Ultimate Fun, Fearless Female’ in *Cosmopolitan*’s Ultimate Women Awards 2012, thereby reinforcing both her media presence and credentials as an icon of youthful femininity. As discussed above in the context of skincare advertising, Williamson (1978) deconstructs the advertising strategy of using celebrity role models, arguing that it is designed to set up a process which links image and message in the mind of the reader, enabling the values readers already associate with a particular celebrity (i.e. Scherzinger’s youthful beauty and sexiness) to be appropriated by advertisers and transferred to what is being ‘sold’—in this case the *Marie Claire* brand of glamour. Therefore with the reader’s unconscious collaboration, glamorous sexiness is presented as the natural, rightful and unquestioned territory of youth. Scherzinger is shown wearing an
elaborate, opulent dress whose sheer, black fabric allows glimpses of skin and contours of the body beneath. The combination of concealment and subtle display, together with her pose, in which one arm is crossed protectively across her body whilst her chin rests thoughtfully on her other hand, bring an element of vulnerability to her performance of glamour. *Marie Claire’s* July issue, which features a front cover shot of Alicia Keys, plays the same game of concealing-revealing; she is shown wearing a flowing, draped dress which appears to conceals the contours of her body but which is slashed diagonally from collar to waist and thigh to ankle. Both front covers juxtapose images and text to reinforce the interconnectedness of sexuality and glamour in these representations of femininity. Christmas party glamour draws from a particular semantic field; the front cover headline positioned across Scherzinger’s body reads:

Christmas Glamour

Look **Hot** in **Sparkling** Make-up, **Sexy** Heels & **Fabulous** Fashion

She appears as the manifestation of a femininity based on sexualisation of glamour and glamorisation of sexuality, linguistically expressed through adjectival patterning: ‘hot’, ‘sparkling’, ‘sexy’, ‘fabulous’. Such textual realisations, intended as general invitations to readers, are located in the same visual field as the social actor so that a connection is established for the reader/viewer between signifier (Scherzinger) and what is signified (glamour/sexiness).

If the front cover encodes the magazine’s ideological approach, setting the discursive tone for readers, the inner pages reinforce it in more detailed exploration of fashion features and editorial content. For example, *Cosmopolitan’s* regular fashion feature, the ‘Look Book’, exemplifies the sexually confident, defiant feminine identity offered to its readers (see Machin and van Leeuwen 2007), using a model in her early 20s with an introductory paragraph promising

**Fashion**

Your dusk-till-dawn **lust-haves**, party must-haves and **sure-fire sexy hits** for the festive season
Vocabulary choices (‘lust-haves’, ‘sure-fire sexy hits’) associate the “right” party wear with the goal of achieving sexual conquest; furthermore, the modal ‘must-have’ and its playful parody ‘lust-haves’, send a message to readers that whilst sexual adventure can be viewed casually, dressing appropriately for it is almost an obligation. The focus of these seasonal fashion pages is on preparing readers for the necessity of display e.g.:

A little red dress will keep you the centre of attention at any party
Get ready to shine in a smattering of sequins and plenty of glitter

The way different semiotic resources are used illustrates the complex and contradictory nature of culturally defined practices of acceptable femininity. Sontag argues that cultural standards impose on women the duty look in the mirror whilst simultaneously characterising this as narcissism and yet as these magazine features demonstrate, ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ (Mulvey 2009: 19) is the communicative leitmotif. Older women (i.e. 35+) are generally not represented in the fashion pages of either Cosmopolitan or Marie Claire. Ageing appearance is addressed via a limited number of skincare advertisements which frame their message in ways which offer least disruption to the construction of youthful femininity, e.g. Marie Claire’s July 2013 edition features a number of advertisements which do not have a social actor, such as Olay Regenerist. These anti-ageing advertising messages account for a small proportion of the overall advertising content of these magazines, the majority of which focus on discourses of body maintenance and enhancement through beauty and cosmetic advertising. The implicit message to the reader is that the ageing appearance is a distant reality which need not disrupt ‘the prestige of youth’ (Sontag 1978: 73), but at the same time, as Sontag further argues, the construction of an acceptable feminine identity is presented as an aspect of female duty, necessary components of which—sexualised glamour, overt display, and youthfulness—are presented as ‘an alreadyness of facts’ (Williamson 1978: 44).

A key consideration for the analysis is how these seasonally driven discourses of glamour and display are applied to older women, and what insights can be gained as a consequence regarding cultural
attitudes to ageing femininity. As ideological encapsulations, the front covers of Good Housekeeping and Woman & Home have a different set of balances to achieve in addressing a significantly older readership than that of Cosmopolitan and Marie Claire. They must accommodate the notion of glamour, as befits the discursive conventions of the Christmas party/summer holiday season, in a way which is appropriate yet still sufficiently aspirational.

**Nigella Lawson: Modified Glamour**

This example from Good Housekeeping suggests that the need to navigate these complex balances necessarily produces a more nuanced portrayal of glamour. The front cover features a full body shot of celebrity chef and author Nigella Lawson, against a red background. She sits on a stool luxuriously draped with red fabric, one arm resting on the gilded back of an ornate chair. Part of a highly decorated Christmas tree is visible in the background behind her left shoulder. Lawson’s white gown creates a striking visual contrast with the rich red and gold tones of the background, but also establishes strong cohesion with many of the textual elements on the front cover e.g. ‘From the heart’, ‘Totally traditional stress-free feast’.

Lawson, in her early 50s, is widely considered to be a beautiful woman. Her physical capital—long glossy hair, striking brown eyes and voluptuous body—is used to communicate aspirational glamour which is at the same time modified by a number of visual strategies to make it age-appropriate and non-threatening: the choice of white for her dress with its obvious connotations of purity and virginity contains the level of sexiness; she is contextualised by the semiotics of Christmas and home—the Christmas tree and the chair—suggesting the privacy of the domestic domain; her seated pose, connoting the party hostess sitting at her own table, further reinforces the impression of cosy domesticity, perhaps setting up an echo in readers’ minds of her self-described persona as the ‘domestic goddess’. Visual juxtapositions with the different textual elements (‘recipes and ideas’, ‘from the heart’, ‘stress free feast’) further locate her in the domain of home, family, hearth and kitchen.
In this way, Lawson’s inherent glamour and sexual attractiveness is toned down to make her an acceptable embodiment of older femininity. The idea of acceptability, itself an ambivalent notion, rests on a greater cultural ambivalence regarding sexuality and its role in the construction of ageing femininity. As Anne Karpf comments in the context of her writing on older female models, ‘in our culture, sexiness in older women is disturbing’ (The Guardian Weekend, 22 February 2014). Lawson represents a more complex construction of femininity than Scherzinger in terms of the way in which discourses of ageing, appearance and sexuality are balanced. Lawson’s glamour and sexuality are toned down, and her domestic credentials dialled up, using visual and textual cues designed to give her accessibility as well as maintaining her status as an aspirational figure. Woodward observes that there are clear tensions inherent in the way in which ‘age and gender structure each other in a complex set of reverberating feedback loops’ (2006: 163). The taken-for-granted cultural “rules” which stipulate ‘the appropriate way to “be” an old(er) woman…’ (Railton and Watson 2012: 212), dictate that Lawson as the exemplary older woman is only allowed a carefully modified kind of glamour in which sexual attractiveness has little place.

Once again, the inner pages demonstrate how the magazines develop the particular construction of femininity showcased on the front cover. In this case, the December issue of Woman & Home, whose target consumer is similar to Good Housekeeping, exemplifies how glamour is interpreted and expressed visually and linguistically for an older female consumer. Ten women aged 36–66 are featured across two double-page spreads, in the first one wearing black party dresses (n.b. LBD = Little Black Dress), and in the second in gold/metallic outfits. One of the most significant differences between this and Cosmopolitan’s ‘Look Book’ lies in the discursive framing. Each section of the article is introduced by a headline that is procedural in its linguistic construction e.g.:

10 take on the LBD
Anything goes, as long as it’s black! The classic LBD is virtually comfort dressing with a style and a shape to suit every figure. But fancy a change? Just turn the page…
10 take on glam gold
Mix black with molten metallics and you’ll have all the sparkle you
need to shine through Christmas for any occasion

The use of imperatives (‘mix black…’) together with the direct address
of ‘you’ (‘you’ll have all the sparkle you need’) make it clear to the reader
that this is glamour presented in the context of necessary advice; the ref-
erence to body shape (‘a style and shape to suit every figure’) is implic-
itly evaluative, encoding the assumption that performing glamour as an
older woman needs to take into account the constraints of a ‘deficient
body’ (Bartky 1990: 29). Furthermore, the women used in the feature
are not models but “real” women, whose names, ages and professions
are shown as captions underneath their photograph. Each identifying
caption also has a headline that explains the choice of dress, often relat-
ing it implicitly to an aspect of body shape:

Flattering Curvy Cut
As worn by Saskia Osmond-Evans, 36, senior PR manager for Evans

So forgiving…The shift for all figures
As worn by Orla Dunn, 51, mother to two boys, aged 15 and 17

The procedural nature of these statements, together with evaluative lexis
such as ‘flattering’ and ‘forgiving’, carry the suggestion of bodily imper-
fections needing to be disguised, further reinforcing the overall con-
text of modified glamour. So different textual and visual elements work
to construct an interpretation of glamour that is permissible because
it is anchored in, and modified by, the traditional domains of older femininity—home and family—from which sexuality is absent. The
assumed interdependence of older femininity and domesticity is pres-
ent throughout the Christmas editions of both Good Housekeeping and
Woman & Home, where female celebrities such as Kirstie Allsop (41),
Julia Bradbury (42) and Fern Britton (55) are shown glamorously dressed
but positioned by the accompanying text as sources of commonsense
female wisdom, sharing festive tips, advice and plans with the reader.

The survey of these magazines, albeit on a small scale, illustrates the
inherent ambivalence in the way older women are represented as well
as the powerful influence of cultural expectations governing standards of acceptable older femininity. The embedded nature of these cultural conventions, defined by ‘the watchwords of attractive older femininity… decorum, poise, elegance and grace’ (Railton and Watson 2012: 200) are thrown into sharper relief by the semiotic conventions of Christmas and summer holidays, in which discourses of glamour and display predominate, and cultural focus on appearance and the body intensifies as a result. Older women are generally absent from the fashion pages of magazines with a younger age-profile, where the feminine ideal is assumed to be youthful, based on sexualised glamour and overt display. Furthermore, the presence of older women in a number of special features often serves to reinforce the narrative of youthfulness as the ideal. For example, the feature on Debbie Harry in Marie Claire’s July 2013 edition, whilst ostensibly celebratory, is nonetheless based on covert ageist evaluations that reinforce the negative comparison between the “then” of her youthful prime and the “now” of her mature years, resulting in a portrayal of ageing femininity that is at best ambivalent. In choosing how to represent older women, all the magazines surveyed have a series of balances to achieve; the youth-oriented discourses of Cosmopolitan and Marie Claire must accommodate the discourses of older femininity in order to deliver balanced appeal to their readership. Magazines with an older profile such as Good Housekeeping and Woman & Home must present a realistic yet still aspirational portrayal of older femininity. However, it seems that even in publications with an older readership there is a limited repertoire of ageing femininities offered to readers, drawn, as Caldas-Coulthard (1996) observes, from a shared—and limited—cultural comfort zone in which older women are allowed to be wise (i.e. the agony aunt Irma Kurtz [78]); professional commentators (i.e. Carol Vorderman [54]); icons (Debbie Harry [68]); survivors (i.e. Dawn French [54]); intellectual role models (i.e. Joan Bakewell [82]); even beautiful (i.e. Helen Mirren [69]), but always subject to the complex balance of effort and restraint (Railton and Watson 2012: 200) which defines the stringent and contradictory cultural “rules” imposed on older women, particularly in the domain of appearance. As illustrated by the feature on Nigella Lawson, it seems that older women are
allowed—even expected—to be glamorous, but in a way which is carefully mitigated and desexualised.

References

Over the next two chapters, the focus shifts from the public voices explored in the previous chapters to the private voices of people’s everyday experience of ageing. In the course of 19 face-to-face interviews, I have been able to examine in depth the language real people use to express their innermost feelings about ageing. The result is a rich corpus of commentary on the day-to-day business of ageing: a deeply personal, intimately experienced phenomenon that is lived, monitored and evaluated as part of the texture of daily life. These private voices provide an important—and largely unexplored—empirical perspective on how the complex process of constructing and expressing gender and age identity is managed in everyday life. Taken together, this and the following Chapter 7 show how close analysis of the language of these private voices illuminates the ways in which individuals, and women in particular, evaluate their subjective experiences of ageing, the linguistic resources they call on, and whether/how public discourses influence how they talk about their experiences. The analysis is divided
into two parts: the first, and focus of the current chapter, looks at how respondents talk about and evaluate ageing in different ways: as an abstract phenomenon in the context of dominant cultural ‘models’ of ageing, and as an intensely personal physical process. The second part of the analysis, explored in Chapter 7, examines a central preoccupation that emerges from the data: how respondents talk about and evaluate their ageing appearance.

I explain in Chapter 1 why I have chosen to focus primarily on the mid-life cohort (whilst also drawing on data from the other age categories in my sample). The cultural visibility of the ‘new middle age’ (see Chapter 2), uneasily and uncertainly located between the (culturally driven) aspiration of youthfulness and the imperatives of older age, makes the mid-life a focus for the wider discourses which continue to polarise youth and age, glorifying the former, pathologising the latter. The analysis in this chapter shows how the power of these discourses shapes the individual landscape of ageing, directly influencing the language people use to construct their own ageing and forcing a causal link between the ageing process and how personal progress through life is judged. Amongst the mid-lifers in particular, this renders the process of identity construction an uncertain and risky undertaking. I return in this chapter to some of the cultural themes discussed in Chapter 2, to investigate how they are lived through the private voices of people whose lives are directly affected by them. I begin by discussing the dominant cultural models of ageing as they play out in respondents’ narratives: the notion of pinnacle followed by inevitable decline; the cultural tension between “successful” ageing based on continuing productivity and the expectation of decrepitude; the conflation of ageing with illness; the segregation of old age from the rest of the lifecourse. I then move to the heart of the chapter, the analysis of the private voices of ageing in the context of these public discourses. Chapter 1 gave a brief outline of the analytical frameworks I draw on in my approach to the data, which I have discussed more fully in Chapter 3. However, in order to give some context to the analysis in this and the following chapter I have chosen to begin with an overview of the data gathering and interview process, and of the participants themselves.
Overview of Interview Data

As I briefly explain in Chapter 1, this dataset is composed of a series of qualitative face-to-face interviews which I use to explore how respondents use language to evaluate their experiences of ageing. I felt that a qualitative approach was the most appropriate method of gathering this data, particularly given its potentially sensitive and personal nature; as Litosseliti and Leadbeater comment:

> qualitative research focuses on allowing research participants to explore, in their own words, issues, beliefs, values and experiences in relation to the research questions posed. (2011: 93)

The interview format was consciously modelled on the ‘conversational research interview’ (Enk 2009: 1266), i.e. an informal and semi-structured interaction, which I chose to base on a different model from the historical conceptualisation of the interview as ‘a unilaterally guided means of excavating information’ (Gubrium et al. 2012: 27). Here, my role as the interviewer was as co-collaborator in the process, and the role of the respondent as an active and empowered subject, rather than the more traditional ‘vessel of answers’ (ibid.: 32). Prior to each interview I sought to mobilise participants’ taken-for-granted background knowledge of the interview as a site for personal narration by encouraging them to think of it “as a conversation”. This was intended to signal a request for intimacy and an intentional framing of the interview as a socially situated interaction as well as a suitably supportive forum for authentic disclosure.

Approach to Interviews

In planning my approach to the interviews I was mindful of the risk of research bias, as discussed by Platt (2012), also referred to as the ‘interviewer effect’ (Singleton Jr. and Straits 2012: 78)\(^1\) whereby the presence

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or behaviour of the interviewer can unduly influence participants’ responses. Whilst it may not be possible to negate this phenomenon entirely, I took steps and employed strategies to minimise its effect.

Secondly, I took into account my own role as interviewer and mid-life woman. As I explain above, I based my approach as interviewer on the model of the researcher as ‘active interviewer’ (Lillrank 2012: 281) and facilitator of the interview interaction. To achieve the necessary balance of detachment and active engagement with respondents, I consciously employed a range of linguistic/interactional techniques (i.e. active listening) to facilitate conversational collaboration whilst maintaining focus on their narratives, thereby minimising the risk of detecting a research—or researcher—bias. I felt that my status as a mid-life woman would be advantageous in terms of the interpersonal dynamics of the interview, as a means of creating rapport with mid-life and older respondents, and neutralising any potential perception of power asymmetry with younger cohorts. As I acknowledge in my concluding Chapter 9, inviting a group of people to reflect on their own experiences of ageing necessarily creates a tendency to problematise this process, perhaps partly due to the nature of the interview situation in which there may be a correlation between negative evaluation and perceptions of honesty/authenticity. However, this in itself can also be seen as symptomatic of the powerful influence of cultural attitudes towards ageing; the consistency of the findings discussed in the chapters which follow argues that this commonality of attitudes is a result of cultural impositions rather than the influence of any discernible research agenda on my part.

Over a four-month period (September–December 2011) I carried out 19 conversational interviews with respondents ranging in age from 21 to 80 (detailed profiles are provided below). As the focus of the analysis is women’s experience of ageing, of the 19 respondents 17 were female, with 2 males included for the purposes of comparison. All interviews were carried out on a one-to-one basis with the exception of one in which two sisters, both in their early 20s, opted to be interviewed together. As I explain above, the interviews were semi-structured in format, following a loose discussion guide whose purpose was to shape the flow of the interview, allowing comparability of data
without constraining or over-directing participants’ responses. I used a selection of stimulus material during the interviews: e.g. current articles concerned with age/ageing taken from newspapers and lifestyle media, images of older female and male public figures and celebrities, and a small selection of anti-ageing advertisements, some of which have been analysed as part of the investigation of skincare advertising in Chapter 4. I transcribed and analysed all the interview data personally (transcription conventions are included in Appendix B).

**Recruitment**

I used a variety of professional and social networks for recruitment. Potential respondents contacted me directly if they were willing to take part so that they self-recruited; this is significant in that this was an active choice for each of them, and indeed many emphasised in their replies that they were keen to talk about their experiences of ageing and had strong views on the matter. The cultural problematisation of ageing, although historically focused on mid-life women, is not by any means solely confined to this age cohort (in fact many anti-ageing messages target women in their early 20s), so I felt it was important to reflect the broad influence of such cultural messages of ageing by recruiting women across a broad span of ages. Interestingly, proportionally more people from the mid-life cohort came forward, indicating a level of engagement/preoccupation with ageing amongst this age group, suggesting a rationale for a primary focus on the mid-life cohort (i.e. aged between 42 and 56). This approach meant that I could examine a specific age cohort whilst also drawing on data from the other age groups for points of comparison and contextualisation. I felt this avoided the potential limitations of a sole focus on a single group of individuals. The mid-life cohort is particularly significant in terms of this study in that these individuals are transitioning between youth and (old) age, occupying a fluidly defined lifestage in which they are positioned by their own and culture’s perception as no longer young but not yet old, and as I argue below, this lifestage brings particular challenges to the process of identity construction. However, as my analysis will show, the mid-life
needs also to be understood in terms of its place in the lifecourse as a whole. Prospective evaluations of mid-life by younger age cohorts, together with retrospective and comparative evaluations by the mid-lifers themselves as well as the older participants in the sample, enabled a broader and more nuanced analysis of the different aspects of ageing.

Age therefore was the principal criterion on which I selected my respondents from the initial group of volunteers. Inevitably this means that in terms of other markers of identity such as ethnicity, sexuality, socio-demographic status, educational background etc., this is a relatively narrow sample; it is a white, middle-class, heterosexual, cis-gendered group of women and men. I considered the lack of diversity of the sample but felt that I needed to prioritise the specific age-related focus of this study. I also felt that the relative uniformity of the sample would allow me to focus on age without needing to factor in other variables. I was also to a lesser degree constrained by the availability and willingness to be interviewed of potential participants. I think however, that whilst acknowledging its limitations, the work I have undertaken here offers a framework for more diverse intersectional studies of ageing and gender, and opportunities for fruitful collaborations with other scholars in the field (I expand on this in Chapter 9).

**Summary Participant Profiles**

To comply with requirements of data protection, and to establish a clear means of referencing anonymised extracts from individual accounts, I developed a coding system which identifies each participant by a unique discriminator indicating gender, age and ranking in the total sample; e.g. F9-48 signifies a 48 year-old female participant who is listed as 9th in the total sample of 19 (see Table 6.1). A number of the (potential) participants recommended friends and family members to take part, so that the sample developed organically, built on a network of interpersonal relationships that I have also captured in Table 6.1. This has added a dimension to the analysis in giving me access to more intimate evaluations between participants who are related or known to each other. The interviews took place in a location chosen by the participant, either their home or office meeting room. Interviews were on average an hour
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant coding reference</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Relationship to other participants</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Educational level</th>
<th>Professional status</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>F1-21</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Sister of F2-23</td>
<td>British</td>
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<td>Student</td>
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<td>23</td>
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<td>Events organiser</td>
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<td>23</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Daughter of F11-54</td>
<td>British/American (resident in UK since childhood)</td>
<td>Tertiary</td>
<td>Brand Manager</td>
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<tr>
<td>F4-36</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Swedish (resident in UK for 5 years)</td>
<td>Tertiary</td>
<td>Marketing Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F5-38</td>
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<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Tertiary</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>F6-42</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
<td>British</td>
<td>Tertiary</td>
<td>Freelance consultant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F7-44</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Wife of M18-44</td>
<td>British</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Finance Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F8-45</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
<td>British</td>
<td>Tertiary</td>
<td>Commercial Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F9-48</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Daughter-in-law of F17-80</td>
<td>British</td>
<td>Tertiary</td>
<td>Self-employed recruitment consultant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F10-49</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Friend of F13-56</td>
<td>British</td>
<td>Tertiary</td>
<td>Entrepreneur</td>
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<tr>
<td>F11-54</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Mother of F3-23</td>
<td>American (resident in UK for 15 years)</td>
<td>Tertiary</td>
<td>Chief Marketing Officer</td>
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<tr>
<td>F12-56</td>
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<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
<td>British</td>
<td>Tertiary</td>
<td>Professional photographer</td>
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<tr>
<td>F13-56</td>
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<td>F14-64</td>
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<td>F16-80</td>
<td>80</td>
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<td>44</td>
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<tr>
<td>M19 53</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Male</td>
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<td>British</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
in duration and were recorded using a specialist Sony MP3 recording device. Permission was obtained beforehand for the recording, and participants were also assured that the process complied with standard data protection procedures (i.e. anonymised transcription, data ownership, secure data storage).

The Cultural Appropriation of Ageing

Whilst it could be argued that cultural attitudes to ageing are shifting and that the cultural, linguistic and visual repertoire is becoming more flexible, it can also be argued that powerful cultural ‘master narratives’ (Gullette 1997: 8 and passim) continue to shape individual attitudes towards ageing, for example: the expectation of pinnacle followed by decline; the importance attributed to chronological age markers and ‘decadism’ (Coupland 2009a: 960); ‘menopause discourse’ (Gullette 1997: 99); and ageing as a ‘biomedical model of decline’ (Hepworth 2003: 89). These cultural messages are enshrined in and disseminated by mass-media discourses, as Twigg notes in her analysis of Vogue:

For magazines like Vogue, however, aging sets in early, starting at the point at which youth begins to fade, often regarded as the late twenties (2010: 473).

As my analysis will show, individual stances appear to owe much of their linguistic construction and ideological foundation to the combined cultural and media appropriation of ageing.

Pinnacle and Decline

… you know we must make the most of our 20s ‘cos it’s all downhill from there ((laughs)) [F2-23]

I took out a photograph of when I was probably the age that I liked myself best at…27…I would say that was the sort of optimum year physically [F13-56]
These extracts, albeit from two women at different stages in their lives, illustrate a commonality across the sample in terms of how people evaluate the stages and transitions in their lives, and significantly, relate this to the ageing process. For F2-23 as she looks forward, what waits at the end of her 20s is ‘all downhill’ by comparison; similarly F13-56, looking back at being 27, describes it as ‘the optimum year physically’ with the implication that the intervening period of time has represented a falling away from that pinnacle. There appears to be a reciprocal impact between how they perceive and evaluate their ageing process and how they judge their personal progress through life. The language of these 20-something women demonstrates the extent to which these cultural and media messages have become embedded:

… age is so positive and so like whorrrr when you’re under 21 ‘cos you can’t wait to be 18 and you can’t wait to be 21 and as soon as you’re 21 22 people make jokes about you being old...

For F2-23, each transition moment, however brief, is regarded as significant, given meaning by the chronological age markers associated with it; thus ‘you can’t wait to be 18 and you can’t wait to be 21’ with the repeated use of ‘can’t wait’ conveys her impatience to reach the perceived pinnacle of being 21, still considered to be the traditional gateway to maturity with its associations of independence and self-determination. However, her next clause already anticipates the decline that is assumed to follow the pinnacle (‘as soon as you’re 21 22 people make jokes about you being old…’). Nonetheless, transition is evaluated positively at this point in her life:

this is what I’ve always wanted to have you know to be sort of a bit more serious and to have all the things I want in my grasp like I feel at this stage I can do anything I want like I’m on the cusp I can see my future forming [F2-23]

Vocabulary choices (‘I’m on the cusp’), modals of possibility/capability (‘I can do anything...’) and the repeated use of the present (‘I can see my future...’) give a sense of momentum to her speech patterns,
anchoring her in the present moment whilst bringing a hypothetical future closer, making it concrete with the physicality of ‘in my grasp’. Another 20-something woman echoes this sense of a pinnacle moment:

and then there’s a small window of your 20s where you think you know I wish I could kind of stay this age forever… [F1-21]

The language of this pinnacle moment, common to the respondents in this age cohort, indicates an assumption already taken for granted by the second decade, that the lifecourse is constructed around a (brief) peak which carries within it the inevitability of decline, expressed overtly (‘it’s all downhill from there’) as F2-23 comments, or left implicit and unspoken as in F1-21’s wish to ‘kind of stay this age forever’.

The notion of pinnacle and decline is also a powerful motif for the mid-life women, although—perhaps unsurprisingly—as this 49 year-old woman shows, the lens is retrospective rather than prospective:

I would say that my pinnacle was probably 10 years ago…. and I would say that 10 years on that’s definitely waning [F10-49]

Here decadal markers (‘10 years ago…10 years on…’) structure the negative prosody in F 49’s description of the contrast between the past pinnacle and the present decline, establishing a comparison between ‘then’ and ‘now’ which is implicitly defined by loss and diminishment, expressed through the inherently negative ‘waning’. The analysis in Chapter 7 suggests that for all female respondents, and for the mid-lifers in particular, the concept of pinnacle and decline is understood and interpreted most immediately in terms of physical appearance. Not only that, for some of these women the menopause is a highly significant marker of decline, intimately bound up with how they inhabit their bodies and judge their appearance. A 45 year-old woman comments

… I’m conscious at some point my menstrual cycle will start to change I don’t know when that will be…. but thinking about the menopause is quite horrific…. [F8-45]
She is asked why she regards the menopause as ‘horrific’:

... well that means that I’m no longer I am definitely middle aged basically I’m no longer able to produce children .... I’ve got this image of kind of shrivelling up and drying and you know drying up.... [F8-45]

What she dreads most about the onset of menopause is the loss of fertility; the lexical group she draws on to express her fear (‘drying up’, ‘shrivelling’,) conveys at a literal level the loss of the bodily fluids related to fertility, and at a metaphorical level, the drying up of the forces which constitute her sense of self-identity and drive her sexual energy. It is significant that she still recalls how her father talked about the start of her menstrual cycle:

... I remember my dad saying to me when my periods started really embarrassing oh you’re a woman now... [F8-45]

His words may continue to resonate with her because they echo wider cultural attitudes towards the menopause, so that as a mature woman, F8-45’s interpretation is that if the start of menstruation symbolises her transition into womanhood then the end of her reproductive life marks a transition to something less than womanhood, indicated by her subsequent (extremely telling) comment ‘you therefore cease to become [sic] a woman’. This language suggests that her projection of life post-menopause is more complex than merely a phase of decline. In an unconscious echo of de Beauvoir’s notion of ‘a third sex’ (1949 [1997]: 63), F8-45 calls into question the foundations on which her gendered identity is constructed, seeing herself consigned by culture and biology to the genderless, desexualised hinterland as described by de Beauvoir, ‘not male [but] no longer female’ (ibid.). For another mid-life woman in the study, the menopause also marks a transition to a sort of decline:

... up until a couple of months ago I was having regular periods and then when they did all the millions of tests I was having hot flushes and I said am I in the menopause ... and they said not even close.... but what I hated about it is I started to wonder ooh I feel a little uncomfortable now I wonder if that’s menopause... [F11-54]
As with F8-45, F11-54 also evaluates the menopause through powerful negative prosody expressed through choice of lexis (‘hated’, ‘uncomfortable’), although her anxiety has a different origin:

I just it goes back to living every day at 120% I don’t want to feel lousy y’know I refuse to accept as the norm like I’m a little tired…. so I don’t think it’s loss of fertility it’s I don’t want to feel bad and I want to have a healthy sex life for a long time… [F11-54]

F11-54 fears the loss of physical and sexual energy (‘I don’t want to feel bad and I want to have a healthy sex life for a long time’), more than loss of her reproductive ability. However both women view the menopause as the harbinger of inevitable decline, a perception which can be tracked back to the menopause discourses disseminated in mass-media communication, which perpetuate wider cultural constructs of menopause-as-illness/decline (see Greer 1991; Gullette 1997 and Chapter 5 of this book). The dominance of such menopause commentary, which Gullette terms the ‘menoboom’ (1997: 98), leads these women to view it as a physical as well as an emotional phenomenon, a profoundly significant transition marker heralding the decline after the pinnacle, the start of a lifestage defined by loss: of youthfulness, energy, fertility, sexuality and femininity. The force and intensity of the negative language both women use is notable and in this particular context indicates the influence of cultural problematisation of the menopause. Counter-discourses that attempt to construct post-menopause more positively, i.e. as a time of liberation and tranquility as Greer (1991) proposes, have seemingly yet to make any impact on their perceptions. The comparisons between ‘then’ and ‘now’ as they are expressed by many of the mid-life women in the study indicate an embedded set of attitudes in which ‘now’ is characterised as a decline, a falling away of attractiveness in comparison with a younger, other self. The commonality of these perceptions again indicates the influence of public discourses on the language of private voices.

For participants aged 75 and over, bodily changes are the particular markers of transition-as-decline. These are often experienced
symbolically as much as physically, and, significantly, draw on another powerful discourse that is bound up with the cultural construct of pinnacle and decline—the conflation of age and illness. A 75 year-old woman recounts a highly significant transition moment in her life:

... I think it [sc. transition into old age] happened when I was 60 because that’s when I started having real problems with arthritis... and I thought huh god this is it the beginning of old age... that was a bit of a watershed for me a deterioration in health... [F15-75]

Her words exemplify the prevailing decline narrative in which, as Gullette (1997) argues, the “normal” decline of the body is pathologised. In a complex stretch of discourse, she makes a causal link, contained within her use of ‘because’, between the onset of arthritis and the onset of old age (‘it [old age] happened when I was 60 because that’s when I started having real problems with arthritis...’). In doing so she subscribes to a dominant cultural attitude to ageing which makes the language of ageing synonymous with the discourse of illness (I discuss this more fully below). For F15-75, ageing and illness are experienced as part of the same phenomenon in that both lead her to an unwelcome ‘watershed’ in terms of her self-perception, heralding the beginning of a new life stage—one defined by decline (‘...the beginning of old age.... that was a bit of a watershed for me a deterioration in health’). At the same time however, her choice of language suggests that ageing is unlike illness in that it is inevitable (‘this is it’).

The dominance of the body as the expression of identity and the importance of its physical changes are significant transition markers at any age, but particularly for older cohorts the body takes on a further significance as a signifier of what has been lost, not only physically, but also in terms of relevance and community. Twigg writes that:

‘... the Fourth Age can seem to be not just about the body, but nothing but the body. It dominates subjective experience, to the extent that it swamps all other factors in determining matters like morale or wellbeing’. (2003: 64)
Twigg’s words find an echo in the narrative of an 80 year-old female respondent:

…. and then my walking went and it was almost as though my whole social life had finished… [F16-80]

The perspective of these fourth age participants is strongly retrospective, expressed through frequent use of the simple past and verbal constructions such as ‘used to’, which evoke past phases in their lives with a sense of finality, as closed chapters in the lifecourse. For these women, the present appears to be defined by the past not the future; having made the final transition into deep old age what remains is a series of present moments lived within an arc of decline, based on a retrospective, fragile sense of self-identity increasingly under threat of submersion by the physical changes of ageing.

The commentary of the women in my study shows the extent to which the cultural construct of pinnacle and decline is embedded in their expectations of the lifecourse. Not only that, the notion of decline is intimately bound up with the ageing process, in terms of the physical ageing of the body, but also of the ageing appearance. However, alongside the culturally-driven model of inevitable decline there is another equally potent discourse which constructs the notion of “successful” ageing.

**Conflicting Models of Ageing: ‘The Unrelenting Body’ Versus the Decrepit Body**

Reflecting on what constitutes successful ageing seems to have considerable salience for respondents across most age categories but particularly for the mid-lifers, perhaps due to the fluid and transitional status of the mid-life (see Chapter 2), whereby the desire for attitudinal distance from old(er) age must be balanced with its increasing physical and temporal proximity. Respondents often cite role models as a means of making the abstract notion of successful ageing more concrete. This is illustrated by a 45 year-old woman’s description of her mother:
... the fact that she’s [sc. mother] so active because I think keeping active keeps you young keep your brain active keep your body active that’ll keep you young she’s a very positive role model... [F8-45]

The way she describes her mother reveals much about her own notion of successful ageing. Her repeated use of ‘active’ emphasises the importance she places on activity as a component in her approving evaluation of her mother as a “good” role model (‘she’s so active...keeping active...keep your brain active...’). By juxtaposing ‘active’ and ‘young’ throughout this stretch of discourse it is clear that her positive evaluation of ‘keeping active’ is because she sees activity as synonymous with the values of youth, a means of maintaining the connection between the inner self and outer body (see below). If successful ageing is contingent on activity, her use of language implicitly suggests that it is also contingent on maintaining an alignment with youthfulness. Her repetition of ‘keep’ (‘keep your brain active keep your body active’), semantically poised between an imperative and a quasi-conditional, appears almost evangelical. F8-45 describes both her parents, aged in their 70s, in terms which exemplify Grenier’s notion of the culturally constructed ‘unrelenting body’ (2012: 92):

... my dad built a big barn this year and he’s got 2 tractors mum got a quad bike for her 60th.... y’know they’re out there mulching out the stables... [F8-45]

Her verb choices (‘built’, ‘mulching out’) and nouns (‘tractors’, ‘quad bike’) create a positive prosody based on ceaseless activity and productivity, which Grenier argues is ‘embedded in success-based models of transition in late life’ (ibid). The pride with which she recounts her parents’ activities as if listing a series of achievements, suggests that she has absorbed this model of successful ageing into the infrastructure of her own aspirations.

When respondents talk about personal aspirations for their own older age, the notion of activity acquires a deeper significance than the merely physical, as illustrated by a 48 year-old woman:
... I think **being fit** I'm not that fit but you know being **able to run for the bus**.... I’m not ready to have a twinset and purple rinse and any of that **I want to run my company** for 10 years and then **I want to have enough energy** if our kiddies have babies when we did... [F9-48]

She constructs activity in terms of physical fitness (‘being able to run for the bus’), but also as kind of fitness for purpose (‘I want to run my company for 10 years’), signifying her desire for continuing agency and control and therefore power and status. In that sense her desire ‘to be able to run for the bus’ and ‘to run my company’ are connected by more than just choice of verb; it is an expression of her determination to succeed according to her own and prevailing culture’s standards, and this is intimately connected with being successful at ageing.

The examples from the accounts of these two women illustrate the extent to which they have both absorbed the requirement to age successfully, conflating the notion of activity with the language of youthfulness and its attributes (i.e. fitness, energy, engagement, relevance and agency). However, alongside the model of successful ageing sits the equally dominant cultural model of age-as-decline, based on an expectation of the aesthetic and physical failure of the body. As Grenier argues:

> the challenge at this stage is in considering the extent to which the pendulum of dominant discourse has swung from one extreme focused on dependency to the other in its overemphasis on success and productivity. (2012: 90)

The conflicting nature of these models points up an unresolved cultural tension around ageing which translates down to the level of individual experience. The strength of respondents’ desire to age successfully (i.e. actively and productively) is counterbalanced by the fear of unsuccessful or problematic ageing, in which ageing is conflated with illness. These tensions find expression in a shared vocabulary of fear.

**Ageing-as-Illness**

... I do have a **fear of decrepitude**.... **ill health** and I have particularly in my (xxxx) on my own a **fear of loneliness**.... my mother died not long
This 49 year-old woman’s personal feelings about ageing are a combination of social/emotional anxieties (‘a fear of loneliness’) and physical concerns, expressed by the strongly negative ‘decrepitude’ which also suggests a sense of pathological rather than merely “normal” decline. In fact her description of her elderly father’s situation (‘my father’s not in very good condition at the moment and I don’t really wish that on anybody’), reinforces the causal relationship she perceives between ageing and illness. Her final comment, ‘it gets you in the end’, in which ‘it’ could refer equally to ageing or to illness, further reinforces the conflation of these two discourses. Her comment fits within a body of language that people commonly draw on to talk about serious illnesses such as cancer, characterising them as the enemy, as preying on the human body (similar findings are observed by Charteris-Black and Seale in their (2010) work on the language of illness). There is little in F10-49’s narrative that constructs ageing as a natural process which will eventually—naturally—claim the body. Rather it is seen as an act of imposition, even predation, which must be resisted, a notion echoed in language used by other respondents:

… but I would hope that I’m in better condition [sc. than father] hopefully warding off … [M19-53]

… I hope that if you carry on exercising and hopefully you can stave off some of this muscle loss… [M18-44]

Both M19-53 and M18-44, share a hope that ageing, like illness, can be ‘warded off’ by the preventative measures they are taking.

The cultural discourse of ageing = illness generates intense, personally felt emotions amongst respondents, expressed through the language of fear as I observe above:

… there’s a bit of me that’s scared I don’t want to get old none of us do… [F7-44]

… fear of dying before you’ve achieved your full potential… and personally that’s the fear of growing old um fear that as you get older there are
more health risks and some of those health risks may limit what one can do… [F7-44]

Expressions of negative emotion coalesce around the word ‘fear’ (‘fear of dying’, ‘my biggest fear’); unhedged phrases emphasise the intensity of the feelings involved; pronoun shifts signify the complex positioning work being undertaken as respondents seek both to achieve distance from their fears and anxieties whilst invoking community and shared experience. The complex system of linguistic resources used to make such shifts in alignment/disalignment is central to understanding how speakers position themselves—engage with—a particular utterance, and with other viewpoints which might be in play. For example, F7-44 moves from direct ownership of her fear of ageing signified by the personal pronoun (‘there’s a bit of me that’s scared’) to the more widely inclusive ‘us’ (‘none of us do’) by which she seeks to position herself as part of a wider community of experience. Her acknowledgement of/alignment with a shared belief system is categorised in Martin and White’s system as a heteroglossic perspective (2005: 92). This is relevant to the analysis undertaken here in that it allows a deeper understanding of the complex manoeuvring involved in constructing an attitudinal stance. In F7-44’s second extract, in which she talks more specifically about death, she uses the second person pronoun to create distance between the self and a proposition presumably too difficult to own in a more personal way (‘fear of dying before you’ve achieved your full potential’). She then moves from the distance of ‘you’ to the more disengaged ‘one’ (‘some of those health risks may limit what one can do’).

Whilst participants talk about age/ing and illness using a common vocabulary based on anxiety and fear of disempowerment, there is a paradox surrounding the ways in which they relate age and illness. If age is like illness it can be resisted, ‘warded off’, even cured through acts of agency such as cosmetic surgery and medical interventions; but if age is unlike illness, despite those efforts it is a kind of inevitable imposition upon the body which ultimately cannot be resisted. For the fourth-age

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2Martin and White’s use of heteroglossia in their system is based on Bakhtin’s (1981) work on dialogism and heteroglossia.
cohort, whatever their physical state, illness becomes the frame within which all physical changes—whatever their nature or origin—are evaluated, as illustrated by an 80 year-old woman while discussing her (unfulfilled) desire to go travelling:

… then I look at it and think well you know I’m too old now [xxxx] go rushing around partly because my memory and that is something that um that does make me a little fearful I suppose because so many of my friends two of my best friends their husbands died of Alzheimer’s… [F17-80]

F17-80 is active and energetic, and throughout her narrative up to that point has made no mention of physical decline, and indeed through continued investment in her appearance aligns herself more with the discourses of youthfulness than ageing, characterising herself as substantially younger than her 88 year-old husband:

I do know that underneath it all actually I think B [sc. husband] feels quite proud that he’s got someone that looks younger…. [F17-80]

It is all the more significant therefore that she juxtaposes reflections on her declining memory with a reference to Alzheimer’s disease, suggesting that in her mind any deficiency in her memory must be in some way pathological. This exemplifies the argument made by Gullette (1997) and Hepworth (2003) discussed in Chapter 2 that the taken-for-granted cultural narrative of decline both problematises and pathologises what might otherwise be accepted and evaluated as a normal physical process. The consequence is that ageing—as-illness becomes the defining narrative of this lifestage.

It seems, therefore, that all bodily changes are unquestioningly negatively evaluated as harbingers of ageing as a state of illness, rather than ageing as a lifestage which can be defined by a wider and richer range of experiences than merely that of biological decline. Amongst respondents aged 75 and above however, the physical changes of ageing are talked about with a different emphasis, related to their perceived role as signifiers of old age as a lifestage separated from the rest of the lifecourse.
Separation and Segregation

This, it could be argued, is one of the most irreconcilable and troubling conflicts experienced by these participants, shaping their perceptions of ageing and specifically of old age as a lifestage which is ‘sequestered’ (Giddens 1991: 149) from the rest of the lifecourse (see also Grenier 2012), as the following extracts illustrate:

… you can have a completely healthy life y’know up until you’re 80 and then boy do things start falling apart… [F11-54]

… my parents are old but they’re still very active so I don’t consider they’re in old age so for me old age is probably when you’re not capable of doing obviously not capable when you stop driving…. [F8-45]

Both F11-54 and F8-45 describe a perceptual threshold which exists between the phase of life before old age sets in, characterised by health and activity, and the phase which follows this notional transition moment, defined by decrepitude and disempowerment. F11-54 juxtaposes ‘a completely healthy life’ with the state when ‘things start falling apart’, separated by the chronological marker of 80, in which the sense is clearly one of “before” and “after”. Similarly F8-45 describes the phase before old age in terms of personal agency and activity (‘my parents are old but they’re still very active so I don’t consider they’re in old age’). Interestingly, the preposition ‘in’, although used in a temporal sense, is a (widely-used) spatial metaphor which in this context semantically reinforces the sense of concrete separation, as if it is possible to be outside old age before being forced into its space, from which, by implication, there is no exit. For F8-45 the passage into the space of old age turns on the notion of ‘capability’, with its associations of ability and active agency, symbolised by the ability to drive, which, when it is no longer possible, signifies the end of one lifestage and the start of another, defined by lack and loss (‘…when you’re not capable of doing obviously not capable’). This sense of separation seems also to be felt by participants who are themselves ‘in’ old age as this 80 year-old woman comments:
... I used to do an awful lot of walking... but unfortunately last year ... I was struck down with arthritis and I can’t walk like I used to I can’t do anything and y’know it’s almost as though there was a good group we used to go socialising... but now I find p’raps it’s just because I can’t walk I’m sort of (.) y’know I don’t know.... but I don’t know how they view me... [F16-80]

Her narrative is characterised by negative comparison between the active engagement of “before” intensified by the regret implicit in ‘used to’ (‘I used to do an awful lot of walking’), and the present moment, defined by the negation of those earlier activities (‘I can’t walk’, ‘I can’t do anything’). Her sense of isolation, of literally being pushed to one side as a result of her physical constraints, is implicit in her use of ‘because’ to denote cause and effect (‘p’raps it’s just because I can’t walk I’m sort of (.) but I don’t know how they view me’). Tellingly, she allows her sentence to tail off uncompleted (‘...I’m sort of (.)’), as if indicating her reluctance or inability to supply the word which might fill the linguistic and emotional void.

Hepworth describes the process of ageing as ‘at once a universal, ‘diverse’ and yet ‘vague’ human condition’ (2003: 92). However, the data in my study suggests that whilst age/ing is at one level a vague, somewhat abstract entity, it is in a much more immediate way experienced as a concrete, embodied phenomenon.

**Ageing and the Body**

**‘Bodily Betrayals’**:

I still think of myself as an attractive younger woman I don’t think of myself as middle-aged yet um.... but you know I have noticed here that my neck is starting to sag [F8-45]

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I know I’m only well nearly 23 but you do I’ve noticed you know you notice the areas that sort of get a bit wrinkly now and you just think ooh… [F2-23]

The body is central to the process of identity construction, and the complex demands placed upon it by the expectations and imperatives of consumer culture mean that the process of ageing is simultaneously a culturally constructed as well as a physical phenomenon. That said, when respondents talk about ageing as it affects them personally, as exemplified in the two extracts above, it is clearly lived first and foremost through the body, experienced most immediately—and intensely—through the body’s physical changes; these are understood both as literal and symbolic transition markers through which the ageing process is monitored and evaluated. The nature of F2-23 and F8-45’s self-scrutiny suggests that from the second decade of the life-course onwards, physical changes are minutely tracked, as signalled through mental process verbs (‘I have noticed here that my neck is starting to sag’, ‘I’ve noticed…the areas that sort of get a bit wrinkly’). Throughout the data this subjective gaze is consistently expressed through negative prosody, conveyed through linguistic features such as negatively evaluative lexical choices, connectives and qualifiers. The complex workings of the subjective gaze are explored in greater depth in Chapter 7, as part of the discussion of the central themes from the data—the “mirror moment” and its defining role in the daily lives of all the women in this study.

Twigg writes that ‘dominant culture teaches us to feel bad about aging and to start this early, reading our bodies anxiously for signs of decay and decline’ (2003: 61). The influence of these cultural messages can be directly tracked in the language F8-45 and F2-23 and other women use to describe their bodily changes. F8-45’s contrastive ‘but’ signals the foreshadowing of physical decline (‘I still think of myself as an attractive younger woman but… I have noticed here that my neck is starting to sag…’). Similarly F2-23 acknowledges that her chronological youthfulness (‘I know I’m only well nearly 23’) is no proof against the encroachment of ageing (‘but you do I’ve noticed… the areas that sort of get a bit wrinkly now’). As I suggest above, the influence of cultural
narratives of age-as-decline means that almost without exception all bodily changes are automatically construed as being the result of the ageing process, irrespective of other possible explanations such as lifestyle factors (e.g. smoking, diet), injury, lack of fitness, genetics. As a consequence such changes are universally negatively evaluated, and by female participants in particular, imbued with symbolic significance as heralding the transition to a new (and unwelcome) phase in their lives.

Evidence from respondents’ descriptions of their ‘mirror moments’ (see Chapter 7) seems to suggest that from the third decade onwards the visible signs of ageing may have an even deeper significance in terms of the part they play in the ageing process. Such bodily changes can ‘herald a disconnect[ion] from one’s sense of self’ (Meyers 2002: 149), a disruption of the relationship between the different dimensions of selfhood, so that the face in the mirror is no longer felt to represent an individual’s sense of their inner “true” self. Whilst these changes are often received as the unwelcome signals of change, they are also physical markers of the threat the ageing body poses to the process of constructing a unified self-identity.

Ageing and the Fragmentation of the Self

‘The Stranger in the Mirror’⁴

… I mean up to a year ago you wouldn’t believe it but I didn’t have any wrinkles and I got up one morning and lo and behold it was absolutely dreadful I looked in the mirror I thought flippin’ eck and I was very very conscious then but up to that point you know… I hadn’t really felt old you see… [F16-80]

… I remember when I first noticed the lines under my eyes and I must have been maybe in my 30s after a really really late night a heavy night and I was staying at a friend’s house and I looked in the mirror and I thought ((sharp intake of breath)) I’ve got lines I’m getting old… [F8-45]

⁴Taken from the title of Jane Shilling’s (2012) book (see below).
These extracts, showing women at different stages in their lives evaluating themselves in the privacy of the mirror moment, illustrate the ontological shock caused by the appearance of visible signs of ageing. F16-80’s narrative suggests that even in deep old age the realization that the body is changing (‘up to a year ago you wouldn’t believe it but I didn’t have any wrinkles’) can be both unexpected and traumatic. Her dismayed exclamation (‘flippin’ heck’) appears all the more shocking because the unwelcome discovery disrupts routines of her daily life, its intensity is reflected in the upscaling of her negative language (‘absolutely dreadful’). F8-45’s account of a similar moment of realization is expressed non-verbally as a sharp intake of breath suggesting shock and dismay (‘I looked in the mirror and I thought ((sharp intake of breath)) I’ve got lines I’m getting old’). At a fundamental level, for these women as for other women in the study, the appearance of signs of ageing signals the disjunction between the outer body and the inner self. Their reactions suggest that the face in the mirror is no longer one they fully recognise. Cultural discourses construct the body as the vehicle of self-identity, and continue to encode the youthful female body as the only legitimate object of the cultural gaze. As a consequence F16-80 and F8-45 continue to evaluate their ageing appearance as being at odds with cultural expectations of the female duty ‘to be looked at’ (Mulvey 2009: 19) and, perhaps more profoundly, with their own sense of coherent selfhood.

The imposition of the culturally constructed notion of pinnacle and decline, as I discuss above, invests the signs of bodily ageing with even greater significance. Women in particular are deeply influenced by the cultural myth of “being in the prime of life”, the notional point when outer body and inner self are perfectly unified in the production of gendered identity. The taken-for-granted decline which is assumed to follow the pinnacle is signaled by the appearance of visible signs of ageing, and it is these ‘bodily betrayals’ (Featherstone 1982 [1991]: 178) which at a certain moment force awareness of the uncertain and problematic intersections between ageing, gender and identity. Respondents from

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5 This sentiment is captured in Jane Shilling’s (2012) autobiographical account of ageing The Stranger in the Mirror.
the mid-life cohort onwards deploy a common linguistic strategy to deal with the increasing complexity of the relationship between self and the ageing body. This involves conceptualising different selves, judged to be subject to different kinds of ageing and therefore to different evaluations. It is a complicated piece of attitudinal manoeuvring brought about by the struggle to connect the notion of continuing selfhood with the reality of a changing, ageing body. Two theoretical perspectives give useful context for the analysis of such complex personal responses: theorisations of different kinds of ageing (i.e. Kastenbaum et al. 1972; Featherstone et al. 1991; Fairhurst 1998), and the philosophical/linguistic approach in Lakoff and Johnson’s (1999) work on the metaphorical structures used in articulating the notion of self.

Inner, Outer and Multiple Selves

I mean mentally you’re about the same but physically you’re not and I don’t like that… [F16-80]

A number of respondents refer explicitly to the notion of an inner self, seen as separate from the outer self as represented by the physical body, and which they invest with particular qualities/characteristics, as illustrated by two mid-lifers:

… I think there’s also a separation of there’s the physical age and the mental age um and you know you meet people who are definitely a very youthful 70 or even a youthful 75 just because of their outlook on life…. until age becomes a physical debilitation in terms of what you can do I y’know I’d characterise it more by sort of attitude… [M18-44]

… some people are very young spirited at the age of 90 like P’s [sc. husband] grandmother who’s 94 now and still goes to her singing classes every week whereas my mother is 72 and she’s been old since she was 45 because y’know she doesn’t make the best use of her life… [F7-44]

The premise of Lakoff and Johnson’s work on metaphor and embodiment is that ‘real people have embodied minds whose conceptual systems arise from, are shaped by, and are given meaning through living
human bodies’ (1999: 6). They argue that people are divided into a Subject, defined as ‘the locus of consciousness…and our “essence”’ and a number of Selves which encompass ‘our bodies, our social roles, our histories’ (ibid.: 268). Subject and Self are distinct from each other and conceptualised through a metaphoric system grounded in the body, which produces a rich diversity of conceptual metaphors for expressing the different relationships of multiple Selves to the Subject.

M18-44 and F7-44 exemplify a specific instance of metaphor which Lakoff and Johnson identify as ‘the Folk Theory of Essences’ (1999: 269):

> each person is seen as having an Essence that is part of the Subject. The person may have more than one Self but only one of those Selves is compatible with that Essence. This is called the “real” or “true” self. (ibid.)

In distinguishing between the inner self and the physical body, M18-44 and F7-44 employ different conceptual metaphors for the inner self, e.g. ‘attitude’, ‘outlook on life’, ‘spirit’, which lead to the same point: they are both trying to convey through language what they see as the ‘Essence’ of the person, defined by qualities which somehow represent the “real” person—more genuine, truthful and meaningful dimensions against which these individuals should be judged. The abstract and intangible nature of the language they use (‘sort of attitude’), seemingly intended to convey timelessness, also contains a paradox: both M18-44 and F7-44 present the inner self as defying chronology, untouched by time and therefore perhaps more powerful than time (‘you meet people who are … a very youthful 75 just because of their outlook on life…’) and yet the inner self in its diverse linguistic guises is qualified by positively evaluative adjectives such as ‘youthful’ or ‘young’, suggesting at the same time a desire to conceptualise the inner self as eternally youthful rather than ageless. Indeed the youthful inner self is viewed as the opposite state to the ‘physical debilitation’ of M18-44’s account and the failure to ‘make the best use of her life’ with which F7-44 accuses her mother. In this way they—and other respondents—actively correlate the notion of the inner self with their ideas and aspirations regarding successful ageing. It could be argued that the real ‘identity trouble’
(see Chapter 2) occurs when the inner self and its external physical shell are no longer considered compatible, when the body as the expression of the outer self can no longer be relied upon as a desirable or even adequate expression of self-identity.

At the same time, however, as I discuss in Chapter 2, identity is fundamentally and inescapably an embodied phenomenon. The reality of the body cannot be denied and as the body ages the need to maintain a stable self-identity as Giddens (1991) argues, is an increasing source of tension. Respondents’ descriptions of the outer body contrast strongly with their conceptualisations of the inner self, indicating the conflict many of them feel between these dimensions of selfhood:

I do think that yes it’s nice to be wise but the trouble is with the knowledge and the experience unfortunately you get the other side of it which is that the body is (...) deteriorating… [F12-56]

This 56 year-old woman describes the ageing body as ‘deteriorating’, which denotes decay and decline, and through its grammatical form a continuing process of decrepitude. Her negative stance towards the physical process of ageing is overtly reinforced through the adverbial stance marker ‘unfortunately’, but underlined in a more subtle way by linguistic strategies which encode lack of engagement: e.g. the distancing ‘you’ (‘unfortunately you get the other side of it’) and the substitution of the definite article for the possessive pronoun (‘the body is deteriorating’). Having characterised the body as an unreliable and fragile physical shell which potentially diminishes the whole, F12-56 then detaches herself from her own perception by avoiding the more direct ownership and involvement of the personal pronoun. This tendency to use depersonalised language when constructing the ageing appearance features in the accounts of many respondents and is analysed more fully in Chapter 7.

These articulations of inner self versus outer body, seen in the extracts shown above and generally throughout the data, are at the most fundamental level of language also expressions of culture’s polarised attitudes towards youth and age; the inner self, described in the language of youthfulness, energy and vitality, is seen as defying chronological age, as
sitting in continuous contrast to the negatively evaluated state of being old, represented by the physical body. Interestingly, similar findings are reported in other, earlier research in this field which is a strong indicator of the continuing relevance both of the findings and the area of enquiry: e.g. Fairhurst’s study on the social construction of older women, which reports that participants distinguish between the physical body and the self, seeing them ‘as two separate entities’ (1998: 268) whereby the inner self is untouched by the changing outward appearance of the body; and Featherstone and Hepworth’s well-known conceptualisation of ‘the mask of ageing’ (1998: 371).

‘Look’ and ‘Feel’ Age

When female and male respondents in my study articulate their attitudes towards age/ing and notions of self they frequently draw on the verbs ‘look’ and feel’:

… there’s a it’s there is a **look** element but at the same time there is an attitude element [M18-44]

… you **don’t feel** that mentally you **don’t feel** any different from when you were 25 30 … but after that **do I feel** any different not really… [M18-44]

… you **look** in the mirror and you see a different you know you don’t **feel** any different inside… it’s the visible things when you **look** in the mirror that makes you realize that you’re not that young free and single person that you once were… whereas if you don’t **look** in the mirror you can keep thinking you’re 18 (la)…. [F7-44]

I think age is just a number and you are only as old as you **feel** [F12-56]

‘Look’ and feel’ work in complex ways here: to distinguish between the inner self and its outer physical manifestation; to signify different kinds of ageing; and to express the different evaluative perspectives of the subjective gaze and ‘the gaze of the Other’. This usage of ‘look’ and ‘feel’ could also be interpreted in the context of Lakoff and Johnson’s ‘objective standpoint metaphor’ (1999: 277), which they relate to the primary
metaphor of the ‘locational self’ (ibid.: 274). Here, the self is conceptualised as a container:

If you are inside an enclosure, you can’t see the outside of the enclosure. Given the metaphor that Knowing is Seeing, vision from the inside is knowledge from the inside – subjective knowledge. If you want to know how your enclosure appears from the outside, you have to go outside and look. Vision from the outside is knowledge from the outside – objective knowledge. (ibid.: 277)

F7-44’s extract in particular exemplifies such complicated positioning work: her account of her mirror moment shifts between ‘look’ and ‘feel’ as she differentiates between the evaluations of the subjective gaze on the inner self (‘you don’t feel any different inside’) versus the imagined ‘objective knowledge’ contained in evaluations of the outer body (‘you look in the mirror and you see a different…’, ‘it’s the visible things when you look in the mirror’). She is expressing a powerfully experienced sense of disjunction between the physical body, defined in Lakoff and Johnson’s terms by the ‘vision from the outside’, represented by the ‘visible things’ she sees reflected in the mirror’s lens, and the ‘subjective knowledge’ of the ‘Essential Self’, characterised by her as ‘that young free and single person that you once were’; whilst seemingly remaining untouched by these physical changes, it is nonetheless threatened by the changing outer body. Indeed for F7-44 as for many other women, their sense of disconnection between the Essential Self and the outer body is revealed by, and lived through, the mirror as it mediates the complex intersection between the personal and the cultural gaze (see Chapter 7). For F7-44 it appears that the cultural gaze—the ‘vision from the outside’—triumphs, in that through the medium of the mirror’s lens, it ‘makes you realize’ the extent of the separation between self and body.

Kastenbaum et al.’s 1972 study remains a relevant reference point for contemporary empirical perspectives on ageing. His research identifies two components in people’s definition and assessment of personal age—‘look age’ and ‘feel age’ (1972, passim)—reporting findings which suggest that ‘feel age’ might be a closer indication of an individual’s assessment of their “real” age. His findings correlate with the linguistic
evidence in this study, and lend support to the argument that personal age and the way in which it is evaluated is a multi-dimensional rather than a unitary phenomenon and that, indeed, chronological age may be less relevant in what he terms ‘the confederation of specific ages’ (1972: 200). This can be seen in M18-44’s narrative (see above), in which through his repeated use of ‘you don’t feel’ juxtaposed with references to chronological markers (‘you don’t feel any different from when you were 25 30…’) he seeks to negate their power. F12-56’s recourse to a commonly used expression (‘age is just a number and you are only as old as you feel’), indicates the extent to which the distinction between ‘look’ and ‘feel’ age has entered the collective consciousness as a metaphor for inside versus outside knowledge of the self as Lakoff and Johnson argue. What M18-44 and F12-56 as well as other respondents may be attempting to reinforce through these linguistic distinctions, is the validity of the subjective gaze in the face of the pressures of the cultural expectations often contained within chronological categorizations. Look age encodes the judgement of the external gaze (how I look to others) and its potential imposition on the individual gaze (what I see when I look in the mirror). Although Featherstone and Hepworth have argued that ‘chronological age continues to be discredited as an indicator of inevitable age norms and lifestyles’ (1991: 374), my analysis of public discourses (see Chapters 4 and 5) as well as empirical evidence from the interview data, suggest that the relationship between look age and chronological age remains an uneasy, problematic and yet highly significant part of day-to-day lived experience of ageing, as illustrated by this 45 year-old woman:

… one of the things which is awful…. is that my daughter has just started school so I’ve got a 4 year-old and I’m 45 so there are people in her class mothers who are in their late 20s… but I have to admit that I have lied about my age…. [F8-45]

Her rapid listing of the chronological relativities which face her on a daily basis (‘I’ve got a 4 year-old…I’m 45….in her class mothers who are in their late 20s…’) reveals the continuing importance not only of look age but also of chronological markers as a component in the complex evaluative infrastructure of an individual’s ageing process.
The way that people in my study talk about the personal meaning that ageing holds for them suggests that the signs of ageing have a significance far beyond the physical, and are felt to herald the breakdown of the unity of self and body. The age-and appearance-based ideologies I discuss in Chapter 2 are powerful components of prevailing cultural discourse, materially influencing the relationship between the women in particular, and their bodies; Bartky characterises this relationship as ‘a permanent posture of disapproval’ (1990: 40). How women evaluate their bodies at any age, but particularly as they age is shaped by these powerful discourses which construct the female body, and specifically the ageing female body, as inherently problematic and ‘deficient’ (Bordo 1993: ibid., see also Furman 1997; Twigg 2003; Bordo 1993; Wolf 1990). The private voices of the people in this study suggest that all bodily changes are without exception, negatively evaluated through a continuous process of critical self-scrutiny, already well underway in the second decade of the lifecourse—and this remains a lifelong source of concern and anxiety. Furthermore, it seems that for the female respondents much of the angst generated by the physical signs of ageing is intimately connected to the importance they attach to appearance. The male participants, however, seemingly operating within a different evaluative context, appear more accepting of such physical changes.

Based on my data I am arguing that all bodily changes are constructed as being the result of ageing and are negatively perceived as a result. Such changes acquire a symbolic significance as transition markers to new life phases, often constructed as decline following the pinnacle. For the mid-life cohort in particular, the changes they observe in their bodies are even more problematic, as they enter the fluid and ambiguous territory of ‘the new middle-age’—no longer young but not yet old—in which there is no real culturally approved roadmap, only expectation.

Ageing and the Mid-Life

Exploring how my respondents perceive and evaluate transition suggests that what Caldas-Coulthard and Iedema (2008) refer to as ‘identity projects’ become more uncertain over time, because of the effects of
time, particularly on the embodied self. Such ‘identity trouble’ (ibid.: 1) appears to be a common feature of the mid-lifers’ experience in that they inhabit a lifestage somewhat uneasily located between the phases of youth and age. ‘The new middle age’ as conceptualised by Featherstone and Hepworth (1988: 384), and also as represented in more contemporary media discourses, becomes an extended, fluidly defined period in the lifecourse. However, there is also an argument that even a redefined mid-life has been appropriated by contemporary culture through pervasive discourses of body improvement which themselves encode ageist ideologies. Therefore mid-lifers are positioned in their own and society’s perception as being no longer young but not yet old, and confronted by a complex task of identity construction which is intensified by the conflicting demands of cultural expectation.

Identity and Uncertainty

... 55 gosh it’s not that y’know it’s not that far away I’m petrified of ageing actually petrified yeah just because my children are so young y’know... I’d hope that I’d be able to keep myself fit and healthy and dress well and that perhaps it would matter slightly less that I would be one of those Helen Mirren women that y’know exudes personality...or the personality would kind of mask the age... [F8-45]

In this section I examine the complex linguistic work needed to construct an age identity in mid-life, by looking in more detail at the narratives of three mid-lifers (two female, one male). In many ways their experiences and language use are representative of the attitudes of this cohort. The above extract, from a 45 year-old woman, shows the extent to which cultural ‘master narratives’ (Gullette 1997: 9) regarding ageing and the mid-life have shaped her attitudes towards her own ageing—and the language she uses to express them. This illustrates Halliday’s (1978) contention that a single sentence can be viewed as a microcosm of the wider semantic structure that produces it. In that sense, and to paraphrase Lakoff, she is using language as much as language uses her, but this is an instance of the complex relationships Fairclough argues exist between the ‘micro events’ of individual talk and ‘macro structures’ of cultural attitudes (2010: 38). This relatively brief stretch of
discourse contains many of the themes already discussed: the signif-
icance of the decade as a measure of cultural expectation as well as a
personal marker of time; an attitude to ageing based on fear and the
need to resist and disguise its visible signs; the notion of the body as
the object of continued investment; and the uncertainty of self-identity
as an ageing woman. F8-45 frames her evaluation of the next stage of
her life in terms of its chronological marker (‘55 gosh it’s not that…
not that far away’), instinctively alighting on a point ten years on from
her current age. Coupland argues that there are ‘new ideological asso-
ciations between time, ageing, the body and personal identity projects’
(2009a: 953) whereby the decade—and to an extent time itself—has
been appropriated by consumer and mass-media discourses. F8-45
instinctively subscribes to the ‘mythic status’ (ibid.: 960) of the decade
as a measure not merely of chronological time but, as Coupland sug-
gests, of cultural expectations and requirements of the ageing female
body. Therefore as she contemplates being 55, F8-45’s expression of
surprise at its proximity carries a sense of dismay which is immediately
explained—and reinforced—by powerfully feelings about ageing (‘I’m
petrified of ageing actually petrified yeah’). The semantic force of her
repeated use of ‘petrified’ imbues her words with something greater than
fear; this is the ‘catastrophe’ of ageing described by Woodward (1991: 8)
which (disturbingly) still appears to have resonance in the current cul-
tural environment.

The pressure of cultural discourses of body maintenance and
improvement can be discerned in the way she frames her continued
investment in her appearance as a “solution” to the problem of ageing
(‘I’d hope that I’d be able to keep myself fit and healthy and dress well
and that perhaps it would matter slightly less…’). Her use of tentative
forms throughout (‘I’d hope’, ‘perhaps…..slightly less…’) indicate
the hypothetical nature of her reflections, but in the context of this
stretch of discourse, may also express her uncertainty.6 Her final com-
ment, again located between tentative hope and speculation, is par-
ticularly telling (‘…or the personality would kind of mask the age…’);

6Such modulations, as both Palmer (1979) and Martin and White (2005) argue, often fulfil more
than one function in discourse, offering an opportunity for more delicate analysis of individual
stance.
her choice of ‘mask’, with all that it symbolises, recalls Featherstone and Hepworth’s complex metaphor of the ‘mask of ageing’ (1988: 371), in which they conceptualise ageing as a mask which conceals the “real” identity of the person beneath. F8-45’s hope that her personality will mask the signs of age can also be understood in the context of Woodward’s development of the notion of the mask, in which she call[s] into question the unequivocal notion of the mask as “mere outward show” that hides a “truth”. A mask may express rather than hide a truth. The mask itself may be one of multiple truths. (1991: 148)

This conceptualisation of the mask incorporates the concept of ‘masquerade’ (1991: 147–165) which Woodward explains in terms of the strategies governing self-representation, which can be both physical (i.e. covering grey hair, cosmetic surgery) as well as behavioural, but which are bound up in the complex performance of gender and age identity. She states that

in a culture which so devalues age, masquerade with respect to the ageing body is first and foremost a denial of age, an effort to erase or efface age and to put on youth. (1991: 148)

These are the discourses which, on a deeply personal level, influence F8-45’s attitudes to her own ageing, and which provide the linguistic framework for her self-evaluation. The cultural mirror (see Chapter 7) reflects back an age identity based on fear of ageing and the need ‘to efface age and to put on youth’, and may even determine her choice of role model (‘I would be one of those Helen Mirren women…’). Mirren is widely represented in mass-media discourses as a culturally-approved, uncontested role model of ageing femininity, even though her beauty may place her, along with younger role models, firmly in the domain of unachievable aspiration for most ageing women.

A 49 year-old woman also struggles with the uncertainty of her identity projects. Her discourse style is characterised by its contradictory and conflicting nature:
… but I think there is this feeling about as a woman of a certain age you almost get to the point where you just need to start lying about your age… [F10-49]

… I’d do anything frankly yeah no I would definitely if I felt because I mean it’s back to pressure on [sic] society because you want to look good to um feel good in yourself so I think physical appearance is very important [F10-49]

… I feel a relief because I do feel that I have an opportunity to be taken a bit more seriously and that actually I don’t have to look so damn fantastic all the time because I can say I am of a certain age… [F10-49]

When viewed together these extracts, taken from different points in her account provide an insight into the complex, multidimensional nature of an individual response to ageing within the impositions of the current cultural environment; this is by no means untypical for the women in this study. In F10-49’s case the somewhat extreme nature of the contradictions in her attitudinal stance, extending from a doctrine of generalised acceptance to a personal undertaking to ‘do anything frankly’ in order to conform at a personal level to external standards of appearance, may be intensified by the impending chronological marker of her 50th birthday. Nevertheless, the linguistic resources she uses to construct her attitudinal stance (i.e. upscaled language, modals of obligation, pronoun shifts, adverbial stance markers) express a genuine conflict between the different dimensions of identity as theorised by (Lemke 2008, see also Chapter 2): the private voice of the subjective identity and the outward-facing self of the projected identity must somehow be accommodated, together with a third component arising from the analysis undertaken in this study, that of the received identity, i.e. which is imposed on individuals by the expectations embedded within cultural discourses of ageing and appearance. Her language use reveals the ‘identity trouble’ she experiences as a result of the tension between these different components of identity.

She builds her projected identity around the notion of acceptance based on a confidence which comes with being ‘of a certain age’, which brings with it a liberation from the tyranny of appearance (‘I don’t have
to look so damn fantastic all the time’). At the same time, however, the
voice of her received identity acknowledges the importance of appear-
ance (‘I think physical appearance is very important’) and, significantly,
her subjective self expresses a deeply held desire to conform to those
same external standards by mounting a fierce resistance to the visible
signs of ageing which at a more subliminal level of selfhood she seeks
to deny altogether (‘you almost get to the point where you just need to
start lying about your age’). Her justification (‘you want to look good
[…] to feel good in yourself’) is also an attempt to reconcile the contra-
dictions in her attitudes both to herself and to an imagined ‘gaze of the
Other’ (Bartky 1990: 27). She expresses the uncertainty of her personal
identity project in profoundly conflicting articulations of acceptance
and denial of ageing, in which she appears both to resist and desire con-
formity to cultural standards of appearance. These contradictions give
an insight into the fragile nature of self-identity when confronted with
the threat of ageing. Giddens characterises self-identity as ‘both robust
and fragile’ (1991: 55), arguing that maintaining a coherent ‘story of
the self’ (ibid.) amongst many other possible stories makes self-iden-
tity an inherently fragile entity which, he suggests, is nonetheless suf-
fi ciently robust to withstand ‘major tensions or transitions in the social
environment within which the person moves’ (ibid.). However, the
experience of F10-49 and other female mid-lifers, caught in the cultur-
ally and discursively uncertain territory of ageing youthfulness/youthful
ageing, suggests that their self-identity is more defined by fragility than
robustness.

The experience of these women can be compared with that of one of
the mid-life men:

… I was not very confident as a younger man being a quiet kid …I think
over the years I’ve matured and I’ve flourished if you like and enjoyed it
almost I still don’t like being in the limelight too much but it’s nice to
know that if needed I can be confident… [M19-53]

…I’m more than happy with where I am now but I guess when I was
36…but I’m more than comfortable now because I’m a lot happier with
things than I was when I was 36… [M19-53]
In contrast with the women, M19-53’s experience is based on the language of confidence and certainty, expressed through positively evaluative verbs (‘matured’, ‘flourished’ ‘enjoyed’), and reinforced by intensification (‘more than happy’; ‘a lot happier’). There is no suggestion of the ‘identity trouble’ that characterises the women’s experiences, rather there is a sense that the different dimensions of M19-53’s identity are working in harmony. This is illustrated by a comment elsewhere in his account where he describes his love of clothes:

… I think this is what I want to wear and I don’t really care too much what people think I’ve got some pink trousers… I’ve got red cords and I love it… [M19-53]

Vocabulary and unhedged verb constructions suggest that his attitudinal stance to this present phase in his life is one of assurance. He is aware that his projected identity contains an element of flamboyance which might be construed as transgressing against the conventions of male dress codes (e.g. subdued/dark colours), and might therefore elicit disapproval from unspecified external voices. His response is to dismiss these hypothetical negative judgements (‘I don’t really care too much what people think’). Perhaps an even more significant contrast with the accounts of the female respondents in the sample is that rather than subscribing to the notion of the lifecourse as structured by an aesthetic pinnacle followed by inevitable decline, M19-53 uses the contrast between “then” and “now” to conceptualise his life as a steady progression (‘I’m a lot happier with things than I was when I was 36’) expressed through metaphors of growth and development (‘I’ve matured and I’ve flourished’).

It would be over-simplistic and unjustifiable on such a small evidential base to suggest that constructing age identity is unproblematic for men; indeed research into male ageing (see Gullette 1997; Featherstone and Hepworth 1998) and more recently, a growing amount of commentary on this issue in the mass-media, indicates a wider acknowledgement that the process of ageing may be becoming increasingly problematic for men and that concern with appearance is starting
younger—particularly for the so-called ‘Generation Y’. Nevertheless, what this study reveals about the nature and extent of the differences in the way ageing is experienced by men versus women contributes to a more generalisable observation, that the evaluative framework within which men construct age identity remains less rigorously policed than that of women. It could also be argued that whilst the ‘new middle age’ may be less dependent on ‘chronological bonds’ as Featherstone and Hepworth (1988: 385) suggest, it is if anything more subject to the imposition of cultural judgements and expectations than traditional conceptualisations of mid-life. This is particularly true for the women in this study whose language encodes the difficulty and uncertainty they experience in performing age and gender in the context of the youth-oriented discourses of the new middle age.

**Performing Age and Gender**

I aim to demonstrate in this book that the relationship between the ageing self and the feminine self is linguistically, emotionally and socially problematic in ways which have a genuine impact on women’s everyday lives—even as it remains relatively unacknowledged in the literature. The purpose of this and the following chapter is to let the real voices of lived experience speak, and in doing so to give much needed insight into how women go about the business of constructing—and living—age identity day-to-day. Across my interview data I observed a number of patterns in the linguistic strategies used by the women in the study as they actively engage in the process of identity construction, attempting to accommodate both gender and age identities. Their accounts exemplify themes I discuss in earlier sections: attitudes to personal ageing; the nature of identity and in particular embodied identity; the preeminence of the body; culturally generated standards regarding female appearance. Whilst the women in the sample are at different life-stages with a spectrum of attitudes towards ageing and its impact on

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7Generation Y is defined as ‘the generation born in the 1980s and 1990s, comprising primarily the children of the baby boomers’ (source: Wikipedia).
them personally, they share a common assumption that ageing and the appearance are indivisible in the complex process of constructing age identity. All acknowledge that they are ageing in a complex cultural environment in which powerful discourses surround the ageing female body, discourses which they may resent and perhaps reject but which they nonetheless absorb and which influence their attitudes and stances. For women in particular there is a continuing tension between desire for self-chosen identity and the potency of cultural conditioning—what Gullette terms ‘the universalised decline narrative’ (1997: 218)—which potentially undermines it. The complex positioning work undertaken by the women in this study (discussed below) and perhaps by the wider community of women coalesces into a personal stance on ageing, and there are a number of these across the data:

‘Ageing as Regret’

…I used to run around in teeny weeny shorts and teeny weeny T shirts showing off my body when I was younger and I was very proud of that [F7-44]

F7-44’s body is the central focus of her sense of self-identity, the seat of her wellbeing and the ‘dominant signifier’ (Woodward 1991: 10) of her own ageing. Much of the discontent and regret she expresses about ageing focuses on changes she registers in her appearance:

… you become less happy with how you look I don’t want to have wrinkles and grey hair …. [F7-44]

However, she invests her body with greater significance than just as a signifier of her ageing. It is a feature of her discourse that she contrasts her ageing appearance—characterised by negative prosody—with her youthful self, which is positively evaluated. Indeed, she conflates her youthful appearance with the state of youthfulness itself. The language she uses throughout her narrative to describe her youthful self (‘young’, ‘free’,) and in the extract above (‘teeny weeny shorts’, ‘showing off my
body’) clearly suggests that for her, youth and beauty are synonymous, and by implication, age/ing and beauty are antithetical. Her youthful body is more than the signifier of her attractiveness, it represents the carefree state of pre-adulthood before time, age, responsibility and maternity have made their mark; it is the embodiment of her feminine self. Tellingly, elsewhere she comments

… I think people wouldn’t call me a girl anymore but I want to be called a girl and there is the kind of school thing you become a Mrs … I think generally the move from being a girl to a lady… but once you’re a lady or a woman you’re different you’re not young… [F7-44]

Her desire to continue to be referred to as ‘a girl’, is expressed consciously, in opposition to the less desirable state of ‘lady or woman’, with awareness of its evaluative implications. ‘Girl’ in this context becomes a densely loaded term, representing the idealised state of oneness of the ‘Essential Self’ (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 282) with a body which (briefly) conforms to both inner and externally driven standards of physical attractiveness, and symbolises a carefree time in her life, now lost but wistfully recalled. For F7-44, as for other midlife women, the continuing centrality of youthfulness to their sense of self-identity, together with the impact of the cultural ‘age ideology’ (Gullette 1997: 3) mean that accommodating the physical reality of ageing can be a problematic process, defined by regret and loss.

‘Ageing as Denial’

I don’t think about it [sc. ageing] a great deal to be honest [F9-48]

I live quite a hectic life you don’t I don’t really stop to think about it [F9-48]

This 48 year-old woman’s way of dealing with ageing is to distance herself, to linguistically sidestep, both ageing and gender. Her professed attitude to ageing—and to her own sense of her feminine self—can be traced back to adolescence:
... I've got an older sister who was very girly and a younger brother and I tended to be the tomboy in the middle and I was a very late developer.... but I didn't have that girly education then you know I boarded I was a late developer amongst all the boarders... [F9-48]

Her experience has directly shaped what ageing means for her emotionally and physically. She locates her adolescent self in a genderless domain, defined by words such as ‘tomboy’ and ‘late developer’ but also by the absence of ‘girliness’, a word—and a theme—she returns to on several occasions throughout her account. She employs this as a short-code for an entire domain of stereotypical femininity which she either eschews or feels unable to participate in:

... I think to be honest they [sc. girlfriends] have different girly conversations that I'm probably not part of... I just don't get it and... we all know I don't get it so it doesn't it's not my priority and I can't pretend it is... [F9-48]

Consequently, the notion of ‘girliness’ is decidedly ambivalent for her. As an older woman she has constructed an identity deliberately not based around appearance or attractiveness, on several occasions emphasising a different set of priorities:

... for me it's more important to try and please the clients than try out the new blusher [F9- 48]

Her attitude to her body is one of pride in an efficient mechanism:

... but I just feel really lucky I don't feel really old yet...’cos I’m still quite supple I do Pilates... I can still do a handstand and a cartwheel if I challenge myself... [F9-48]

For her the ageing process does not appear to represent the loss of beauty and sexual allure so much as a threat to the efficient working of the machine, which she will continue to deny until it makes its presence felt in ways she can not ignore. In intentionally positioning herself to
one side of the youth-beauty-femininity equation and indeed at times taking an overtly negative stance towards what she construes as stereotypical femininity, she signals that she has built her identity as an older woman on other foundations:

…I’m not 24 blonde and trying to flirt with the client to get the work I’ve got I don’t know if eloquence is the right word but I’ve got my own background to back me up to give me gravitas… [F9-48]

Here, there is an implicit contrast between the negative stereotype ‘24 blonde and trying to flirt’, and the identity she has chosen to foreground, defined by inherently positive adjectives such as ‘eloquence’ and ‘gravitas’. When she does acknowledge that appearance has a role, it is as a function of her professional identity, a professional tool:

… having run my own business only for a year… I’m more aware whether my clothes fit properly rather than just bunging on another suit that’s uniform… but I’ve always felt I look smart enough I’m representing a company whereas actually I’m representing me I am the front person of my company… [F9-48]

Even then she articulates her efforts with appearance in terms of functionality, ‘whether my clothes fit properly’, rather than emotional investment. Twigg’s argument that clothing and dress ‘stand […] at the interface between the body and the social world’ (2007: 301) underlines the importance of this aspect of the appearance as a focus for complex discourses concerning embodied identity, femininity and agency. The detached way in which F9-48 talks about clothes suggests that for her they do not belong with the other ‘insignia of a gendered body’ (Woodward 1991: 3) but are a means for her to perform another aspect of her identity which for her is more meaningful, that of ‘the front person of my company’.

As she looks towards her old age, the insignia of femininity appear to have slightly more prominence within her age identity, but framed in decidedly modalised terms:
... at least I might have the time to research a better foundation that works....[F9-48]

In some ways she offers a counter-discourse to some of society’s ‘narrative indoctrination’ (Gullette 1997: 218) concerning both ageing-as-decline and the performance of ageing feminine identity. Woodward writes of women’s marketability as ‘continuing] to depend in great part on their attractiveness’ (1991: 159), which in turn is contingent upon youthfulness. F9-48’s marketability is central to her identity, but in a literal professional sense in which neither age(ing) nor gender are particularly relevant. For her, ageing is primarily a physical rather than an aesthetic phenomenon which her physical robustness allows her to ignore. Furthermore, as she appears to experience her body in a functional way as female rather than overtly feminine, the intersection between her ageing and feminine selves is not composed of regret for the loss of beauty, but is rather a group of physical changes (i.e. menopause) to be managed and accommodated.

‘Ageing as War’

In reflecting on the personal impact of ageing, a 54 year-old respondent draws a deliberate and explicit distinction between ageing, and beauty (her gloss for appearance/attractiveness). This generates two separate discourses, one relating to ageing and another concerned with aesthetics. Her ‘ageing discourse’ is one of fierce resistance, based in the language of combat:

I just think you can beat age with physical health... [F11-54]

... that’s where I am fighting the ageing thing yeah I am... [F11-54]

She characterises physical ageing as a battle between her will and the forces of nature:

... so sometimes if I get up to walk you know particularly in the morning I’m stiff and I’m just a little bit ooh nature is after me... [F11-54]
By contrast, her ‘beauty discourse’ is one of acceptance based on a dispassionate assessment of her own aesthetic status:

…I’ve always been you know somewhat overweight and that’s always been fine… [F11-54]

I don’t fit into a lot of designer clothes so I think fine I’ll have watches and bags so there’s a lot of acceptance in there… [F11-54]

These seemingly contradictory articulations are rooted in the way F11-54 constructs her feminine self and the role she gives to appearance; together these shape her attitude to her body. In her assessment of her appearance, beauty as it is conventionally defined has little place:

… on the beauty front which is a whole different bucket I think I am uncommonly accepting of how I am so I think that I look average I think I’ve always looked average… [F11-54]

As with other women in the study, F11-54’s quest as she ages is not for the recovery of lost, youthful beauty, but rather a pragmatic, maintenance driven view of her body. Bartky (1990) argues that the female body is perceived as a task and continual work-in-progress, but for F11-54 this is a task undertaken without a sense of angst:

… why have I not made the time to do that [sc. plastic surgery] …so it’s eminently pragmatic… [F11-54]

The word ‘pragmatic’ occurs repeatedly in her account as a self-selected description of her attitudes both personal and professional. In this way she establishes her positioning with regard to her own appearance as one of detached, objective action-oriented acceptance, ‘I just need to get it taken care of’. Whilst F11-54 has undoubtedly absorbed the constructions of femininity offered by women’s magazines, which teach women ‘how to be better, i.e. more “feminine,” women’ (Bartky 1990: 36), these discourses have meaning for her as part of her personal war against ageing rather than an attempt to make herself beautiful. Indeed she has managed to balance an awareness of externally generated standards with
her own inner-driven ones and constructed her feminine self out of this process of accommodation:

… in my 20s if I was feeling bad about my appearance…. I would have counted the number of people I thought looked better or worse than me so that I would have a real standard but what that … is evolved to is **how do I look for me relative to me** and I think that would have come from we would have been a family that would have emphasised… you should **make the most of what you have is** probably the core of what I think… [F11-54]

F11-54’s feminine identity is built out of a force, drive and energy which is physical, emotional and sexual, rather than based on a conventionally defined standards of female beauty:

I wanna feel good and live every day… [F11-54]

I must feel good at all times… [F11-54]

… I don’t think it’s [sc. menopause] loss of fertility it’s I don’t want to feel bad and I want to have a healthy sex life for a long time… [F11-54]

She expresses an almost aggressive desire for physical wellbeing, through language features which characterise her discourse style: unhedged verbs of affect (‘I wanna’); modals of obligation (‘I must’), which have the effect of a demand she makes directly of her body; upscaled lexical choices (i.e. ‘blaze’), as shown in the extract below. Even her attitude to menopause is not one of regret for loss of femininity as defined by fertility, but rather fear of the loss of energy and drive—encapsulated in her articulation ‘I don’t want to feel bad’—and the diminution of her sexual energy. Her body is the instrument and expression of a feminine identity driven by energy rather than appearance, and this is what she sees as under threat from the process of ageing. Her response is an age identity based on energetic resistance rather than regret:

I think **we have to blaze** a new trail and so those things like 70 is the new 50 50 is the new 30 I believe that and I feel it’s right to blaze that trail…. [F11-54]
At aged 75, F15-75’s position on ageing typifies the views of the other women in this age cohort. As I argue in the earlier section of this chapter, commentary in the field of age and gender suggests that the fourth age holds particular challenges in terms of the construction of ageing femininity. Woodward poses the question ‘at what point can it be said that age supersedes the salience of gender?’ (2006: 177). In evaluating how she is performing her own ageing, and how friends are performing theirs, F15-75 indicates that a degree of resistance is still important to her, that appearance remains a central concern:

I have a friend who’s going to be 80 this year and we all comment on the fact that she looks good for her age she cares about her appearance and to some extent she’s a role model for the rest of us… [F15-5]

… and I think also to make the best of yourself so of course I wear makeup I know some women who don’t bother after a certain age but I do try to wear makeup that makes me look good for my age… [F15-75]

I do I think there are many people who are as old as me who I think don’t take as much pride in their appearance as me… [F15-75]

It is significant that ‘appearance’ is often prefixed by a verb combination such as ‘cares about’ or a nominal construction such as ‘pride in’. Such lexical choices express her desired goal, which she articulates as ‘looking/being good for my/her age’, and which entails the need for an appropriate degree of resistance to the process of ageing. The phrase ‘looking good for my age’ appears frequently in her account, suggesting its centrality to her performance of age identity, as well as indicating the powerful impact of cultural requirements of ageing femininity. Sontag argues that a culturally generated double standard applies different rules to men and women, imposing ‘a relentless pressure on women to maintain their appearance at a certain high standard’ (1978: 77). As F15-75 shows, this pressure is experienced as a lifelong concern, and is of fundamental importance to how she accommodates her femininity within the process of ageing. She describes the penalties involved in not taking care of appearance:
I have another friend who’s a very negative role model in that she doesn’t make any effort to look good….she’s very involved with her grandchildren but she looks dowdy… [F15-75]

This is a complex stretch of discourse in terms of the attitudes it encodes. The word ‘effort’, which appears several times in her account, echoes her use of the word ‘bother’ in the extract above. Both belong to a set of semantic choices which evaluate femininity as a form of duty (see Sontag 1978) requiring work and maintenance. Furman writes that ‘femininity as we know it…. is not a “natural” endowment of women’ (1997: 46). F15-75’s words seem to support this view, and suggest furthermore a view of femininity as a construction project, socially driven, personally interpreted and enacted through continued investment in the appearance—clothes, makeup, hair styling etc. The price of neglect is to be designated ‘dowdy’, a strongly negatively-loaded adjective which connotes shabbiness and a down-at-heel, uncare for, unfashionable appearance that represents, in Furman’s words, ‘a feminine failure’ (1997: 55).

As with other participants (see above) F15-75’s concern about her appearance is less about beauty as it is conventionally defined, or indeed at 75, about chasing lost youth—although in common with all the female participants in the study she hedges her bets, conscious of society’s expectations:

… but you are very much under pressure you know my common sense side says it’s a waste of time but my other side that thinks ooh it might just help to make you look less wrinkled so I’ll try it anyway… [F15-75]

‘Looking good for my age’ expresses a desire which is located precisely at the intersection of ageing and gender; for her it means continuing to look good as an ageing woman. Silver’s (2003) study on gendered identities in old age comments on the way ageing female bodies, once they move beyond the reproductive milestone of the menopause with its perceived decrease in the likelihood of ‘attract[ing] the gaze of men’ (2003: 386), are more likely to be degendered by language and perception. F15-75’s continuing investment in her ageing appearance is an attempt to
keep the degendering\textsuperscript{8} nature of ageing at bay. In terms of Woodward’s question regarding the salience of age versus gender in old age, Silver reports that ‘in the third and fourth ages…. [g]ender categorization becomes less salient than age as a way to self-define’. F15-75’s account suggests that, although the demands of a weakening body may at some point change the balance between her ageing self and her feminine self, she has not yet reached that point and that her face and body are still ‘the continuing site of [gender] identity’ (Woodward 2006: 177).

\textbf{Summary}

This chapter discusses how for individuals in this study, the lived experience of ageing is far from being a homogenous experience. Rather it is diverse, often conflicted and contradictory, and understood on a range of dimensions that are subject to different evaluations and articulations. The impact of public discourses which construct age/ing as a process of decline, and its visible signs as unacceptable and ‘unwatchable’ (Coupland 2003: 136), can be clearly seen in the private voices of participants’ self-evaluations. Whilst the signs of physical ageing are generally imbued with a negative significance as the signifiers of (unwelcome) transition points in the lifecourse as I discuss above, appearance remains the most significant index of ageing. Furthermore, the cultural attitudes which inscribe women’s mirror moments as they continually monitor and assess their ageing appearance, mean that without exception the subjective gaze negatively evaluates and struggles to accept the physical reality of ageing. It is worth noting that the influence of cultural and media counter-discourses which construct the ageing appearance more positively (see Chapters 4 and 5) have seemingly yet to make an impact on these daily personal moments of self-evaluation.

\textsuperscript{8}Chapter 2 discusses the important distinction to be made between ‘degendering’ and ‘deseualising’.
References


For the women taking part in my research, and perhaps for the wider community of women, as Woodward argues, appearance is ‘the dominant signifier of ageing’ (1991: 10). The way in which they evaluate their own—and others—ageing is intimately bound up in how they evaluate their appearance, which they monitor and scrutinise day-to-day, sometimes hour-by-hour, through the complex literal and symbolic event of the “mirror moment”. In these intensely personal moments, common to all the women I interviewed, the physical changes of ageing and their perceived impact on the appearance are evaluated by the subjective gaze, in readiness for the judgement of the wider cultural gaze. I use the mirror and its many lenses—subjective, cultural, gendered—as the vehicle for examining how a group of women use language to construct their ageing appearance, how this relates to wider cultural attitudes to ageing women, and how this relationship is expressed through the shifting nature of the female gaze.

The first section considers the mirror as a subjective, cultural and gendered lens. I then explore the changing nature of the female gaze and use this to examine the notion of “right” and “wrong” ageing. This chapter finishes by discussing the conflicted area of cosmetic intervention.
“The Mirror Moment”

…it’s the visible things when you look in the mirror that makes you realize you’re not that young free and single person you once were… [F7-44]

In every interview I conducted, sooner or later the respondent describes a moment of self-evaluation in front of the mirror. This is a complex moment, at once intensely personal and at the same time profoundly shaped by external expectations. The extract above from a 44 year-old woman, typifies the ‘mirror moment commentary’ that appears to be a common experience to all respondents, irrespective of identity differentiators such as age, gender, nationality, lifestage or socio-economic status. The language these women draw on to talk about their mirror moments illustrates the complicated relationship that exists between individuals and their ageing process as well as between private voices and public discourses of ageing. Diana Meyers writes that ‘every mirror is culturally inscribed’ (2002: 132) implying that the reflected image can never be neutrally viewed or received, and this is supported by my data, which suggests that the moment in front of the mirror, as much symbolic as literal, is freighted with different evaluative perspectives—mostly negative, as F-44’s words (above) imply. What is reflected back, therefore, is not merely an individual face, but a terrain where personal and social identities, notions of selfhood and interpretations of cultural norms are constructed. F-44’s words illustrate the constantly shifting nature of the mirror’s evaluative lens; not only the vehicle of self-evaluation at its most private and personal (‘it’s the visible things when you look in the mirror’), but also the embodiment of ‘the gaze of the Other’ (Bartky 1990: 38), in this case the voice of external evaluation which forces her to acknowledge the reality of her own ageing appearance. The mirror has a complex role to play in the daily lives of women: it is not only a mechanism of self-evaluation, but also a lens through which other women are judged as the female gaze turns outwards. At a more profound level, the mirror is an instrument of identity construction, a bridge between the inner and outer selves.


A ‘Fragile Bridge’

The connection between the mirror and self-identity is explored in many different domains of study: Jacques Lacan analyses the role of the mirror image as a mechanism of self-identification in his (1949) seminal work on the nature of subjectivity and otherness, ‘The Mirror stage as formative of the I function’. Sabine Melchior-Bonnet documents the mirror from a historical perspective, describing the changing role of the mirror image over time, in its transition from an instrument of introspection—the lens of the moral self—to the conduit of external judgement against which the appearance is constructed and monitored:

... one did not look at oneself in the mirror, the mirror looked at you; the mirror dictated its own laws and served as a normative instrument for measuring conformity to the social code. (2001: 134)

Similarly, in his monograph on mirrors in art, Jonathan Miller commented that

... the mirror, in art as in life, has assumed complex metaphorical significance, epitomizing both the vice of vanity and the virtue of prudent self-knowledge. (1998: 13)

The ambivalent relationship I am exploring between the individual and their reflection is in part a result of the duality of the mirror’s lens and its complex role as ‘the fragile bridge linking the inner and exterior worlds’ (Melchior-Bonnet 2001: 247), in which what is inner and what is external, what is “real” and what is reflected are held up to the evaluative gaze. The mirror moment is characterised by the constantly shifting evaluative lens as it travels between the ‘inner and exterior worlds’, monitoring, assessing, comparing “what I see” with the imagined “what does the world see?” There are many illustrations from the private voices of this group of women; a 56 year-old woman describes the ritual of her daily mirror moment:
... if you have one of those magnifying mirrors you think hmmmm.... and you look and you think you do it in that awful light you know when you've got all that light streaming in at you... [F12-56]

She recounts the moment in terms of exposure. There is nowhere to hide from the combination of magnification and bright light, described as ‘awful’ and ‘streaming in at you’; the preposition, commonly occurring in ‘aim’ and ‘target’ verbal structures, seems to convey a sense almost of being under attack. Yet she has chosen to bring this moment about. This is a daily ritual—willingly undertaken—through which she assesses her naked face with the most intimate and unsparing gaze, that of the self by the self. The voice of her inner self narrates the next step in the ritual, which is the preparation of the social face to meet the gaze of others:

... you think right if I can make myself look reasonable in this that I find acceptable chances are I'll look pretty ok when I walk out of the door... [F12-56]

Her phrase ‘when I walk out of the door’ symbolises the moment of transition between private and public domains, and by extension the subjective and projected dimensions of identity mediated by the mirror’s ‘fragile bridge’.

64 year-old woman illustrates another aspect of the complex interplay between evaluative perspectives:

... you can look in the mirror and sometimes you might think you but if you look it’s like when I went to the Hairy Bikers and I saw myself on TV I saw how old I look to everybody else... [F14-64]

She holds a certain mental image of herself, perhaps taken from a previous phase in her life when for her, the inner and outer selves were in alignment. This is implicitly rather than explicitly expressed by the juxtaposition of ‘think’ and ‘look’, as her mental image of herself meets the reality of the reflected image. Her tentative hopes of finding her mind’s eye picture confirmed in the mirror are negated by her use of ‘but’ and the series of clauses started and not completed, modalised
(‘you might think’), and rendered even more hypothetical by the use of ‘if’; (‘you can look in the mirror and sometimes you might think but if you look…’). As with other women in the research, she encounters a ‘stranger in the mirror’, ¹ which is also a realisation of what the gaze of others sees (‘I saw myself on TV I saw how old I look to everybody else…’) brought home to her in a very public way by the TV monitor-as-mirror. There is a disjunction between the inner and outer self, the internalised image and the reality, so that as Meyers comments:

instead of encountering the face one has identified with, however ambivalently, one confronts an alien image. This face is disconnected from one’s sense of self…. (2002: 148)

The sense of encountering a stranger in the mirror, an alien image embodied in the reflected face, exerts a powerful influence over many of the women in my study, and for some, the self and the mirror image remain unreconciled and irreconcilable through the lifecourse. An 80 year-old woman describes such a defining moment, experienced when she was in her 70s:

… I got up one morning…. and lo and behold it was absolutely dreadful
I looked in the mirror and I thought flippin’ ‘eck you know… [F16-80]

Her shock comes from noticing wrinkles for the first time, and as a consequence realizing that her inner reality and the external reality are diverging; the mirror as a subjective lens on her appearance reflects back the need to accommodate the undeniable fact of ageing within her self-identity.

The Mirror and the Subjective Gaze

The mirror moment is first and foremost a personal encounter between the self and its reflection in which there is no pretence—a moment of

¹This phrase is used by Jane Shilling as the title to her (2012) autobiographical account of her own ageing process.
private self-evaluation. There are a number of common features in the language the women use to describe their feelings in such moments; these fall into three language areas which express the contested relationship between inner and exterior perspectives:

‘What Do I See?’ The Language of Surveillance

I notice
what do I see I see the lines of age
you look in the mirror and notice something

The face is the primary focus and object of scrutiny; much as Twigg (2003) argues, the women in my study also tend to invest the face with a kind of metonymic significance, so that it comes to symbolise the changes wrought by the process of ageing on the body as a whole. The face in the mirror is therefore the start of the journey of the gaze, which moves from inner-directed perceptions, realised through mental process verbs\(^2\) of scrutiny and surveillance (‘look’, ‘see’, ‘notice’), to acknowledgement of perceived changes (‘realize’, ‘think’) by which the image in the mind’s eye and the reflected reality are implicitly compared, and finally to evaluation, expressed by verbs of (generally negative) affect (‘I didn’t like’, ‘I don’t want’) which realise attitudinal stance. The reflected image, duly scrutinised, is generally found wanting.

Distancing and Alignment Strategies: Pronoun Shifts

Shifting pronouns are a feature of mirror moment commentaries, and track different degrees of engagement\(^3\) with the reflected image, often signifying complex changes in alignment. This commonly involves the

\(^2\)Halliday and Matthiessen define mental process verbs as ‘constru[ing] the flow of events taking place in our own consciousness’ (2004: 197).

\(^3\)‘Engagement’ as explained by Martin and White (2005) construes the domain of appraisal concerned with the construction of stance and attitude. Chapter 3 discusses its application to the analysis.
movement from ‘I’ to ‘you’, often within the same clause or stretch of discourse:

**you** look in the mirror and **you** see a different…**you** know **you** don’t feel any different inside… **I** don’t want to have wrinkles… [F16-80]

As a linguistic strategy this performs a number of functions, one of which is as a distancing mechanism designed to achieve a measure of emotional distance from an uncomfortable reality:

… when **you’re** at 60 …. there’s no question **you are old** there’s nothing **you can look** in the mirror… [F14-64]

In their work analysing gender and the language of illness (which has significant parallels with ageing), Charteris-Black and Seale refer to the use of more impersonal pronouns such as ‘you’ and ‘it’, as ‘deictic distancing’, arguing that ‘some pronouns distance the speaker from the entity discussed and contribute to a more ‘objective’ or impersonal discourse style’ (2010: 63). Whilst such pronoun use cannot be taken to signify an individual’s whole speech style, the switching between the personal ownership of ‘I’ and the impersonality of ‘you’ the suggests the need for a kind of selective engagement. The shift between ‘I’ and ‘you’ also denotes a more complex shift in perspective. Many respondents use ‘I’ to describe the initial act of noticing the changes in their own faces. It signifies the intimacy of this personal act of recognition, of what Charteris-Black and Seale (ibid.) term ‘the world from the speaker’s lived perspective’ e.g.

… **I** notice my skin changing…
… **I** see **I** see the lines of age…

The switch to ‘you’ (**you look** in the mirror and you see’) signals a shift to an external perspective which acknowledges the viewpoints of unspecified others. In this context ‘you’ is also used in an objective, depersonalised way, perhaps to normalise the act of looking in the mirror, which is an aspect of (female) behaviour so freighted with cultural
judgement as to be a source of guilt as well as obligation. As I discuss below, the mirror is a powerful metaphor for the culturally constructed—and highly problematic—notion of female narcissism.

‘These Bits’—Deconstruction and Depersonalisation

For the women in this study, the scrutiny of the subjective gaze is also an act of deconstruction. They disassemble their faces, focusing on individual parts as separate entities, in something of a reversal of the Lacanian moment of unity before the mirror:

… what do I see I see the **lines of age** that are there I see the **bits** I’ve had done the **bits** I haven’t had done…. [F12-56]

… I’ve noticed you know you notice the **areas** that sort of get a bit wrinkly… [F2-23]

… I could have done another A’Level if I for all the time I spent with the mirror looking at y’know I can see it there’s much less [hair] here than here and then the **bits** going… [M18-44]

This evaluation-through-deconstruction is a linguistic manifestation of the fragmentation of the self, as I discuss in the previous chapter. Here, the face is characterised as a collection of specific, separate parts: ‘the bits’, ‘the areas’, ‘these bits’. The generic, impersonal vocabulary makes this not only an act of deconstruction, but also of depersonalisation. The face has become objectified linguistically but also symbolically, as this 38 year-old woman demonstrates:

… I want to look in the mirror and think I look ok y’know I’m ok to go out with the **this face**… [F5-38]

The absence of a possessive pronoun (‘**this face**’), suggests a detachment from her own face; it takes its place alongside other ‘bits’ that need fixing or sprucing up. This view of the face-as-object finds grammatical expression in the choice of definite articles over possessive pronouns:
Furman notes the same tendency in the women in her research as they assess photographs of themselves, a phenomenon she relates to the wider discourses of the beauty and cosmetic industry:

what these women have in common is their identification of a body part as insufficient, inadequate…. or otherwise unacceptable. The recurrent tendency to break their image apart reproduces advertising’s propensity to isolate female body parts in order to sell merchandise that will improve or make desirable that part needing servicing… (1997: 57)

Judith Williamson’s classic analysis of the workings of advertising goes further, arguing that parts of the female body are appropriated by advertisers and through this transaction acquire the status of objects which are then sold back to consumers in the form of an idealised image. The consequence, Williamson states, is that ‘we are both product and consumer’ (1978: 70). Two seemingly contradictory approaches to the face sit alongside each other: one which deconstructs the face in order to evaluate it, and the other which simultaneously confers metonymic status upon it. The ageing face is most often the catalyst for this apparent paradox, but other areas of the body are not exempt:

… the texture of the skin and the toning of it and it’s predominantly from the knee up for me I feel… that’s the first sign of old age and I don’t like it… [F10-49]

These extracts illustrate the complex nature of individual lived experience; day-to-day in front of the mirror specific parts of the face and body are identified and evaluated separately rather than as part of a whole, whilst at the same time being held to account as representative of the whole, against the (imagined) standards and judgements of wider culture.
The Mirror as a Cultural Lens: The Power of ‘Should’

… I remember when I first noticed the lines under my eyes and I must have been maybe in my early 30s…. I looked in the mirror and I thought ((sharp intake of breath)) I’ve got lines I’m getting old I’m getting old…. [F8-45]

Many women in my study recount a specific moment of (unwelcome) realization in front of the mirror, when they first acknowledge that visible signs of ageing may start to put their appearance ‘into […] conflict with cultural representations of feminine beauty…’ (Furman 1997: 5). The 45 year-old woman’s reported reaction (see above) to what she sees in the mirror reveals the extent to which cultural discourses construct the face as the site of women’s ‘symbolic capital’ (Coupland 2003: 127); her sharp intake of breath indicates almost visceral shock as she makes an immediate evaluative leap from ‘I’ve got lines’ to ‘I’m getting old’. Cultural requirements of femininity and beauty have already inscribed the mirror in which she evaluates her ageing appearance, and her reactions as well as those of all the female respondents to what they see reflected there, are driven by the power of these cultural discourses. This generates a sense of duty to the appearance which starts at an early age, as illustrated by a 23 year-old woman as she describes the changes she is already observing in her skin:

… I know I’m only 23 but you do… you notice the areas that sort of get a bit wrinkly now you just think when should I start looking after my skin and like it’s interesting that I even think … like it’s a definite decision that I will go into the whole anti-wrinkle cream thing…. [F2-23]

The weight of obligation contained within the modal ‘should’ implicitly references cultural voices which dictate that there is a “right” time to start ‘the whole anti-wrinkle cream thing’, i.e. before the changes she notices in her face place her in conflict with these external expectations. A woman from the mid-life cohort articulates the tension between the problematic ageing female body and the cultural conflation of youth and beauty:
… you look in the mirror and you see a different you know you don’t feel any different inside… you become less happy with how you look I don’t want to have wrinkles and have grey hair I want to be that young person that I used to be… [F7-44]

She negatively evaluates her ageing face, ‘you become less happy with how you look’, and uses a verb of negative affect (‘I don’t want’) to signal her rejection of the visible signs of ageing she sees on her face which are implicitly evaluated as unattractive. By contrast, the verb of positive affect (‘I want to be’) and the past construction ‘used to be’, express regret at the passing of her youth.

These are far from being isolated examples of mirror moment commentary; it is striking that women across all age cohorts in the sample almost without exception negatively evaluate what they see reflected back, using a variety of linguistic devices: negatively-loaded verbs and adjectives, adverbial markers of stance, intensification, and paralinguistic cues, e.g.:

… I looked in the mirror and I thought ((sharp in-breath)) I’ve got lines I’m getting old [F8-45]
… I didn’t like the way my face was changing… [F13-56]
… I don’t want to have wrinkles and have grey hair… [F7-44]
… it was absolutely dreadful I looked in the mirror… [F16-80]
… it did worry me that I had all these grey hairs… [F12-56]

It seems that what these mirror moments represent—and literally reflect—is the continuous struggle of identity construction taking place at the intersection of the personal mirror and the cultural mirror as these women attempt to navigate the requirements of the feminine self, the ageing self and the weight of cultural expectation. Interestingly, Justine Coupland’s study of the role of the mirror in the ‘self-consciously age-emancipating environment’ (2013: 20) of a dance studio reports that despite this liberating context her participants remained ‘frequently aware of the potentially repressive ideology of mirrored old
age’ (ibid.). My data suggests that this ‘repressive ideology’ continues into old age:

…but even now I get irritated ‘cos I feel my stomach’s not what it used to be [F17-80]

This 80 year-old woman’s comment is a powerful illustration of the notion that cultural discourses which construct the ageing female body as problematic mean that the appearance remains a lifelong concern and anxiety for women. Her dissatisfaction with her appearance is undiminished so that despite her advanced age and having given birth to five children, she considers herself as deviating from the cultural model of femininity in which slimness = youthfulness = beauty. This also begs a wider question as to whether the pressure to be a lifelong stakeholder in the appearance is the province of women alone—to what extent ageing might be a gendered process.

The Gendered Mirror

…I’m grey but yeah that’s at least I’ve got grey hair and I’m not bald but if I was bald y’know there’s not a lot you can do about it is there ((la)) if that’s the way you’re gonna go… [M19-53]

My data points to intrinsic differences in the ways in female and male respondents inhabit their bodies. For the women, the significance of the physical signs of ageing is intimately connected to the importance attached to appearance, as discussed above. Whilst the 80 year-old woman’s self-evaluation shows her lifelong commitment to standards of appearance—as well her capacity to remain dissatisfied with specific parts of her body—it seems that the men in the study have a different

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4This argument is explored by Gergen and Gergen in their (2000) analysis of autobiography which concludes that the body plays very different roles in the development of male and female identity.
relationship with the mirror, as illustrated by the 53 year-old man’s comment shown above. The way he talks about grey hair and baldness indicates an evaluative context constructed around physical acceptance (‘there’s not a lot you can do about it is there ((la))’) rather than dissatisfaction and anxiety.

The cultural context within which women evaluate their appearance at any age, but particularly as they age, is shaped by powerful discourses which problematise the female body, especially the ageing female body. Not only that, the evaluative starting point for women at both ends of the age spectrum is what Bartky terms the ‘deficient body’ (1990: 29). The relationship between a woman’s appearance, the ageing process, and cultural standards requires complex navigation; as Furman observes, ‘the “to-be-looked-at-ness” nature of a woman’s experience prepares her to be ever at the ready for being observed’ (1997: 54), and for this to be a lifelong preoccupation. The youngest woman I interviewed comments tellingly:

… I do feel like my skin looks a bit grey sometimes and I guess it is kind of more like (.) yeah there’s more that can go wrong on a woman ((la))… [F1-21]

At 21 she has already absorbed three key messages: that her skin is already in need of work in order to meet the required standard (and is therefore to be negatively evaluated); that dealing with imperfections is an expected aspect of the ‘problematic’ female body; and that this is more the case for women than for men (‘there’s more that can go wrong on a woman’). These are the taken-for-granted assumptions she carries forward in her process of identity development and which form her evaluative infrastructure. By contrast, when the younger male respondent (aged 44) assesses his appearance in the mirror, his evaluation of the physical changes he notices (e.g. fine lines around the eyes) is the product of a different gender ideology:

… what I feel… sort it out get more sleep or um kind of well you must have drunk too much last night ‘cos you don’t look like that normally surely… [M18-44]
Whilst subject to some of the same self-surveillance as his female counterparts, his instinctive reaction is nonetheless to ascribe the evidence he sees in the mirror to lifestyle factors (too much alcohol, not enough sleep) but not to ageing. He evaluates the changes in his appearance as short-term problems which can be ‘sorted out’. The series of exhortations he delivers to himself (‘sort it out’, ‘get more sleep’) express this underlying attitude; it can all be solved by a quick fix solutions-based approach. Coupland’s (2003) study of the gendered nature of advertising in the skincare market argues that the ideological context within which men evaluate their appearance is very different compared to that of women5 (this is explored in Chapter 4), so that although aware of the need to look after his appearance to some degree (‘I moisturize after I shave’), M18-44 has not been subject to the same discursive conditioning as the women. He and the other male respondent are not nonchalant about the signs of ageing they observe in themselves, but they take their place in a different hierarchy, determined by a view of the body not as the problematic site of anxious self-scrutiny, but as a generally efficient and aesthetically acceptable mechanism which needs relatively little maintenance to function as required. It is worth noting, however, that amongst younger males (i.e. aged 18–25) attitudes to appearance may be changing with the growth of the male grooming market, a trend increasingly picked up in media commentary.6

For women in this study, particularly as they age, the relationship with the mirror is demonstrably problematic. The mirror is both the instrument of self-examination and the lens of society’s gaze for which the outer self must be prepared; this highlights a complex set of pressures which afflict women far more than they do men. Susan Sontag saw this in terms of the unspoken requirements imposed on women, which are bound up with the intricate double-bind of narcissistic duty.

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5Although the L’Oreal brand’s 2013 campaign featuring Hugh Laurie as the ambassador for their ‘Men’s Expert Vitalift’ skincare product suggests that the anti-ageing discourses more traditionally associated with the female skincare market are also starting to be applied to the male market.

6E.g. ‘Oh Boy, it’s the Adonis complex’, The Sunday Times, 15 September 2013.
Female Narcissism and the Gaze

Women look in the mirror more frequently than men do. It is, virtually, their duty to look at themselves – to look often. Indeed a woman who is not narcissistic is considered unfeminine. (1978: 77)

Meyers uses the term ‘the visual culture of feminine narcissism’ (2002: 106) to encode the collective ambivalence surrounding women and mirrors. However the same cultural discourses which establish feminine narcissism as a requirement, also judge it negatively as being indicative of the ‘stigma of vanity and triviality’ (ibid.: 124) associated with the stereotype of female preoccupation with appearance. As Davis comments, ‘[a] woman who cultivates her appearance is damned-if-she-does and damned-if-she-doesn’t’ (1995: 45). Subliminal awareness of this cultural double-bind may underlie this 38 year-old woman’s comment:

… I very often leave in the morning I’ve not looked at myself in the mirror once yeah because I get up really early to go to work ((la))… [F5-38]

Although balancing a demanding career with caring for three young children, she clearly still feels the need to justify not checking her appearance in the mirror. She constructs this behaviour as slightly shameful, almost deviant, using subtle linguistic cues: ‘I’ve not looked at myself in the mirror once’, where ‘once’ serves to emphasise her lack of attentiveness to her appearance. The connective ‘because’ establishes cause and effect, and offers an explanation of what could be construed as a failure of her feminine duty; finally her laughter may work as a paralinguistic cue to deflect her embarrassment.

A 36 year-old respondent describes how her relationship with the mirror has changed over time:

… I remember when I was like 16 17 years old always looking in the mirror always making sure y’know but now I can go the whole day and I know I don’t look right but I’m just here to do a job I don’t have to look like a million dollars… [F4-36]
Her comment ‘now I can go the whole day and I know I don’t look right’, presented in contrast with the insecurity and neediness of her 17 year-old self, indicates a more secure sense of identity which has developed with maturity and is less dependent on the mirror image; she is able to subordinate aesthetic standards to her professional identity (‘I know I don’t look right but I’m just here to do a job’). That said, in her use of the phrase ‘I can go the whole day’ there is an echo of discourses of dependency, an implicit suggestion of self-denial. This recalls media interest in a phenomenon known as ‘mirror fasting’; this extract from an article in the *Daily Mail* typifies the sort of coverage it received:

> Women fed up with the constant pressure to look good are embracing a new trend – ‘mirror fasting’.

> They are trying to avoid the obsession with youth and beauty by not looking at their reflections for anything from a few days to a year. (Tamara Cohen, *Daily Mail* online, 19 August 2012 | Updated 21 August 2012)

The author creates an attitudinal starting point which assumes that women are inherently narcissistic and preoccupied with appearance (‘the obsession with youth and beauty’) whilst her own evaluative stance remains somewhat opaque. Her use of the distancing ‘they’ suggests that she does not include herself within that community of women and possibly encodes a negative evaluation both of the women who give into ‘the constant pressure to look good’ and those who attempt to resist it through mirror fasting. Such authorial ambivalence leaves unresolved the question of whether mirror fasting offers freedom from the enslavement of the gaze or thralldom of another kind. The result is that complex and conflicting messages are sent out concerning stereotypes of feminine vanity and the conflation of (female) identity with appearance, mediated by the mirror, which even when it is denied serves to perpetuate the vanity of women. F4-36 and F5-38’s comments illustrate how these messages are internalised and brought to bear on their own relationships with the mirror.

Cohen’s article and the cultural context which has produced it raises the issue of what Meyers terms ‘narcissistic agency’ (2002: 120), that is,
the extent to which women feel free and empowered to present themselves as they choose, rather than defining their appearance according to externally driven expectations. Gill theorises the notion of narcissistic agency in the context of the postfeminist shift in representations of women from passive objects to ‘active, desiring sexual subjects who choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner because it suits their liberated interests’ (2007: 258). She sees this also as a shift in terms of the operation of power from ‘an external, male judging gaze to a self-policing narcissistic gaze’ (ibid.), all the more pernicious in that it represents an even deeper form of exploitation than the historical objectification of women. In this way, as Gill argues, ‘the objectifying male gaze is internalized to form new a disciplinary regime [which] constructs our very subjectivity’ (ibid.). These are the cultural forces which make it difficult for the women in my study to articulate a simple answer to the question ‘who do you want to look good for?’, as illustrated by this 23 year-old respondent’s somewhat convoluted response:

**Interviewer:** so if you were to have it [sc. cosmetic surgery] done, who would you be doing it for for whose gaze

[F2-23]: that’s a very good question (.). well I think it’s actually primarily for myself but it’s about because I’m we’ve been doing all these personality assessments [....] and apparently I very much define myself by what I perceive as the opinions of people around me.....so if I define myself by what other people think if I had plastic surgery I’m doing it for myself but it’s my own perception of what other people think

[F2-23]

John Berger (1972) argues that women are culturally conditioned to prepare themselves for the male gaze:

men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight. (1972: 41)
My data seems to suggest, however, much as Gill observes, that whilst the pressure of the male gaze remains, the female gaze is changing, its judgement intensifying, so that many of the female respondents appear to enforce cultural standards regarding women’s ageing appearance far more ruthlessly than the men do. This evaluative double standard becomes evident in respondents’ often paradoxical and contradictory responses to public discourses of ageing.

The Surveyed and Surveying Woman

The women in my sample generally demonstrate a high degree of awareness of cultural attitudes to ageing, particularly as expressed in media discourses. They continuously position themselves with regard to these powerful public voices through subtle evaluative shifts, expressed linguistically through constantly changing alignment/disalignment strategies. The extracts below typify a general view across the sample that cultural attitudes to ageing are fundamentally gendered:

… women are I would say um written off quite early on ((la)) […]. men can be um men can age I guess are allowed to age more gracefully and can be sexy… [F8-45]

… I think it’s been a well proven case that the judgement of women who age from a beauty perspective is much higher […] because the cliché is that men get dignified women get old and I think that’s how it’s seen… [F11-54]

Passive constructions (‘I think that’s how it’s seen’) appear to construct women in general as passive, powerless recipients of these judgements. By contrast, in drawing a distinction with how men are regarded, ‘men can age I guess are allowed to age more gracefully’, F8-45’s semantic adjustment from the modal ‘can’, signifying ability and capability, to the much stronger ‘are allowed to’, suggests permission conferred. It is unclear whether F8-45 and F11-54 include themselves in the community of women they are describing, but the lack of agent (that’s how it’s
seen’) indicates their remoteness and disengagement from the originator of the viewpoint. They may be using these linguistic devices to signal non-membership of the group of women who are ‘written off’ in this way by allowing themselves to be the objects of the cultural gaze, still understood to be predominantly male. What is interesting in these two women’s accounts is the way in which they appear to be positioning themselves as the surveyors of other women—a role traditionally attributed to men—but more particularly as the surveyors of older women. Elsewhere in her narrative F8-45 comments that:

… I guess I’m not really that representative of society… because I work I’m y’know I take care of myself […] the majority of the population the majority of women do not take care of themselves properly after a certain age they don’t think it’s that important um once you reach I dunno what age it is 40 for some women 50 for some women you let yourself go…

[F8-45]

This complex stretch of discourse illustrates the fluid nature of the judgements of the female gaze. In the negative evaluations inherent in her references to women who ‘do not take care of themselves properly’ and ‘let themselves go’, she herself appears to dismiss large sections of the female population and to align herself with the same disapproving societal voices she has previously referenced (‘women are I would say um written off quite early on’). This is a profoundly contradictory position: she expresses an implicitly negative evaluation of cultural standards which she sees as disadvantageous to women, but which at the same time seems to espouse in forming her own judgements. These complex and conflicting evaluative perspectives continue when respondents consider the question of how society judges appearance:

… women are supposed to be pretty young things… [F10-49]

… women are expected to be kind of smooth and beautiful… [F8-45]

… yeah I do think they’re judged they’re judged far more on their looks [M18-44]
Both male and female respondents appear to share a common view that ageing women are judged differently/more harshly than men, and that these judgements are primarily rooted in aesthetic standards; passive constructions (‘are expected to be’, ‘they’re judged’) suggest a perception of society as a remote, anonymous and genderist entity. Interestingly however, in describing what they perceive as the gendered nature of society’s aesthetic expectations, the female respondents reproduce the language of gendered stereotype (‘pretty young things’, ‘smooth and beautiful’, ‘men…. get dignified’) without overtly challenging it. Linguistically, this presents as detached commentary on a status quo which they do not overtly reject and may even accept, but which they don’t appear to apply to themselves.

These extracts indicate genuine ambivalence on the part of the women in the sample concerning their perception of cultural standards of appearance and their personal stance towards them. What emerges is the centrality of appearance to collective evaluations of ageing; it is significant that despite evidence of their uncertainty and conflict regarding cultural expectations of them as women, none of these women is prepared to step outside the cultural script of ageing. This apparent paradox is especially evident in their—often contradictory—relationships with advertising media, particularly the way the (ageing) appearance is typically constructed in anti-ageing skincare advertising (see Chapter 4). Many of the women reveal an emotionally charged and conflicted attitude towards this domain of the media and its messages, in which rejection sits alongside desire to conform:

the Garnier one with Davina McCall is disingenuous…totally airbrushed so don’t have any belief in that at all [F7-44]

I spend money on skincare you know I buy Clarins… I don’t buy a lot of it but I think maybe I should [F8-45]

Powerful cultural imperatives coalesce in F8-45’s comment ‘I think maybe I should’, where the modal expresses her sense of pressure to conform to aesthetic requirements embedded in these advertising discourses despite the cynicism they engender amongst all the women in
the sample. It is difficult therefore to view F8-45’s choices of skincare products as genuinely agentive, but rather the product of the paradox of ‘narcissistic agency’ and the complex work undertaken by advertisers in positioning and appellating their consumers.

In this discursive environment, female respondents across all age cohorts occupy complicated attitudinal stances, poised emotionally and linguistically between rejection and desire: rejection of the idealised representations of women which characterise most anti-ageing skincare advertisements and which they see as being imposed upon them, and desire at some level and to some extent, to conform to cultural expectations of beauty and femininity encoded there. For all these women, monitoring and scrutinising their appearance for the signs of ageing is embedded in the texture of everyday life. Evaluating their own—and other people’s—appearance is a complicated process, intensified by ageing, involving continuous measurement and subtle judgements and comparisons against the widely accepted and culturally constructed notion of a “right” and a “wrong” way to age. This evaluative yardstick is at the heart of how women judge themselves and other people, and here, seemingly, lies another double-standard: such judgements appear to be applied more stringently to women by other women than they are by women to men—the surveyed female has also become the surveyor.

“Right” and “Wrong” Ageing

Twigg writes that ‘reflexive self-scrutiny has created an environment in which the body and its changes become the focus for acute attention’ (2003: 61), further intensified by pervasive public discourses that continue to problematise the ageing female body and idealise the youthful body. As women confront the physical changes in their bodies, they must somehow work out how to accommodate age and the physical reality of ageing within their sense of self-identity. The experiences of the women in my study indicate that this is often a difficult and anxiety-laden process which requires them to construct a personal stance on ageing—i.e. how far to resist, how far to accept—as well as a way of talking about it:
there is some grey [sc. hair] and I also think it’s you know when you have a 20 year-old and a 17 year-old towering over you you can’t you don’t pretend you’re an age you’re not and in my work it doesn’t worry me I’m the age I am… [F9-48]

... I’d do anything frankly yeah no I would definitely if I felt because I mean it’s back to pressure on society because you want to look good to feel good in yourself so I think physical appearance is very important… [F10-49]

These extracts illustrate how the linguistic resources many respondents draw on connect cultural standards with the construction of individual stance: for example F9-48’s use of modality (‘you can’t’) signifies lack of possibility, that the only path is to deny and dismiss cultural expectations by accepting ageing; whereas F10-49’s choice of a verb of positive affect (‘you want’) signifies her deep desire to meet cultural expectations through resisting ageing. F9-48’s use of the word ‘pretence’ with its many associations of dishonesty and disguise is a significant motif in the data as a whole, and expresses the ambivalence many women feel with in trying to reconcile the fact of their own ageing with the cultural premium on youthfulness.

Writing about the complex nature of individual responses to the process of bodily ageing, Twigg argues that the notions of resistance and acceptance are themselves highly problematic:

... the process and meaning of resistance is itself deeply ambivalent […] It remains paradoxical in its usage […] what constitutes resistance and what capitulation is often far from clear. How does age resistance differ from age denial? (2003: 63)

The notion that there is a right and wrong way to age could well be considered a modern myth as defined by Roland Barthes, whereby a cultural discourse embeds in the collective consciousness acquiring over time the status of a truth which masks ‘the ideological abuse which… is hidden there’ (1957: xix). Nonetheless, this is a cultural construct which all the women in my study appear to have internalised and which is
reinforced by the visual and discursive environment of their daily lives. For them, as well as for the wider population of women, beauty continues to be regarded as synonymous with youth, which in turn presented as the prerequisite of feminine success. It is impossible to avoid the cultural focus on appearance even if the response is to deny its validity. The pressure this generates positions women as ‘surveyed’ (Berger 1972: 41) by the cultural gaze, but also as ruthlessly by their own subjective gaze. Not only that, the competitiveness for the acknowledgment of the ‘gaze of the Other’ (Bartky 1990: 27) which Furman argues is part of the feminine psyche, means that as discussed above, the surveyed woman is also increasingly the surveyor of other women.

‘Mutton Dressed as Lamb’ vs ‘Ageing Gracefully’

The complex female evaluative lens sharpens its focus with the process of ageing, moving constantly along the (highly nuanced) spectrum of judgements that determine “right” and “wrong” ageing. My interview data reveals some recurring fixed and semi-fixed expressions which respondents use to map this evaluative territory; ‘ageing gracefully’ and ‘mutton dressed as lamb’ mark opposite ends of this notional spectrum:

… I don’t think she’s [sc. Hillary Clinton] had many facelifts… so I think I would say she’s aged gracefully… [F1-46]

… no I’d be too scared it[sc. cosmetic surgery] would go wrong I’m much more a person I’d rather find a way of ageing gracefully [F7-44]

… for me I think don’t look like mutton dressed as lamb that’s something I would worry about […] because I like to look fashionable but I don’t want to look like mutton dressed as lamb… [F15-75]

The prosody around ‘ageing gracefully’ (which also incorporates the idea of ‘naturalness’) suggests that it encapsulates positive evaluations of ageing, whereas ‘mutton dressed as lamb’ together with its synonym ‘trying too hard’, signifies the wrong/inappropriate way to age. At some point in each interview, every respondent instinctively calls on one or other
expression as a ready-made, condensed articulation of the powerful and complex judgements contained within ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ ageing. The presence of these expressions in the data and the commonality of their usage is significant not just in terms of what is revealed about the attitudes they encapsulate but also the interconnectedness of personal and cultural evaluations. Eileen Fairhurst’s (1998) study reports similar findings, noting that the ways in which participants deal with their own ageing ‘are the keys to assigning people to the categories of either ‘mutton dressed as lamb’ or ‘growing old gracefully’ (1998: 262). The way these expressions are used in media commentary further reinforces their subtle power (see Anderson and Evans in preparation); this example is from an article by the journalist India Knight:

The question of mutton – or the fear of being perceived as muttonish – preoccupies all my girlfriends, though not as much as the fear of seeming prematurely aged. (The Sunday Times Style Magazine, 25 November 2012)

Such commentary invokes the perceived social penalties of too much/not enough resistance to ageing by discursively framing both states in terms of ‘fear’. What is particularly striking is the ‘age ideology’ (Gullette 1997: 9) that has produced the language Knight chooses to frame the dilemma, as much as the dilemma itself. The grotesque and damning connotations of the ‘mutton(ish)’ metaphor (i.e. meat which is old and tough and has ceased to be tempting or appetizing), inspire a dread which is comparable to being perceived as ageing. An equally fundamental point, however, is the gendered nature of these expressions; they seem to encapsulate cultural judgements which are uniquely female, applied only to women (this is particularly true of ‘mutton dressed as lamb’), almost exclusively by other women. The taken-for-granted place of these expressions at the heart of the collective consciousness and their seemingly unchallenged genderist nature is a further indication of the different evaluative context which women and men inhabit, certainly in matters of appearance. This is what generates the standards against which they judge themselves and each other.
Standards: External, Internal, Gendered and Double

The notion of ‘standards’, particularly as applied to appearance, is central to the complicated positioning work undertaken by many women—and to a lesser extent by men—on a daily basis. The existence of ‘a standard’ comes up frequently in respondents’ talk, sometimes referenced directly:

… the fact that you could say I’m very average is not a good starting point…. standard does get lifted when I see normal people y’know aka the thought I was a supermodel last night y’know it was just ‘cos the standard was so low… [F11-56]

and also expressed more obliquely through grammatical forms such as modals of obligation:

… we all know what he [sc. Barry Manilow] should look like I guess at 65 but that’s not 65 is it… [M19-53]

Yet the very notion of ‘standards’ is complex and somewhat slippery. Standards in this context are intensely personal yet communal, as the continuing power of ‘mutton-ness’ attests, and abstract whilst being rooted in the physicality of the appearance. Standards encapsulate the fluid evaluative infrastructure out of which people construct an attitudinal stance, forming a bridge between the world of the inner self and the external gaze. Particularly for girls and women, as Furman notes, the habit of self-evaluation and comparison against external norms enters the female consciousness early, as even very young girls become aware of the pressure of ‘conformity to peer group standards and practices’ (1997: 49). The 56 year-old woman’s words (shown above) illustrate the constantly shifting nature of the comparative-evaluative lens as it moves between external and internal perspectives (‘you could say I’m very average…and that standard does get lifted when I see normal people…’), reflecting the continuous process of absorbing attitudes.
and expectations from wider culture and applying them at a personal level. As a consequence, as my data indicates, standards are frequently invoked, densely packed repositories of contradictory feelings and emotions: desire, resentment, insecurity, acceptance, denial—much of which seems to pass largely unacknowledged in individual discourse. Nevertheless, these powerful, notional standards are the yardstick of the surveyed and surveying woman, used to connect and compare external reference points—cultural expectations, media messages—with their own personal choices and behaviour, as well as that of others.

My data shows that respondents use standards to perform different functions depending on whether their stance in a particular moment is that of surveyed or surveying woman. The surveyed woman invokes standards as vehicles of the external gaze to be contested but ultimately, often reluctantly, to be conformed to:

... in theory I think cosmetic surgery’s a bad thing and that **we should all be happy** with who we are and have this inner self belief... but it's kind of like a double think at the same time I hold equally true to believe that I actually... **I want to meet society's definition of beauty** and I want to fit into that.... [F3-23]

This 23 year-old woman’s conflict seems to lie in her desire to meet the standard (‘I want to fit into that’), whilst resenting its imposition, and at the same feeling an internally-driven pressure towards self-acceptance. This conflict is linguistically expressed in the use of the modal ‘should’ (‘we **should** all be happy with who we are’). A 54 year-old woman comments

... I think about my behaviour and my skirt length as I get older [.....] I think about what I wear because I wouldn’t want to be... mutton dressed as lamb... [F11-54]

Her references to ‘behaviour’ and ‘skirt length’ are an implicit acknowledgement of the standards which dictate how the appropriacy of both should be measured, and what is at stake if either of these is misjudged—the (public) censure contained within the expression ‘mutton
dressed as lamb’. Yet the same woman describes her anxieties about her 23 year-old daughter:

… maybe if we go back to the A [sc. daughter] question is this what has formed her standard that she’s judging herself against and if I thought about that… it would make it up my list of things I worry about…

[F11-54]

She negatively evaluates the beauty ideals embodied in these external discourses, seeing them as particularly harmful (‘it would make up my list of things I worry about’), whilst not applying the same thinking to herself, or seeing any contradiction in her position. In fact such contradictions are inherent in the positioning work of many respondents in relation to external standards; they represent both the lure and the pressure of conformity to a publically endorsed standard, and despite negatively evaluating these external standards, none of the women is prepared to step outside them.

This contradiction is particularly evident in the area of ‘beauty-work’, the beauty and cosmetic practices which form an important part of many women’s daily lives. This is a complex issue; almost without exception the female respondents willingly engage in these practices which are seemingly undertaken as active and conscious choices even as they critically evaluate the public voices which exhort them to carry out these regimes. Perhaps one observation to be made is that the contradictions inherent in the way they position themselves vis-a-vis external standards are irrespective of age but a product of the ageing process. Whilst they are aware of pressures to conform aesthetically to external expectations, body work is also a vehicle to wellbeing and self-confidence. Furman comments that ‘… the pursuit of beauty and body improvement is a vehicle to women’s power’ (1997: 63). The negative force of these respondents’ evaluations of the visible signs of ageing they observe in themselves suggests that whatever discourse of self-acceptance they seem to espouse, and however seemingly strong their rejection of external standards, the boundaries they represent are more powerful than their desire to transgress them.
When the female respondents evaluate themselves, the complicated positioning work they undertake in balancing external reference points along with their own internally-driven standard, can be tracked in the language. Many reference their own aesthetic starting point, e.g.:

… I think that I am uncommonly accepting of how I am so I think that I look average I think I’ve always looked average and I’ve always been you know somewhat overweight and that’s always been kind of fine… [F11-54]

This 54 year-old woman’s self-assessment (‘I think that I look average’) is made with external standards as the implicit reference point, but is an internally-driven judgement of her own appearance, expressed both dispassionately (‘I think’) and also unsparingly (‘average’, ‘overweight’). There is a marked absence of language features signifying emotional intensity such as intensification, which sits within F11-54’s stated contextual frame of being ‘uncommonly accepting’. That said, the negative nature of externally-driven standards threatens her self-acceptance:

… where does the standard come from (.) I don’t know I suppose if you come at it and you say well the fact that I think I’m very average is not a good starting point so you could say that’s a bad standard that’s a standard created by the media… [F11-54]

Along with many of the other women she constantly juggles her awareness of internal and external standards, often using pronoun shifts to signal the different evaluative perspectives they represent: ‘you’ indicates the unspecified external voices which pass comment on her assessment of herself as ‘average’ (‘if you come at it and you say well the fact I think I’m very average is not a good starting point’). She seems to be playing with the notion that her personal definition of ‘average’ may differ from an externally created standard, but given her rational-definitive speech style, her repeated use of ‘I think’ suggests considered evaluation rather than tentativeness—her own internally-driven standards seemingly have primacy over externally generated ones.
The pressure of balancing internal and external standards can be a lifelong concern, as an 80 year-old respondent demonstrates. As a young woman growing up in a patriarchal family where men were considered to be superior she has been categorised as the ‘less intelligent but pretty one’ destined to survive on the strength of her personality and physical attractiveness, and this has clearly shaped her self-evaluation as a mature woman:

… I think I’ve felt more equal since I’ve been 50 because before I had such a hang up that it was only because I was physically attractive that men really liked me [F17-80]

Furman writes that ‘women’s developing sense of their bodily selves is strongly shaped by the way they are perceived by others’ (1997: 51), arguing that this often sets up a lifelong pattern of competition and comparison with others which sometimes results in feelings of inferiority. F17-80’s physical attractiveness has had a profound impact on her sense of self in that it has been an impediment to her sense of self-confidence (‘it was only because I was physically attractive that men liked me’), but at the same time has defined her internal aesthetic standard to such an extent that even as an 80 year-old woman she continues to subscribe to discourses of body maintenance, disclosing that for some years she has regularly undergone a regime of non-surgical face-lift treatments:

… but it was years before I conf- I still feel guilty now about doing it […] you know indulging spending that money just on so that I can go on looking you know younger which I’d rather look… [F17-80]

Her choice of language conveys a strong sense of shame. Her unfinished word (‘confess’) is juxtaposed with ‘guilty’; semantically they express her powerfully negative judgement on her own actions, positioning them in the realm of sinfulness. Both her guilt and justification arise from the same conflicting motivations: she feels the need to maintain her appearance, having been defined by it for much of her life; the pressure
to maintain her own aesthetic standard for the external gaze, embedded within her sense of self, is a lifelong concern. At the same time she is aware that her actions might elicit disapproval from others, but her desire to conform to a standard of attractiveness drives her quest for youthful-looking skin, although she may question its appropriateness for a woman of her age. Furman writes of ‘the search for attractiveness’ (1997: 51) as being one of the forces governing the development of female self-perception, arguing that as a consequence women aim to become objects of male desire not subjects themselves [.....] this tendency is not limited to women’s youthful years but continues to affect the time and attention they devote to their physical appearance throughout their lives. (ibid.)

F17-80’s experience, and interestingly that of the other older women bears this out.

The older of the male respondents provides a point of contrast; he operates within an evaluative context that allows him to assess his own appearance very differently:

I would say […] that we’ve still got it we as a group of guys we go out occasionally into town and we socialize […] and it’s still nice to go out and you put your suit on…then I guess it’s a little bit of flirting but it’s nice to y’know see that ok well I have still got it [M19-53]

His choice of the phrase ‘I’ve still got it’ contains a sense of confidence in his appearance which is also bound up in a feeling of sexual confidence (‘I guess it’s a little bit of flirting’) which is not only undiminished by age (he is 53), but as he describes earlier in his account, may have become more powerful with age. It would be difficult to envisage a similar level of confidence in any of the female respondents, whatever their age.

As I discuss above, the surveyed woman is also the surveyor of other women. In appraising others, respondents position themselves as the external evaluative lens, drawing on a complex and often contradictory conjunction of internally and externally driven standards. A
manifestation of this is that many of the women seem to apply a different standard to other people (women) from the one they apply to themselves. Not only do women seem to judge other women more harshly than they do themselves, those judgements can also be—perhaps surprisingly—gendered. An example of the female gaze at its most remorseless comes from a 56 year-old respondent who is being asked to assess a series of images of older high profile/celebrity women, but amongst which is an image of an “ordinary” older woman:

F13-56: …well I think this person’s [sc. “ordinary” woman] completely irrelevant doesn’t look like she’s done anything except have a family don’t know who she is

Interviewer: so she’s irrelevant in what way

F13-56: I don’t think she’s ever made anything of her life or had any independent career nothing that defines her as herself she’s always be defined by somebody’s daughter somebody’s wife somebody’s mother somebody’s grandmother

Interviewer: what makes you say that when you look at her
F13-56: well if it’s nowadays she’s let her hair go grey…. 

F13-56 appears to use the woman’s appearance to index her character and worth (‘well I think this person’s completely irrelevant doesn’t look like she’s done anything except have a family…’), using language which is much more intensified than elsewhere in her account. She constructs a strikingly negative evaluation of the (imagined) life choices and achievements of an unknown woman based solely on the semiotics of her unadorned, wrinkled face and grey hair. Negative constructions follow each other (‘doesn’t look like’, ‘don’t know who she is’, ‘nothing that defines her’), challenging her value as a person seemingly on the basis of her ageing appearance (‘well if it’s nowadays she’s let her hair go grey’). By making no attempt to disguise the visible signs of her ageing, the unknown woman “fails” to meet F13-56’s standard of successful female ageing and is judged—and dismissed—accordingly.

It is not only the severity of the female gaze that is striking, however, but also its gendered nature. Another mid-life female respondent describes a hypothetical situation in which
… a lady comes to you with a man they’re both 56 right the guy you look and you think ok maybe grey hair maybe not it’s fine then you look at the woman who doesn’t wear any makeup doesn’t pluck her eyebrows or do anything she just looks awful [F12-56]

Her ruthless and uncompromising evaluation of the hypothetical woman (‘she just looks awful’) is more than the ‘revulsion inspired by the unimproved female body’ (Furman 1997: 60). What is being judged is a failure of feminine duty to invest in the appearance (‘doesn’t wear any makeup doesn’t pluck her eyebrows’) and compensate for the visible signs of ageing—which by contrast are deemed acceptable for the hypothetical man (‘they’re both 56 the guy…you think ok maybe grey hair maybe not it’s fine…’). These extracts reveal an evaluative double standard whereby a woman’s ageing appearance is judged more ruthlessly than a man’s by other women as well as by men. This phenomenon may in part be explained by what Furman describes as a sort of feminine competitiveness:

… the attention women get from all quarters – teachers, family, friends, and men – depends in large measure on how their bodily appearance stacks up in comparison to others: real people, professional models, and media images of femininity. (1997: 52)

This same competitiveness may be a factor in the hardening of the female gaze which means that women, increasingly the surveyors of other women, at times even perpetuate the gendered evaluations of wider culture in which the pressures on women to look good are more not less intense. Evidence from the private voices of the group of women in my study suggests that they experience these pressures every day, in ways which have a discernible impact on how they evaluate their own ageing appearance under the scrutiny of a constellation of evaluative perspectives: the personal gaze, the cultural gaze, the gaze of woman as surveyor and surveyed, the youthful gaze, the male gaze. In response to this, women develop complex mechanisms of justification in order to navigate and accommodate conflicts between self-evaluation and judgement of others, and between their own desires simultaneously to conform to and reject external standards.
Nowhere are such conflicts more apparent than in the powerful feelings evoked by the issue of cosmetic surgery, which seems to be a catalyst for evaluative double standards. A 45 year-old woman is discussing a close female friend who has had cosmetic surgery:

… and then the third one that had them done did have incredibly loose and saggy breasts [...] she also had her teeth done and her breasts done um so y’know they’re still my friends I still love them but there’s something about it that disappoints me um I can’t judge people on my own standards so back to your original question have I considered it [sc. cosmetic surgery] yeah y’know we talk about who’s going to have botox first… [F8-45]

Appearing unaware of the contradictions in her account, F8-45 negatively evaluates her friend’s decision to have cosmetic surgery (‘there’s something about it that disappoints me’); her use of the judgement-loaded ‘disappoint’ belies her statement that she does not intend to be judgemental. Furthermore, in laying claim to the disappointment personally (‘disappoints me’) she positions herself as the external arbiter, the ‘gaze of the Other’ (Bartky 1990: 38) whilst not discounting the possibility of cosmetic procedures for herself, ‘I have considered it’. Susie Orbach (1986) comments that the female gaze is fiercest when turned upon itself and this is a further illustration that the gaze of women is even more unforgiving when turned on other women.

Cosmetic Surgery: Conflict and Contradiction

… if you have botox and you have beauty products and you’re seen to do all of those things then you’re seen to be vain if you don’t do them then typically you’re going to be unkempt… [F10-49]

Kathy Davis argues that individual stances on cosmetic surgery are often formed from ‘ambivalence and … unease’ (1995: 13) and this 49 year-old woman’s words encapsulate the dilemma and dualism of personal and culturally driven attitudes towards cosmetic surgery. The pendulum of collective judgement can swing from accusations of vanity ‘if
you’re seen to do all of those things’ to judgements of ‘moral laxitude’ (Featherstone et al. 1991: 178) for not doing them. At the same time cultural focus on appearance means that cosmetic surgery is a highly salient, as well as polarising issue for all the women in this study, highlighting diverse ideological positions and eliciting strong emotions and opinions. For this 45 year-old respondent cosmetic surgery has a significance beyond the physical:

... why would you put bits of plastic inside your body to make your breasts bigger that’s so superficial... [F8-45]

For her, the procedure and the recipient are dismissed as ‘superficial’, almost morally reprehensible. This view is shared by other respondents, suggesting that cosmetic surgery is a focal point for many different discourses relating to appearance, ageing, embodied identity, and gendered cultural stereotypes concerning (female) beauty and narcissism. Most respondents seem ambivalent, even conflicted about cosmetic surgery, sitting uneasily somewhere between expressions of disapproval and desire to hedge their bets, as shown by F8-45’s judgement on her friend (discussed above). This forms part of a more generalised narrative of conflict and contradiction constructed around appearance, undoubtedly influenced by the ambivalence of much media commentary on cosmetic surgery,7 and has a direct impact on individual attitudes.

Respondents’ distancing and alignment strategies—and therefore judgements—become more complicated the more personally vested they are, so amongst those who have had cosmetic surgery, or expressed an intention to do so, motivations and justifications can be particularly convoluted and contradictory. A 49 year-old woman has repeatedly expressed a personal doctrine of self-acceptance throughout her narrative, and a dislike of airbrushed images of women which for her, have

7Grazia Magazine’s article *Goodbye Pillow Face, Hello ’No Trace’* (March 2010) provides an example of such media dualism; readers are invited to judge celebrities who have had obvious cosmetic surgery (‘pillow face’) and those who may have had more subtle interventions (‘no trace face’). The implication is that the former is trying too hard, whilst the latter is in some way cheating by being hard to detect.
no expression or personality, describing them as ‘Stepford wives’. She subsequently admits to having had botox:

Interviewer: …I’m interested that […] you’ve recently had botox which smooths out expression lines

F10-49: er that’s true because I think that um but I don’t actually it’s more than I would have wanted actually I would like to have it so it gets rid of the frown line but not necessarily gets rid of expression….’cos I just think when you get this bit here between your eyebrows it can just make you look grumpy…

Her heavy use of hedges and hesitations indicate her deep discomfort at the apparent contradictions in her attitudes; she attempts to justify her actions by creating a distinction between frown lines (unacceptable) and expression lines (allowable), whilst framing her decision within the wider context of cultural pressures on appearance:

… I mean it’s back to pressure on society because you want to look good […] so I feel physical appearance is very important… [F10-49]

This is an instance of what Davis describes as the contradictory lures and oppressions of femininity’ (1995: 63), which she goes on to argue can be experienced as “ontological shocks” – that is disjunctures between a woman’s values and beliefs and her practical or lived consciousness of being-in-the-world, between how she thinks she should feel and how she does feel. (ibid.)

This disjuncture is present in the accounts of many respondents, including those who have undergone some kind of cosmetic intervention, but who still feel compelled to frame the experience as a kind of admission, as if to mitigate the possibility of negative external judgements:

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8The reference is to a 1975 science fiction thriller by Brian Forbes, based on the 1972 novel by Ira Levin.
... I’ve only had fillers and botox...

... I’ve had botox [...] my friend when I split up with G [sc. boyfriend] who does botox said have it on me dear...

The careful linguistic framing of these disclosures, either via some sort of explanation-justification (‘when I split up with G...’) or minimising device (‘I’ve only had fillers...’), is significant, and can perhaps be related to the deficiency model which Sandra Bartky argues is how most women approach their appearance. Bartky contends that the pressures of ‘the fashion-beauty complex’ (1990: 41)—her term for the pervasive, powerful and inescapable presence of the beauty and cosmetic industries in society—drive a woman to ‘[...] exist perpetually at a distance from her physical self, fixed at this distance in a permanent posture of disapproval’ (ibid.: 40). According to Davis, these powerful cultural and commercial voices force women to view their bodies as functional objects, ‘something to be improved, fixed, or transformed’ (1995: 62), and the ‘object of work’ becomes for some a powerful motivation behind their decision to have cosmetic surgery.

Interestingly, when respondents evaluate other people, cosmetic surgery is the single most commonly occurring starting point. The attitudes this generates are often inherently contradictory:

I personally have no objection to it but I suppose most of my friends they don’t lie and they don’t have the frozen look...

F9-48’s ambivalent stance is clearly discernible in this chunk of discourse, in which her seeming objectivity, couched in the language of rationality (‘I personally have no objection’) is immediately belied by her much more emotive and judgement-loaded use of ‘lie’ to describe her friends’ behaviour. Her choice of the adjective ‘frozen’ with its unfavourable connotations of loss of expression and personality often associated with cosmetic surgery, reveal more of her covert condemnation. Other respondents are more overtly negative, typically locating cosmetic surgery in the semantic domain of the ‘shameful secret’, which must be denied or owned up to:
... and she **doesn't deny** she does botox all these things...

... she looks fantastic she **owns up** she says yeah I’ve had it done...

Although ‘owning up’ is positively evaluated in these extracts, the very act of ‘confessing’ to having had surgery lays the person concerned open to powerful cultural dualisms in which ‘a woman who cultivates her appearance is damned if she does and damned if she doesn’t’ (Davis 1995: 45). Other common evaluative stances cluster around the notion of pretence:

... *it’s like John Cleese having a hair transplant... why try and **pretend** that the ageing process isn’t happening...* [M18-44]

... *she’s had something done **but** it’s quite natural...* [F5-38]

Several discourses come together here: ‘pretend’ situates cosmetic surgery within the domain of artifice, self-delusion and dishonesty, whilst the connective ‘but’ in the second extract carries an implicit negative comparison between ‘having something done’ and ‘naturalness’—constructed by contrast as the desired state. The message is clear; in evaluating artifice and pretence as inherently unacceptable, cosmetic surgery as the instrument of such deceptions is negatively evaluated by association.

Another commonly held view positions cosmetic surgery as an intervention that takes resistance too far, tipping dangerously into denial of ageing:

... *he’s **fighting it** [sc. ageing] rather than going with it... he’s obviously had so much surgery **it’s ridiculous**...* [M19-53]

The key factor is the degree of obviousness of the surgery, although the age and possibly gender of the recipient also pertain (this extract refers to the singer Barry Manilow, then aged 71). In this instance the male respondent’s judgement is that cosmetic surgery has fallen on the wrong side of acceptable resistance so that it has become a denial of the reality of ageing. There is an added implication that it is considered more inappropriate for a man undertaking cosmetic surgery—a domain more
traditionally associated with female vanity—in that it transgresses traditional conceptualisations of heteronormativity; consequently M19-53’s evaluation is strongly negative (‘it’s ridiculous’).

This linguistic positioning work shows the extent to which cosmetic surgery remains a problematic and unresolved issue for many participants, perhaps the more so as a result of powerful media discourses. This raises a number of issues: the significance of cosmetic surgery as a reference point in the evaluation of other people and the generally negative or ambivalent evaluative loading conferred upon it; its status as a qualification even in the context of a positive evaluation (e.g. ‘I still think she’s [sc. Twiggy] lovely whatever she has or hasn’t had done…’); and the rarity of the influence of any genuine counter-discourses in respondents’ accounts, or indeed in the wider domain of media commentary. It is clear that for many individuals in this study, as Davis concludes from her research, cosmetic surgery is regarded as a ‘morally problematic’ undertaking (1995: 162) which requires justification. Furthermore, my analysis also indicates much as Davis argues, that ‘cosmetic surgery is not about beauty but about identity’ (ibid.: 163). The complex positioning work conducted around any discussion of cosmetic surgery shows it to be a catalyst for more fundamental considerations about the roles of the feminine self, the ageing self and the notion of “beauty” in identity construction. Hurd Clarke and Griffin’s (2008) paper concluded that women’s recourse to cosmetic surgery was more fundamentally about ‘the fight against invisibility’ (2008: 653), and that maintaining social visibility was contingent on maintaining the appearance of youthfulness by (surgically) effacing the signs of ageing.

Davis states that cosmetic surgery is ‘the cultural product of modernity and of a consumer culture which treats the body as a vehicle for self-expression’ (1995: 17). As an act of physical intervention, it sits discursively between medical, technological and cosmetic domains and its power to alter the body materially, not just visually, may account for the

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9Another example can be found in the relentless, negatively-loaded media speculation about Renee Zellweger’s apparently radically altered appearance (Express online, 22 October 2014), matched only by her attempts to deny that it is due to cosmetic surgery.
guilt and need for a certain coveryness shown by some respondents. For those who have had cosmetic surgery or intend to do so, it is a deliberate act which all claim is ‘for me’, although Hurd Clarke and Griffin suggest that the presence of external judgements and standards is a deeply influential factor for all individuals, whether explicitly acknowledged or unconsciously implied. Indeed it seems that for many women there are few moments lived outside this ‘gaze of the Other’, however the ‘otherness’ is constructed.

Bartky’s notion of the ‘deficient body’, an attitude which begins early in the lifecourse and remains a lifelong concern, is frequently a trigger for the decision to have cosmetic surgery. Respondents interpret and apply the notion of deficiency in different ways, but all are concerned to some degree ‘to meet the cultural requirements of femininity’ (Davis 1995: 41) however critical they are of these norms, and all define their femininity in relation to them, particularly as they age. Whilst the women who have had/intend to have cosmetic surgery claim it as an agentive choice, the question remains as to whether this choice represents genuine empowerment or is in fact a kind of ‘pseudo-liberation’ (Giddens 1991: 107). Exploring the question of women’s agency in a postfeminist environment, Gill (2007) contends that cultural/media discourses that seem to confer agency on women mask a deeper and more insidious form of objectification. It is unclear whether the women in my study are genuinely laying claim to their own bodies, although all would argue this. My analysis suggests that respondents do not construct their feminine self around an idealised notion of beauty, but rather a standard of acceptability which is related to their sense of their own aesthetic starting point: ‘making the best of myself’ rather than the quest for beauty. Cosmetic surgery, increasingly viewed as a tool in this process, has become more strongly identified with resisting ageing, which may partly account for its prominence as a reference point for women as surveyors of other women. The data suggests that many respondents assume that a beautiful (older) woman will have ‘had some help’. If the effect is natural, this is positively evaluated, if too obvious it is judged negatively as signifying too much resistance—amounting to denial—of ageing. The dualisms inherent in these evaluations are symptomatic of the wider ambivalence with which the media views the
ageing female body. Despite the fact that cosmetic surgery is increasingly normalised in contemporary society, in its intimate relationship to notions of selfhood and femininity, it remains for the women in this study ‘a complex and dilemmatic situation’ (Davis 1995: 67).

**Summary**

This chapter has focused on the centrality of the mirror moment to the relationship between ageing, femininity and appearance. Woodward comments that ‘in our mass-mediated society, age and gender structure each other in a complex set of reverberating feedback loops’ (2006: 163); I argue that the mirror, as a literal and symbolic lens, lies at the centre of the reverberating feedback loops, setting up reciprocal reflections between age and gender, between the subjective and external gaze, between the inner and outer selves, and between cultural expectation and personal desire. In the context of culture’s continuing preoccupation with the appearance, the private voices of this group of women show the extent to which appearance is the ‘dominant signifier’ (to paraphrase Woodward) of the feminine self, and the terrain where its intersection with the ageing self is uneasily negotiated by women who have become the objects of their own as well as the cultural gaze. Through the narratives of their mirror moments, something of the complexity involved in the process of performing ageing femininity as part of day-to-day lived experience can be understood. What is reflected back is the lack of a culturally approved trajectory for women as they age, with the result that in the second decade of the twenty-first century, older women’s identity projects are more fragile and uncertain than ever.

In the next chapter the mirror is turned from the private back to the public domain as I explore these tensions further by considering highly visible older women who break the rules—in different ways and for different reasons—and in doing so become the targets of media comment and judgement. As I will discuss, the complex and contradictory nature of media responses to these women reveals much about the nature of such public judgement mechanisms.
References

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In Chapters 4 and 5 I explored the notion of the taken-for-granted cultural “rules” which profoundly influence the way the media mirror judges un/acceptable female ageing. I analysed the covert messages embedded in anti-ageing skincare advertisements, and more explicitly in representations of older women in women’s magazines. Chapters 6 and 7 turn the mirror back onto the domain of individual lived experience, exploring in depth the impact of public discourses of ageing on the private voices of the female self. This chapter returns the focus to the public arena: I analyse two case studies, each featuring older women, highly visible on the public stage, who transgress cultural rules in different ways in terms of how they choose to perform their ageing femininity, and who are either celebrated or censured in media discourses as a result. My analysis reveals the fundamental ambivalence and unease that continues to drive cultural attitudes towards female ageing, often expressed in contradictory evaluations of older women. The first case study, a group of six women aged 73–90 termed ‘the Fabulous Fashionistas’ who came to prominence in a Channel 4 documentary, shows that there is a certain suppleness in the cultural rules that has allowed their highly unconventional, unrepentant and visible
ageing to be accommodated—even celebrated. The historian and classicist Mary Beard is the subject of the second case study. Now in her early 60s, she too is an unconventional older woman performing her ageing in an unrepentant and visible way. However, the censuring discourses surrounding her suggest that such evaluative suppleness is highly selective.

**Acceptable Transgressions: The Fabulous Fashionistas**

Railton and Watson (2012) argue that the cultural requirements determining what is an acceptable way to perform ageing femininity are grounded in a complex series of subtle balances: acknowledgement of chronological age but concealment of its visible signs; continuous—but discreet—body maintenance which supports the performance of femininity but not sexiness; clothing choices which avoid age-related stereotypes of ‘frumpiness’ as well as overt display, which is often negatively evaluated in public and private discourses through fixed expressions such as ‘mutton dressed as lamb’ (see Anderson and Evans forthcoming, also Chapter 7). Their analysis of Madonna documents the powerfully negative evaluations directed at her by the media precisely because she is perceived as transgressing the rules of ageing femininity:

… by flouting the censorious obligation to appear decorous and natural, Madonna fails to perform aging femininity appropriately, properly, or correctly. (2012: 201–202)

I aim to build on Railton and Watson’s work and on the analysis in previous chapters of this book with the texts I analyse here, a television documentary and series of connected blogs, which further explore the operation of these influential “rules” whose power is implicit rather than explicit, collectively understood without being explicitly articulated, but which are part of the cultural infrastructure.
September 17, 2012 saw the screening of a documentary entitled ‘Fabulous Fashionistas’, produced for Channel 4 by the documentary maker Sue Bourne which focused on six women aged 73–90, selected by the producer because of a shared attitude to ageing and appearance and to ways of performing as older women. Jean, at 75 became Gap’s oldest employee; Bridget (75) a lifelong activist now campaigns for older women; Gillian (87) former ballet dancer and choreographer still dances; Lady Trumpington (91) is one of the oldest peers in the House of Lords; Daphne (85) is a model and Sue, in her 70s, a self-described outsider artist and curator. As the introductory voice-over stated:

…this Cutting Edge documentary explores the art of ageing with six extraordinary women who have an average age of 80 and who are determined to look fabulous, have fun and redefine old age. (17 September 2013)

Through their clothing choices, appearance and lifestyles all the women in some way transgress the rules of ageing femininity, what Sadie Wearing terms ‘chronological decorum and propriety’ \(2007: 298\). As a review in \textit{The Telegraph} comments:

“I think I would say I’m a bit unusual for my age” says Jean Woods, whose Mary Quant-style fringe, statement jewellery and Doc Marten boots would give even the most fashion-conscious Hoxtonite a run for their money. (Rachel Ward, \textit{The Telegraph} online, 18 September 2013)

With the possible exception of Lady Trumpington, the clothes they wear, as the review indicates, are colourful and often eccentric, ranging from unusual and distinctive to theatrically outrageous, in the case of the artist Sue Kreitzman, who describes dressing herself each day as an act of ‘curation’. She states ‘I hate beige…. I don’t wear beige it might kill you’, using beige as a metonym for the (well documented) invisibility which often accompanies old age. Coupland comments on ‘this unwatchability of the old…[which] contrasts with the ‘watchability’, and the obsessive watching, of the young’ \(2013: 5\). The Fashionistas
make themselves unrepentantly visible and in doing so, create an ‘arena of visibility’ (Woodward 1999: ix) but also of display. These are attributes more commonly associated with youth, and offer a challenge to the way in which the conventions of ageing femininity have become synonymous with invisibility, as the journalist Florence Keyworth observed over 30 years ago. Then in her mid 50s, she was sent on a reporting job with a group of young male journalists who were making sexist comments about young women passers-by. She realised that they were not doing this to shock her; more disconcertingly ‘they had not noticed me. I was invisible’ (1982: 133). Yet this is not the ‘youthfulness as masquerade’ described by Woodward (1991: 147) nor the ‘girling’ of older women (Wearing 2007: 294) which underlies many discourses of popular culture that claim to reframe ageing on the basis of reformulated chronological age markers (i.e. ‘40 is the new 50’ etc.). The Fashionistas make no attempt to disguise their ageing appearance; their faces are visibly marked with the lines and wrinkles of age, and with one exception, all have grey hair. Indeed Daphne, who at 85 is Britain’s oldest model, attributes her success as a model to her trademark long silver-grey hair. They step outside the culturally defined paradigms of age-appropriate appearance and behaviour and are widely applauded for it, although the explanation Railton and Watson offer for the negative evaluation of Madonna could equally apply to them:

a very visible discursive clash between two demands of aging femininity: the demand to achieve an appearance of youthfulness in the disavowal of one’s real age and the demand to act responsibly, moderately, and with a sense of decorum in the accomplishment of that appearance. (2012: 203)

They do not seek to make themselves into ‘ghastly simulacra of youth-ful bodies’ (Greer 1991: 266), however they incorporate some of the attributes of youth into their age identity, doing so in a way which is seemingly untrammeled by concerns about decorum. As 87 year-old choreographer and dancer Gilly Lynne comments:

I like wearing really short skirts and sometimes I think what must people think look at that poor old 87 year-old woman…. I don’t give a toss.
Similarly, Lady Trumpington’s now well-known two-fingered gesture to another peer in the House of Lords whilst clearly flying in the face of decorum, was treated indulgently and even admiringly in media commentary that described her as ‘formidable’ (*Daily Mail* online, 15 November 2013).

The question remains as to why the Fashionistas are celebrated rather than censured and the question itself is a catalyst for the complicated and often contradictory relationship that the media, as the mirror of wider culture, conducts with older women. The additional factor of celebrity appears to mobilise, intensify and polarise the attitudes that already form part of the collective cultural sediment. The Fashionistas phenomenon can be viewed and perhaps interpreted in the context of how, and in what way, they both accept and resist ageing. The review of The Fabulous Fashionistas documentary characterises it as an acceptance narrative:

… their strong life purpose was matched by an acceptance and embrace-ment of old age. (Rachel Ward, *The Telegraph* online, 18 September 2013)

However closer examination suggests that the Fashionistas have actually constructed a way of performing ageing femininity based on a complex balance of acceptance and fierce resistance. Significantly, they show the ageing female body as a site of continuing identity development; they have all either reinvented themselves in deep old age, choosing to capitalise on personal tragedy, moments of revelation and opportunities, or as with the choreographer Gilly Lynne, have continued to pursue professional lives with energy seemingly undiminished by age. They personify Woodward’s call for ‘a creative female body that is not post-reproductive but productive, a new kind of body in older age’ (2006: 170). This may in part account for the fascination they hold for the media and the wider public. They resist the process of ageing whilst not attempting to deny or disguise its visible signs. It is notable that the language used by all of them when they talk about ageing is that of physical, visceral resistance:
I think you have to pit yourself if you like against the ageing process and you just mustn’t allow it in

the minute you give an inch life or illness it [sc. ageing] will take a mile.

The fierce determination in the lexical choices (‘pit yourself’, ‘give an inch’) indicates a powerfully felt need for unrelenting vigilance against age as the enemy of energy and agency, but not as the thief of beauty. They do not appear to lament the loss of youthful appearance, so in that sense there is acceptance of the process of ageing. Theirs is a more fundamental battle waged against invisibility as the taken-for-granted companion of age, which drives ‘the wish of our visual culture to erase the female body from view’ (Woodward 2006: 163). In an earlier paper, Woodward remarks that historically

    younger people (and older people who deny their own aging) have functioned as mirrors to older women, reflecting them back half their size. (1999: xii)

The Fashionistas’ pursuit of visibility is based on the expression of their individual style, a way of not being ‘disappeared’ or diminished by the gaze of youth, and as such is a product of their subjective gaze, rather than of the imperatives of the ‘gaze of the Other’. They appear to succeed in liberating themselves from the remorseless appraisal of the youthful gaze and the male gaze, and in doing so become their own mirrors. However the journalist Michele Hanson, commenting in The Guardian soon after the documentary was screened, adds a counterbalance to the widespread public approval of them as interesting, stylish, unconventional older women. Her sub-head reads:

    There’s nothing surprising about older women being interested in fashion – just as there’s nothing wrong with them dressing drably either.

Her words are a challenge to the collective instinct to fall back on categorisations that artificially conflate things which may not be related—in
this case ageing and drabness/ageing and stylishness—creating new stereotypes in trying to break down old ones. Hanson continues:

Channel 4 has got its social groups wrong. They’re dividing us up in the wrong way, as usual, with a line between young and old. It should be between dull and vibrant [...] old age makes little difference to your personality or choice of outfit – once a bore, always a bore, once a sparkler, always a sparkler. [...]Telly has just picked up something they’ve [sc. Fashionistas] done all their lives, and called it remarkable because they’re old. Really it’s just because they’re them. (The Guardian online, 23 September 2013)

The final component in what has made this cohort of women fascinating rather than freakish is the absence of sexuality in their display. The possibility that an older woman might still be an active sexual subject seems to underlie much of the collective unease surrounding evaluations of ageing women such as Madonna (cf. Railton and Watson 2012). The Fashionistas, together with other positively evaluated exemplary women such as Joanna Lumley and Helen Mirren, successfully perform gendered ageing because sexuality is absent (as with the Fashionistas) or sufficiently dialled down (as with Mirren and Lumley). This further illustrates one of the rules that according to Anne Karpf, operates with regard to older models. She writes

the more you dig, the clearer it becomes that, most of the time, a strict set of rules operates....You can get work as a model if you’re older as long as you’re not too sexy. (The Guardian Weekend, 22 February 2014)

As a feminist researcher, Woodward’s view is that

the feminist aging body, entailing gender and sexuality as the continuing site of identity, need not be a contradiction in terms. (2006: 177)

Analysis of the Fashionistas phenomenon, whereby they are celebrated as older women precisely because of the absence of sexuality, suggests
that Woodward’s hope for greater suppleness in the cultural rules surrounding ageing femininity may be some way off. The subject of my second case study, the historian and classicist Mary Beard, challenges Woodward’s words in a different way. As the next section discusses, the public censure surrounding her arises in part because of the presence of a sexual element in her performance as an older woman.

The Hounding of Mary Beard

In this section I consider media commentary about Mary Beard including the campaign of online abuse that she was subjected to in 2013. I argue that the language which continues to be used both to and about her on social media platforms as well as in more general news commentary, is at once very specific to her as a highly visible older woman, but also symptomatic of a deeper unease on the part of the media and wider culture about how to accommodate older women, particularly on the public stage. Beard, along with other highly visible older women such as Hillary Clinton and Nicola Sturgeon are catalysts for this collective ambivalence. For all of these reasons, this small-scale case study of the hounding of Mary Beard is a useful lens through which to examine broader questions concerning age, femininity and sexuality.

Beard is first and foremost a respected academic; she is professor of classics at Cambridge University, Fellow of Newnham College and Royal Academy of Arts Professor of Ancient Literature. Based on her areas of academic focus and expertise she has also achieved prominence as a broadcaster and author. As her television appearances became more regular, as a journalist writing in The New York Times comments she encountered the response that awaits many women with the temerity to venture into the public arena: “trolling” or online abuse. (Matthew Schneider, The New York Times online, April 2016)

Following an appearance on BBC1’s Question Time in January 2013, Beard became the subject of a concerted campaign of trolling. She is quoted as describing the experience as ‘a side on internet trolling that
I haven’t experienced before…. [that is] truly vile’ (The Guardian, Monday 21 January 2013). The nature of the abuse was significant not only for its personally directed ferocity, but also for the complex conjunction of appearance-based judgements and insults of an overtly, almost sadistically sexual nature. Beard’s own commentary on this is quoted:

“My appearance on Question Time prompted a web post that has in the last few days discussed my pubic hair (do I brush the floor with it), whether I need rogering (that comment was taken down, as was the speculation about the capaciousness of my vagina, and the plan to plant a d*** in my mouth)” writes Beard. (The Guardian, Monday 21 January 2013)

Beard came under the scrutiny of the late writer and critic A. A. Gill when he reviewed her documentary on Pompeii in 2010. In the public exchange that followed, he described her as ‘too ugly for television’ (Telegraph online, 24 April 2012). His evaluation and Beard’s subsequent rebuttal demonstrate the complex nature of the discursive construction both of ageing and of the male gaze on the ageing female body. Gill states that:

For someone who looks closely at the past it is strange she hasn’t had a closer look at herself before stepping in front of a camera. Beard coos over corpses’ teeth without apparently noticing she is wearing them.

From behind she is 16; from the front, 60. The hair is a disaster, the outfit an embarrassment.

This isn’t sexist or beside the point. If you’re going to invite yourself into the front rooms of the living, then you need to make an effort. (Mail online, 23 April 2012)

The language he uses to formulate his evaluations exemplifies Woodward’s comment that ‘old age in others […] causes an instant repulsion’ (1991: 70). His lexical choices are powerfully negative, ‘disaster’, ‘embarrassment’, but more significantly, his comparison of Beard’s teeth to those of a corpse aligns her ageing appearance more with death than life, portraying it—and her—as freakish and comically
nightmarish. Gill attempts a justification that ‘this isn’t sexist’ by suggesting that his comments are not bound up in gendered assessments, but can be rationalised as the judgement of the wider gaze of society on Beard as an ageing person rather than as an ageing woman. However his comment—‘if you’re going to invite yourself into the front rooms of the living then you need to make an effort’—establishes two opposing communities: ‘the living’ (i.e. the television audience in which he includes himself and the reader) and ‘the ageing’ (as personified by Beard) who are not included in the community of the living unless specifically invited. Gill’s choice of language positions him as the vehicle of external judgement and allows him to channel a complex constellation of external evaluative gazes onto Beard, ‘the male gaze, the youthful gaze, the dominant culture’s gaze’ (Furman 1997: 5), which characterise her as deviant and alien—the ‘Other’ in de Beauvoir’s terminology (1949 [1997]: 16). His earlier statement that ‘…it is strange that she hasn’t had a closer look at herself before stepping in front of a camera’ illustrates Woodward’s notion of ‘the mirror stage of old age’ (Woodward 1991: 53). This is an inversion of the Lacanian theory of the childhood mirror stage in which the child perceives its body for the first time as a unified whole; here it is the disintegration, rather than wholeness of the body which is reflected back:

if the psychic plot of the mirror stage of infancy is the anticipated trajectory from insufficiency to bodily wholeness, the bodily plot of the mirror stage of old age is the feared trajectory from wholeness to physical disintegration. (Woodward 1991: 67)

Gill challenges Beard to confront her own ageing appearance in the mirror before presenting herself to the external gaze represented by the camera’s lens. The mirror he metaphorically holds up for her to contemplate is inscribed not only with ‘culture’s negative assessment of old age’ (Woodward 1991: 66) but also with his own judgements, which despite his disingenuous denial (‘this isn’t sexist’), are fundamentally gendered. His evaluations of teeth, hair, and clothes are all directed towards and elicited by, her ageing female body, just as the discrepancy he notes
between her back and front views (‘from behind she is 16; from the front, 60’) is a piece of tabloid/popular culture terminology specifically applied to ageing women. As a further illustration of how deeply embedded this way of evaluating ageing women is in the collective consciousness, it is interesting to note that one of the midlife women in my study makes the comment that

if they saw me from the back they’d see the long blonde hair and everything else and then when I turn round they go oh my god ((laughs))

[F12-56]

She uses the anonymous ‘they’ as A. A. Gill does, to represent an unspecified but unsparing external gaze. However she also uses it to cue a complex mesh of evaluative perspectives: she is both surveyor of her own appearance (‘the long blonde hair and everything else’) and the surveyed, aligning herself with the judgement of ‘the gaze of the Other’ (‘if they saw me from the back…. and then when I turn round they go oh my god’) in appraising her own body. The dual perspective of the surveying and surveyed woman recalls Rosalind Gill’s observation that postfeminism has brought about a shift whereby women internalise ‘the objectifying male gaze […] to form a new disciplinary regime [which] constructs our very subjectivity’ (2007: 258, see also Chapter 7). The power of these cultural shifts has forced Beard to enter the debate about her own appearance; although unrepentant about letting her long hair go naturally grey, she tackled the issue of ‘greyness’ in a programme for Radio 4 in March 2016 entitled ‘Glad to be Grey’.

Even before Beard became the focus of internet trolls she had been categorically ‘Othered’ by the remorseless nature of A. A. Gill’s evaluation in his capacity as the self-appointed vehicle of the cultural gaze that discursively constructed her as a visible and visibly ageing woman, physically unattractive yet unashamed about her appearance. Other recent media discourses involving and surrounding Beard reveal a context of negative appearance-based commentary. Speaking out about a ‘Twitterstorm’ of abuse she received for arguing that Roman Britain was in all likelihood ethnically diverse, she comments
it also feels very sad to me that we cannot have a reasonable discussion on such a topic […] without resorting to unnecessary insult, abuse, misogyny and language of war not debate. (The Independent online, 6 August 2017, Rachael Revesz byline)

The opprobrium Beard elicits may be a consequence of the contradictions she embodies, which challenge culture’s visual and evaluative repertoire negatively rather than positively, as with the Fashionistas. An immediate focus and site of these contradictions is Beard’s long, untamed grey hair. The journalist Anouchka Grose writes that ‘the online vitriol against Mary Beard happened in part because long, grey hair on a woman is too much for some to compute’ (The Guardian online, 25 January 2013). She continues

Long hair is typically equated with unrestrained sexuality (think pre-Raphaelite muses – or 99% of glamour models), while grey hair is associated with being past it. (Anouchka Grose, The Guardian online, 25 January 2013)

Grose’s comment pinpoints the ambivalence that appears to coalesce around Beard and what she represents. Anthony Synott writes of the ‘power of beauty and ugliness’ (1993: 74) as equal and opposite evaluative counterpoints in society; at a subliminal level Beard disrupts these polar opposites. In his analysis of the semiotics of the body, Synott describes the culturally embedded symbolism of long hair on women:

Long hair […] has for centuries been both a gender sign and a sex symbol in our society. Paul [sc. Saint Paul, I Corinthians] was probably not the first to describe a woman’s long hair as a ‘glory’… (1993: 105)

Long hair is a signifier of stereotypical, culturally endorsed notions of femininity. What is signified is sexual attractiveness, as Grose argues. At one level Beard’s long, flowing hair connotes femininity and sexuality; the fact that her hair is unkempt and grey encodes a different set of associations which, according to Grose, both desexualise Beard and make her an object of suspicion:
The word “witch” comes up remarkably often in relation to this particular hairstyle [sc. long, naturally grey hair]. This probably shouldn’t be surprising given that fairy books are full of wicked old women with unkempt locks straggling out from under their pointy hats. (Anouchka Grose, *The Guardian* online, 25 January 2013)

Paradoxically, however, even as Beard is desexualised by the semiotics of her appearance, in the course of her academic commentary on the lives—and sexual practices—of ancient Romans, she is also associated with sexual matters, as I allude to above. Grose speculates that the overtly sexual nature of the online abuse directed at Beard has its genesis in this profoundly complex conjunction of frank discussions about sex (albeit in the context of ancient Rome) delivered by an older woman, deemed to be unattractive, whose mane of grey hair sends out conflicting messages regarding sexuality and ageing:

If you are bad at processing complex information, this combination will fry your brain. (What, a woman past breeding age still up for it? As if sex was all about procreation. As Beard may tell you, even the Romans used contraceptives.) And perhaps in this frazzled state you might lash out at the person who has made you confront this enigma – the woman who really shouldn’t turn you on, but who somehow causes you to have filthy thoughts. (*The Guardian* online, 25 January 2013)

The complex, highly ambivalent nature of these judgements sits in marked contrast to the positive evaluations of other older grey haired women such as Daphne Selfe, one of the Fashionistas, whose long silver-grey hair (albeit glossy and well-tended) is the visual trademark of her successful modelling career. Beard’s choice to allow her hair to go grey, with its attendant cultural connotations, is bound up in her personal ideology regarding her own ageing process which means that she maintains a lack of interest and investment in her appearance whilst continuing to defend her right—every woman’s right—to her position as a visible woman of status, a premise she explores in her (2017) book *Women and Power: A Manifesto*. The combination of these discourses confounds the culturally generated ‘rules’ of ageing well which require
an appropriate, seemingly natural appearance to be maintained. The implicit message is that this can only be achieved by investing in continuous, but discreet, resistance to ageing—all of which complex and contradictory messages are bound up in A. A. Gill’s exhortation that she should ‘make an effort’ (see above). Beard explains her position:

Sure, I don’t wear makeup. I have nothing against those who do if it gives them pleasure, but actually I feel happy enough in my own skin not to feel I want to bother with it. I don’t dye my hair for the same reason. I ask myself: ‘if I did what would I be covering up?’ (Mail online, 23 April 2012)

In declaring that she is ‘happy enough in my own skin not to feel I want to bother with it’, Beard flies in the face of what Furman has described as ‘the revulsion inspired by the unimproved female body’ (1997: 60). Her resolute acceptance of an unimproved, ageing body (which by every culturally defined standard of aesthetic acceptability could be considered ‘deficient’, to borrow Bartky’s word), is probably one factor in the savage judgements of the media gaze, given voice by commentators such as Gill. The prevailing evaluative infrastructure is seemingly unable to accommodate her defiance of its conventions, although there is something of a groundswell of support of Beard, albeit still located within the stereotype-loaded domain of appearance: The New York Times describes her wearing a canary-yellow coat, as ‘hardly the “old frump” of an earlier era of British academia’ (Matthew Schneider, The New York Times online, 16 April 2016).

Furthermore, and this is another factor which separates Beard from the Fashionistas, in her blatant refusal to invest in her appearance she flouts one of the fundamental requirements of the performance of femininity at any age, which is the preparedness ‘to be ever at the ready for being observed’ (Furman 1997: 54). The Fashionistas share a commitment to investment in their physical capital, which means that the external evaluative gaze can allow them to be visible and visibly unconventional without judging them as grotesque, even celebrating their self-display as fulfilment of the feminine duty of ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ (Mulvey 2009: 5). Beard eschews such notions of feminine duty along
with the need to conform to the expectations of the gaze of the Other; her subjective gaze is what drives her ideological stance and therefore her mirror is inscribed with discourses of self-acceptance:

Mirrors can play odd tricks with time. Some days…it’s the 17 year-old me in the glass, the kid with the dreamy smile who fancied she looked like a pre-Raphaelite damsel (always an entirely implausible fantasy)…. But, when I’m concentrating, it’s the real me in the mirror – somewhere in between the young self and the granny. I’m every inch the 57 year-old academic, half proud of her wrinkles, her crow’s feet even her hunched shoulders… I used to be scared of looking like this, but now I couldn’t wish to be any different. (The Guardian online, 30 March 2012)

Her trajectory from the 17 year-old ‘kid with the dreamy smile’ to the 57 year-old academic is articulated through discourses of appearance which move from the consciously idealised ‘a pre-Raphaelite damsel’ to the realistic assessment of her 57 year-old body. Her evaluation is both unflinching and forgiving—even positively constructed. She is ‘half proud’ of these visible signs of ageing and ends with a powerful statement of self-acceptance, ‘I couldn’t wish to be any different’, the more powerful because she has clearly faced and resolved past insecurities, ‘I used to be scared of looking like this’. A brief, tongue-in-cheek coda suggests that she is consciously playing with the notion of herself as outside cultural standards of acceptable female ageing. She dismisses the idea of dyeing her hair to disguise the grey, adding instead ‘I do nurture a little fantasy of going bright pink for a week, just for the hell of it’.

The cultural and media lens accommodates—even enjoys—the sartorial eccentricities of the Fashionistas even though some of them are arguably more transgressive than Beard’s pink hair fantasy. Indeed, the designers Zandra Rhodes and Vivienne Westwood, both in their 70s, both well known for their respective pink and orange hair, are accommodated and celebrated within the cultural visual repertoire precisely because of the challenge they represent to conventions of ageing femininity. What makes it allowable and acceptable is that it is an expression of investment in the appearance, which whilst unconventional, achieves the required balance of acceptance and resistance to ageing. Beard’s real
transgression, which touches on prevailing culture’s deep ambivalence towards ageing women, is her decision as a highly visible older woman, to perform her ageing femininity as a discourse of acceptance of a deficient body. Part of her decision not to be silenced is her refusal to find the process of her own ageing unwatchable. She looks to the ancient world for a counterbalancing perspective, arguing for intellectual over physical worth:

I could even try a Socratic point here. Like the great Greek philosopher, I look a mess. But actually if you took the trouble to listen to him, he had something valuable to impart. I’m nowhere near the towering intellect of Socrates, but at a lower level the analogy could apply to me. (Mail online, 23 April 2012)

Like the Fashionistas, Beard accepts her ageing self and firmly rejects conventional appearance-based stereotypes, defiantly defending her ‘arena of visibility’ (Woodward 1991: ix). However, unlike the Fashionistas, the external gaze is unable to accommodate Beard, casting her instead as the troubling and troublesome ‘Other’ whose presence cannot be reconciled. As Grose comments in her conclusion:

This uncanny brew in a woman is clearly a bit too much for some people. (The Guardian online, 25 January 2013)

Summary

The Fashionistas undoubtedly present a genuine challenge to some of the cultural strictures that shape how ageing femininity is represented in that they show a different way of ageing which, to paraphrase Woodward, has forced the cultural image-repertoire to become supple enough to accommodate them (2006: 170). In other ways it could be argued that the counter-discourses they represent are situated at some distance from the day-to-day experience of many older women who remain deeply constrained by the gaze of the Other, as exemplified by the fourth-age participants in this study. The presence of such
extraordinary older women may even symbolise another set of expectations to live up to and another source of pressure on “ordinary” women who, as Anne Karpf commented in an interview on Radio 4’s The Today Programme (29 April 2014), might actively choose ‘the elasticated waistband’. The Fashionistas exemplify Grenier’s notion of the ‘unrelenting body’ (2012: 92), her way of characterising ‘older people who achieve extraordinary feats, while hailed in the media as aspirational role models’ (ibid.), and increasingly emphasised as part of the cultural narrative of successful ageing into later life (see Chapter 2). Whilst the presence of counter discourses which challenge the nature of ‘what–goes-without-saying’ (Barthes 1957 [2009]: xix) suggest that collective visual vocabulary may be evolving, society remains structured by the polarities of youth and age (see Woodward 1991 and Chapter 2), so that attitudes towards older women are seemingly still fundamentally defined by the ‘cleaver-sharp binary between beauty and the so-called ravages of time…[which] is encoded daily in the stories and advertisements in the mass media’ (Woodward 1999: xvii). It could therefore still be argued that the media’s relationship with older women remains at best ambivalent and at worst one of excoriating judgement.

References

This chapter outlines the principal findings of my study. I consider to what extent and in what ways the analysis of the data addresses the questions I wanted to explore, and what conclusions can be drawn. I end this section by setting out an agenda for further research into discourses of age and gender.

The purpose of this study has been to investigate the relationship between the private voices of individual lived experience of ageing, and the public discourses of gender and age(ing) generated by the media and beauty/cosmetic industries. I have examined the reciprocal nature of this relationship, seeking to show how in the current cultural environment, the language used about ageing women directly influences the language used by the ageing women in my study, and how for these women, performing femininity on an ageing body as Wearing (2007) contends, is a risky and uncertain enterprise in which the balance of age and gender identities must be constantly monitored. Much of this ‘work’ is done in front of the mirror; the mirror moment in a literal sense is the vehicle of self-evaluation, and a symbol of what is reflected back to women by wider culture’s evaluative gaze.
My analysis has focused primarily on mid-life women. As I argue in Chapter 2, the mid-life has been subject to cultural reconceptualisation; this ‘new middle age’ as described by Featherstone and Hepworth (1988 [1991]: 384) is no longer rigidly delineated by chronology, but is now viewed as an extended, fluid, transitional phase located somewhere between youthfulness and (older) age but more closely aligned to youthfulness than age by powerful media/advertising discourses of body maintenance and improvement. Not only has old age been pushed back, but more flexible patterns of employment and career development mean that more women are working for longer. Retirement is no longer the social/economic and chronological fixed point it once was. These changing social conditions mean that cultural and individual expectations about ageing and the meanings assigned to age have also shifted in ways that make ageing an even more complex process, particularly for women. Paradoxically, the process of (successful) ageing in the current cultural context is perceived—and accepted—as being contingent on maintaining the values and appearance of youthfulness.

Women remain primary targets of the discourses of consumerism that as Giddens (1991) and Gill (2007, 2009) argue, characterise post-modern, postfeminist society. The media and women’s magazines in particular continue to be important sites for the construction of feminine identity through discourses of fashion, beauty, youth and the importance of body work, which historically have ‘rigorously excluded age’ (Twigg 2010: 483). However, the growing community of mid-life people challenges such perceptions and ways of operating. They do not identify themselves as old and see no reason why they should be represented as such in mass-media discourses, thereby presenting beauty and cosmetic corporations as well as the media and advertising industries with one of their greatest challenges: the ideological difficulty of accommodating the ageing female body and the threat it represents to culturally acceptable models of femininity, whilst fulfilling the (lucrative) needs of this cohort of consumers. In the current postfeminist media culture, media discourses remain profoundly ambivalent about ageing. As I discuss in Chapter 1, older women do have greater visibility in the public arena, although it could be argued remain under-represented along with other categories of ‘otherness’ such
as non-heteronormativity and ethnicity. However, role models of successful ageing held up to the public gaze are often presented in terms of prescribed identity categories, carefully modified by visual and textual semiotic resources (see Chapter 5): e.g. Helen Mirren (acceptable glamour); Mary Berry (domestic wisdom); Judi Dench (national treasure); The Fabulous Fashionistas (acceptable transgression); Hillary Clinton (woman—grandmother—in a man’s world). These women, who are still subject to judgement-by-appearance (as the commentary about Clinton in Chapter 1 attests), are evaluated as acceptable role models of ageing femininity because they achieve, in their different ways, the complex series of balances required to conform to what Railton and Watson (2012) argue are cultural ‘rules’ governing the performance of ageing femininity: investment in the appearance without “trying too hard”; maintaining youthfulness but not sexual desirability; acknowledging personal age whilst disguising/resisting its visible signs. The public judgements reserved for ageing women who fail to conform to these rules are exemplified in the opprobrium directed at Mary Beard (see Chapter 8).

I have used three interrelated datasets to examine the relationship between public and private discourse: spoken data from a series of qualitative interviews represents the private voices of ageing. Public discourses are explored through two datasets: selected anti-ageing skincare advertisements; and a range of media texts. My analytical approach to the datasets draws on a combination of theoretical frameworks: Critical Discourse Analysis, Appraisal Theory and Multimodal Analysis which have allowed me to analyse systematically the relationship between public discourses and the language of the private voices of the women in this study. The spoken data, which is the focus of Chapters 6 and 7, provides a unique and rich corpus of commentary which I draw on to explore in depth the language women use to talk about and evaluate their lived experience of ageing. I consider the linguistic strategies, choices and resources that constitute the day-to-day reality of ‘age talk’ and how this fits with each woman’s ‘story of the self’ (see Giddens 1991). My findings show many commonalities: for these women ageing is a complex, non-unitary and universally unwelcome experience, and whilst ageing is experienced in a highly personal
and individual way, there are nonetheless striking similarities in how they perceive and talk about their experiences. Participants seek to make sense of this most amorphous phenomenon by conceptualising it in terms of different dimensions of ageing which require different evaluations and differing degrees of dis/alignment and engagement. This complicated positioning work is realised through diverse linguistic strategies such as pronoun shifts, specific positively/negatively loaded vocabulary, use of intensification and hedging.

My analysis shows that the process of ageing is indivisible from the appearance, and the mirror moment is central to the way all female participants irrespective of age, interpret and evaluate how they are/their ageing. As I show in Chapter 7, ageing is most immediately experienced in the mirror and its lens forms a complex bridge between the cultural and subjective gaze, and between external and inner worlds and the different dimensions of identity they represent; once again, pronoun shifts express these complex shifts in evaluative gaze. The way these women construct the mirror moment linguistically is rooted in the body, characterised by language of deconstruction and scrutiny. Without exception all bodily changes are ascribed to the ageing process and negatively evaluated as a result, often using powerfully intensified language. The recurrence of ‘should’ in many participants’ talk encodes complex reactions to their own ageing: the obligation to conform to cultural requirements of the ageing female appearance; the tension between the subjective and external gaze; awareness of the constant presence of ‘the gaze of the Other’, whether that is the gaze of men, of youth, or as seems increasingly the case, the female gaze turned on other women. A consequence of this is that despite their negative evaluations of cultural attitudes, and protestations of acceptance of their own ageing, and the rise of positive counter-discourses of ageing, none of the women in my study is prepared to step outside the cultural rules which still drive the feminine duty of ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ (Mulvey 2009: 19).

I look at how ageing women are represented in media and advertising discourses through analysing anti-ageing skincare advertisements and selected media texts (see Chapters 4 and 5) applying a postfeminist framework of interpretation. My principal findings suggest a number of common attitudes encoded within these public discourses.
Fundamental media ambivalence towards female ageing is expressed through the ways in which older women are represented textually and visually, and in the contradictory nature of age-related discourses. For example, menopause is discursively framed as the signifier of the prevailing age-as-decline narrative, but sits alongside the notion of the relentlessly active and productive body that constitutes success-based models of ageing as described by Grenier (2012). Similarly exhortations to maintain a youthful appearance by whatever means have equal prominence with public judgements of women who have been “found out” as having had cosmetic surgery. The absence of representations of older women in magazines targeting younger consumers attests to the generalised cultural unease about ageing. There are few references to or features about, older women; often those that are to be found whilst ostensibly celebrating older women, in reality encode highly ambivalent evaluations of ageing through linguistic strategies such as the omnipresent verbal qualifier ‘still’. The highly sexualised nature of representations of young women discussed by Gill (2007) serves to highlight further the exclusions of older women. Publications with an older readership present carefully modified constructions of femininity to readers based around the cultural “rules” of ageing femininity in which sexuality has little place—often accomplished by locating older women in the domestic sphere. Multimodal analysis of skincare advertisements suggests that without exception the process of ageing is negatively constructed through a combination of compositional, visual and verbal elements that by contrast, glorify the attributes of youthfulness as the desired state.

My exploration of representations of women versus men in public discourses has been limited; the number of male participants included in the interviews was not sufficient to provide a meaningful basis of comparison, and similarly the small number of male-targeted skincare advertisements and media texts included in the analysis has been on too small a scale to have fully addressed this question. Nevertheless, valuable insights have been gained which demonstrate a very different—and gendered—communicative approach in male-targeted communication versus that of women, and which provide a promising basis for further research. I make the point in Chapter 4 that I am conscious of the effect
of the interview situation on participants’ evaluations of their ageing and appearance in that by inviting women to reflect on these issues they are likely to problematise them, for reasons of personal modesty as well as an assumed correlation between honesty and negative evaluation. However, this in itself can be seen as symptomatic of the pressures on ageing women of the cultural model of youth=beauty, and reinforces the importance of continuing work in this area.

In conclusion, based on the analysis I have undertaken, I argue that for the women in this study the experience of ageing is more, not less difficult in a postfeminist environment which, it seems, serves only to intensify the uncertain status of older women. The reciprocal impact of ageing on femininity—linguistically, socially and emotionally—indexes a double powerlessness and lack of visibility, much as Laura Bates argues in her 2014 book Everyday Sexism. She contends that the sexism that is normalised in many women’s day-to-day experience intersects with other categories of prejudice, such as age, to create ‘double discrimination’ (2014: 276). Cultural attitudes towards age(ing) remain fundamentally gendered, lacking sufficient ideological suppleness to accept that an ageing female body can continue to be a site of femininity and desirability, or that there is a notion of femininity which can accommodate the ageing body. Not only that, but the hardening female gaze perpetuates the gendered nature of ageing; women are increasingly surveyors of other women, compounding historical (male-generated) perceptions of women as legitimate objects of the gaze. Woodward asks

> can we invent in our culture new meanings of old age so that we need not fight this battle with ourselves and others? Can we imagine mirrors which reflect other images of old age back to us? (1991: 70)

Over twenty years later these questions still remain largely unaddressed by contemporary culture and these issues continue to challenge prevailing age and gender ideologies in very significant ways.

The work I have undertaken here has a contribution to make both within academia and in the wider business environment. The relationship between ageing and gender is only one aspect of the wider issue of intersectionality which is of increasing relevance in academic and
business domains; the debate needs to be broadened to include different categories of ‘otherness’ such as race and sexuality. Many further directions suggest themselves for which this study represents only a beginning. The insights I have gained in carrying out this research have meaningful applications in the wider environment of advertising, in raising awareness amongst brand owners and advertisers about the language used about and by ageing women. Other initiatives arising directly from this study have already led to approaches to corporations to work on language and diversity-related projects, building on work already undertaken on gendered discourses in the workplace (see Baxter 2011; Litosseliti and Leadbeater 2011). Future research would seek to broaden the investigation of the linguistic impact of gender and age(ing), developing the (albeit limited) insights gained into male ageing by undertaking an equivalent study focusing on mid-life men—given that cultural attitudes to masculinity appear to be shifting, particularly as men age and more sophisticated male-targeted anti-ageing products become available. This would offer a more meaningful comparison of attitudes to female versus male ageing.

This book, the study on which it is based and the future directions I outline here share a common purpose which is about offering to the collective community the possibility of greater understanding of ageing, a phenomenon at once shared and intensely individual, resisted despite being inevitable—and in doing so, even in a small way, to start to change the conversation.

References


Appendix A

Linguistic Classifications for Analysis of Interview Data

In outlining the application of their system of appraisal to written and spoken data, Martin and White (2005) identify a comprehensive series of classifications for the linguistic realisations of Attitude, Engagement and Graduation (see Chapter 3 of this study). As Chapter 3 discusses, the semantic domain of Attitude is broken down into three sub-systems: Affect, Judgement and Appreciation, each of which is realised by a range of linguistic features and structures. I have drawn on Martin and White’s system of classification in order to develop the framework for classifying Attitude which I have applied to my own data (see below), also incorporating Martin and White’s groupings of emotion into three major sets: un/happiness, in/security and dis/satisfaction (2005: 49) and their clined scale of emotional intensity: low/median/high. The classification framework is illustrated with examples from the spoken data in my study.
Attitude—‘Ways of Feeling’ (ibid.: 42)

i. *Affect*: Registers positive/negative feelings, resources for expressing emotion (Table A.1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classification</th>
<th>Positive/ negative</th>
<th>Realisation</th>
<th>Typology</th>
<th>Grading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Affect as process</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Affective mental</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>E.g. ‘the one thing I do like about getting older...’</td>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
<td>Median</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Affective behavioural</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>E.g. ‘there’s a lot of acceptance in there but if I go out of the range for me I get upset’</td>
<td>Unhappiness</td>
<td>Median</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>E.g. ‘I was appalled by Felicity Kendall how much work she’d had done’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affect as ‘quality’ (i.e. adverbial/adjectival modifiers)</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>E.g. ‘I know it’s [sc. ageing] going to be sad’</td>
<td>Insecurity</td>
<td>Median</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affect as ‘comment’ (i.e. modal adjunct)</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>E.g. ‘unfortunately I look in the mirror and go ooh dear there’s another wrinkle’</td>
<td>Dissatisfaction</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ii. *Judgement*: Deals with attitudes towards people and behaviour

Martin and White sub-divide judgements into two categories: those dealing with ‘judgments of esteem’ and those concerned with ‘judgments of sanction’ (ibid.: 52). ‘Social sanction’, and its illustrative realisations of ‘veracity’ and ‘propriety’ can be understood as being concerned with ‘edicts, decrees, rules and regulations’ (ibid.: 54) and is the category I have applied to my data. Martin and White argue that there is a further level of delicacy in the analysis of resources of judgement which maps the intersection between types of judgement and certain
modalisations, i.e. modulations of obligation can be related to judgements of propriety, and modalisations of probability to judgements of veracity, as shown below’ (Table A.2).

iii. *Appreciation*: Adapting Martin and White’s definition, this has been interpreted for the purposes of this study primarily as aesthetically-based evaluation of people. Two of the illustrative realisations of *appreciation* they identify—reaction and valuation—have been used in the framework outlined in Table A.5. In addition Martin and White suggest that the *appreciation* framework can be interpreted in terms of the metafunctions (see Chapter 3 of this study), a level of analytical delicacy which I have found useful in distinguishing between the nature and source of aesthetic evaluations (Table A.3):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social sanction</th>
<th>Positive (praise)</th>
<th>Negative (condemn)</th>
<th>Modalisation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Veracity (i.e. ‘how truthful?’)</td>
<td>E.g. ‘most of my friends don’t lie and they don’t have the frozen look’</td>
<td>E.g. ‘I know that there’s a lot of crap in some of these ads and so I actually don’t believe in a lot of these ads’</td>
<td>Probability: e.g. ‘she’s certainly has some work done’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Propriety (i.e. ‘how far beyond reproach?’)</td>
<td>E.g. ‘she’s aged gracefully I doubt she’s had any work done’</td>
<td>E.g. ‘I think don’t look like mutton dressed as lamb that’s something I would worry about’</td>
<td>Obligation: e.g. ‘in theory I think cosmetic surgery’s a bad thing and that we should all be happy with who we are’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

‘women are expected to be kind of smooth and beautiful’
Engagement and Graduation: Intersubjective Stance, Alignment and Solidarity

Martin and White explain engagement in terms of ‘the linguistic resources by which speakers/writers adopt a stance towards the value positions being referenced by the text and with respect to those they address’ (2005: 92). As Chapter 3 discusses, this approach, which I also take in my analysis, presumes that all utterances are in some way, to some degree, stanced. Martin and White take a ‘dialogistic perspective’ to their analysis of engagement, arguing that the speaker/writer enters a relationship with the ‘other voices’ (ibid.: 93) which make up the discursive context for any utterance, either acknowledging and positioning themselves in relation to this wider discursive community (heteroglossia), or choosing not to reference it (monoglossia). Thus Martin and White’s framework for engagement and graduation is concerned both with specific language features (i.e. hedges and intensifiers) and dialogistic locutions (i.e. modal realisations) by which speakers/writers align/disalign themselves with regard to ‘prior utterances in the same sphere’ (ibid.: 93) and express the strength of their positions (Table A.4).

Martin and White identify a complex and highly detailed taxonomy of resources realising intersubjective stance, and whilst not all have been applied to my data, the framework I have developed, based on Martin and White’s work, allows for a sufficiently fine-grained level of analysis.

Table A.3  Example linguistic resources of Appreciation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of appreciation</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
<th>Metafunction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reaction: i.e. ‘did I like it?’</td>
<td>E.g. ‘she’s a beautiful looking woman’</td>
<td>E.g. ‘it was the most horrific spectacle … she looked like a skeleton’</td>
<td>Interpersonal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valuation: i.e. how worthwhile, how “worthy”</td>
<td>E.g. ‘old people are seen as a burden on society once they’re past their usefulness’</td>
<td>E.g. ‘I think this person’s completely irrelevant ...I don’t think she’s ever made anything of her life’</td>
<td>Ideational</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Although classifications for engagement and graduation are shown separately for reasons of clarity, gradability is a defining property of all attitudinal meanings and is, as Martin and White state, ‘central to the appraisal system’ (2005: 136) (Table A.5).

### Table A.4  Example linguistic classifications—Engagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Engagement</th>
<th>Linguistic realisations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disclaim (i.e. the textual voice positions itself as rejecting other contrary positions)</td>
<td>E.g. ‘you don’t need to put bits of plastic into yourself to look younger’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertain (i.e. the speaker presents the proposition as on of a range of possible positions, thereby entertaining dialogic alternatives)</td>
<td>E.g. ‘in my view she’s trying too hard’ ‘I believe happiness comes from within’ ‘Age is just a number I believe’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attribute (i.e. the speaker presents the proposition as originating in an external voice)</td>
<td>E.g. ‘they they just try and blast you with research’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialogic status: monoglossia i.e. ‘bare assertions’,</td>
<td>E.g. ‘my expectation is firmly that I will not age’ ‘Old age starts now in your 80s and not a minute before’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>heteroglossia i.e. referencing/acknowledging other points of view via:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Modal auxiliaries</td>
<td>E.g. ‘I might one day consider it [sc. plastic surgery]’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Modal adjuncts</td>
<td>E.g. ‘that’s why I’m definitely fighting ageing’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Mental verb structures expressing epistemic judgements</td>
<td>E.g. ‘I think I am remarkably accepting of my appearance’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table A.5  Example linguistic classifications—Graduation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Graduation</th>
<th>Linguistic realisation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Force i.e. up/down scaling of intensification:</td>
<td>E.g. extremely/rather attractive, looking relatively young</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Qualities</td>
<td>E.g. ‘I really want to fit in to society’s definition of beauty’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Verbal processes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus i.e.:</td>
<td>E.g. ‘she’s still a real beauty’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharpening via boosters and intensifiers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Softening via hedges and minimisers</td>
<td>E.g. kind of/sort of/rather</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Sample Analytical Grid Applied to Individual Interview Texts

See Table A.6.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Object of evaluation</th>
<th>Appraiser</th>
<th>Positive/negative</th>
<th>Sub-system</th>
<th>Typology</th>
<th>Lexical realisation</th>
<th>Prosodic realisation</th>
<th>Graduation &amp; Engagement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional status as an older woman</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td>Strongly neg</td>
<td>Affect</td>
<td>Insecurity, dissatisfaction</td>
<td>Lexis: dismissed' irrelevant; negated mental processes I don’t feel respected'</td>
<td>Highly negative expression of her feelings about the value of her experience</td>
<td>Unhedged declarations I don’t feel; use of minimisers and vague language to diffuse intensity, ‘kind of irrelevant’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appearance—grey hair</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td>Strongly neg</td>
<td>Affect</td>
<td>Insecurity, unhappiness</td>
<td>Lexis: give in; negated mental process verbs, I can’t bear it; modals of obligation, you just have to</td>
<td>Strong statement of stance but also evidence of conflict re desire to give in to grey hair vs social pressure to resist, realised by vocabulary of defeat rather than acceptance</td>
<td>Upscaling of force via intensified language, can’t bear; use of modal signifies heteroglossic positioning, i.e. with regard to conflicted feelings about other voices and opinions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appearance—current vs appearance at age 27</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td>Neg</td>
<td>Appreciation</td>
<td>Reaction</td>
<td>Comparative language based on implied negative, you weren’t like this all your life</td>
<td>Evidence that the ageing appearance is negatively evaluated against perceived physical optimum, signified by negative loading of this</td>
<td>2nd person pronoun suggests distancing strategy and implies the external gaze i.e. you weren’t like this…</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Example Visual Communication Analysis: L’Oréal Anti-Ageing Skincare Advertisements

See Table A.7.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Metafunction</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Application to visual composition</th>
<th>Specific realisation</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>L’Oréal Men ‘ice cool eye roll on’</td>
<td>Ideational</td>
<td>Represents aspects of the external world and their connection to people experiencing them</td>
<td>Illustrated by verbal resources working to support the visual</td>
<td>E.g. verbal headline last night? Never happened positioned across male social actor’s face</td>
<td>The powerful sexual undertone supports stereotypes of traditional heterosexual masculinity to compensate for the historically female domain in which the ad operates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L’Oréal women’s ad ‘collagen micro-pulse eye’</td>
<td>Interpersonal</td>
<td>Represents ‘the social relation between the producer, the viewer and the object presented’ (1996, 2006: 42)</td>
<td>E.g. illustrated by the gaze of the social actor</td>
<td>E.g. the lack of direct gaze in the female targeted L’Oréal ad vs the direct gaze in the male ad</td>
<td>In female ad this connotes lack of engagement with viewer, encodes stereotypical attitudes towards femininity (passive and objectified) vs masculinity as agentive and engaging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Textual</td>
<td>Concerned with flow of information and coherence</td>
<td>Illustrated by compositional structure, use of typefaces etc</td>
<td>E.g. left-right compositional structure in female L’Oréal ad which equates to given-new</td>
<td>Composition as an ideological statement: placing the female social actor in the given zone normalises the idealised representation of masculinity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B

Transcription Conventions

Silverman (1993) argues that the way in which a given piece of spoken data can be transcribed depends on what the analysis of that data is trying to achieve. My approach to the interview data in this study has been to focus on its linguistic structure and features and their relationship to wider socio-cultural structures (see Chapter 3) rather than a Conversational Analysis (CA) approach which examines the structural organisation of the talk itself. This is reflected in a simplified transcription approach, which treats each interview account as a narrative as Silverman (1993) suggests, aiming to capture the specific language features of individual discourse which express evaluation, and how these contribute to prosodic realisations of attitude across larger chunks of discourse, from which attitudinal stances are constructed. The following transcription conventions are based on Silverman (1993: 118), using examples from the data in my study:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transcription symbol</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Function</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>I: if I show you this lady who's just- C: -yeah she's just yes</td>
<td>Single dashes, one at the end of a line and one at the beginning, indicates sequential talk with no gap between speakers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(.)</td>
<td>C: in traditional societies there's still more respect for the elderly (.) but not in ours</td>
<td>A dot in parentheses indicates a short pause in talk, e.g. under one second</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>{</td>
<td>C: those kind of things suddenly I: {are brought home because you are people do look at you as old</td>
<td>The left bracket indicates the point at which the current speaker's talk is overlapped by another's talk, but the first speaker does not yield the turn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/</td>
<td>C: you're not going to go and have botox or all that sort of thing which is/ I: /or bring it on I want everything C: yes yeah</td>
<td>The forward slash indicates the point at which the current speaker is interrupted by another speaker and yields the turn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(       )</td>
<td>I: how did your own mother deal with the ageing process C: ((exhales)) not very well</td>
<td>Double brackets contain various paralinguistic elements such as laughter, inhalations/exhalations, and gestures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[        ]</td>
<td>C: well she [sc. older model] looks magnificent</td>
<td>Editorial brackets contain author's comments and clarifications rather than transcriptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(xxxx)</td>
<td>C: so I always remember 'cos (xxxx) a little quote and I keep that little quote</td>
<td>Parentheses containing a row of xxxs indicates the transcriber's inability to hear what was said</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>word-</td>
<td>C: aged gracefully is quite h-how would you almost say aged gracefully</td>
<td>A word followed immediately by a dash indicates that the speaker has left the word uncompleted</td>
</tr>
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