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Beauty work or beauty care? Women's perceptions of appearance in the second half of life

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ABSTRACT

The prevailing cultural emphasis on women's attractiveness being tied to youth raises questions about how women perceive their appearance in the second half of life. The current qualitative study addresses this issue by posing two questions: how do women over fifty perceive and describe changes in their appearance? And how do they cope with these changes? Five focus group meetings with 19 Israeli women aged 54–76 were held to examine the issue. The meetings were structured around viewing three film clips starring older characters, encouraging the reporting of attitudes and perceptions in response to the clips. Based on a latent thematic analysis, the findings led to the conceptualization of a five-attitude model in response to physical changes in women's appearance: Grief—over the loss of youth and attractiveness; Resentment—over gendered media representations and cultural norms; Avoidance—distancing from one's aged appearance; Care—maintaining grooming routines; and Acceptance—coming to terms with the changes in appearance. Differences in responses between women were interpreted as reflecting a distinction between internal and external locus of control. Those with an external locus of control internalized the judgmental gaze of others, thus, reporting a greater sense of loss. Those with an internal locus of control were better able to accept themselves and focus on grooming rather than conforming to an imagined ideal. Results suggest that the distinction between understanding women's relationship with their appearance in terms of beauty work or beauty care may depend on the woman's locus of control.

KEYWORDS

Ageism; appearance culture; beauty care; beauty work; lookism

Introduction

According to various researchers, one prominent aspect of feminist awareness is recognizing a sense of victimization. This realization emerges with the perception of external forces, such as societal norms or specifically masculine influences, that contribute to the unfair treatment of women and the reinforcement of restrictive and oppressive gender roles. This fundamental conceptualization is related to all facets of women's lives, including their aging (Bartky, 2015; de Beauvoir, 1972; Wolf, 2013).

Although aging is a fundamental aspect of the human experience, offering chances for personal development, change, and even emancipation from societal norms, older women contend with an inequitable dual standard in a culture that frequently places the highest worth on a woman's

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youth and deems women less appealing as they grow older (de Beauvoir, 1972). The societal double standard regarding aging is evident in the cultural acceptance of aging men as a natural phenomenon, while women face pressures to retain youthful appearances indefinitely. Consequently, characteristics such as wrinkles, sunspots, or gray hair are often perceived as signs of defeat among women (Sontag, 2018). The role of media culture in enhancing these perceptions is reflected in the tendency to associate older women with decline, deterioration, ugliness, deficit, and passivity (Berger, 2008; Bordo, 2004; Wolf, 2013).

The perception of social policing in relation to women's age enhances the sense of women's social oppression (Sontag, 2018). However, while, as observed by Bartky (2015), the acknowledgment of this victimization promotes solidarity among women and facilitates the examination of gendered constructs from social and political perspectives, it also prompts a noteworthy question regarding the significance of tending to one's beauty:

The persistent need I have to make myself "attractive," to fix my hair and put on lipstick—is it the false need of a "chauvinized" woman, encouraged since infancy to identify her human value with her attractiveness in the eyes of men, or does it express a basic need to affirm a wholesome love for one's body by adorning it, a behavior common in primitive societies, allowed us but denied to men in our own still puritan culture? (p. 18)

Bartky's frank portrayal captures the ongoing debate between researchers who associate beauty work with the societal weight placed on aging women, compelled by the demand to preserve a youthful appearance and those who accentuate the concept of agency within beauty work (Clarke & Griffin, 2008).

This study explores women's positionality regarding their appearance in the second half of life, drawing on the personal comments of 19 Israeli participants in five focus groups, through two questions: How do women over fifty perceive and describe the changes in their appearance? And how do they cope with these transformations?

Women's appearance and age

As Holstein (2015) notes, the ongoing inequalities women face throughout their lives continue and even worsen as they grow older. As a result, women are more susceptible to appearance norms than men (Puvia & Vaes, 2013) and as they grow older, they are socially pressured to preserve their youth and not "surrender" to the signs of old age (Liran-Alper & Kama, 2007).

As part of the prevailing social norms, women are encouraged to rigorously discipline their bodies through means such as make-up, restricted postures, diet, skincare, Botox injections, and plastic surgery (Lemperle et al., 2001; Wolf, 2013). The social conceptualization of the meaning of "feminine beauty" creates pressure to conform to these prevailing cultural norms. This results in an unconcealed gap between the fantasy of feminine beauty and the ability to choose or realize this fantasy, especially at a more advanced age (Bordo, 2004; Wolf, 2013). The youthful appearance is presented as an object of universal desire in a way that instills negative ageist attitudes and stereotypical views toward older people, including feelings of rejection and superiority toward them (Bodner, 2009). One example is how the cultural association between youth and beauty has turned graying hair among women into a token of ugliness, dependency, social neglect, and transparency. Consequently, women are increasingly under pressure to conceal their chronological age by dyeing their hair to appear younger and maintain their social aesthetic capital (Clarke, 2010; Symonds & Holland, 2008).

Because older women as a social group face multiple forms of marginalization, including ageism, sexism, and lookism, they are candidates for both hyper-visibility at a younger age and invisibility at an older age (Granleese & Sayer, 2006), when they are often invisible, ignored, and dismissed (Gendron, 2022). This is especially relevant when it comes to black women and women from marginalized minority groups who are underrepresented in mass media (Pollock, 1992).

One of the results of this pressure is self-agism and the thought shared by women themselves that there is little to appreciate in the physical appearance of older women (Clarke, 2010). The pressure to combat aging and conform to societal norms also creates internal conflicts and inner tension. Older women express dissatisfaction with their body image, regarding weight and age-related changes and discuss daily struggles to meet cultural standards, even if they are aware of criticism (Clarke, 2010). Women's beauty work is related to this sense of invisibility at an older age and one of the reasons for it (Clarke & Griffin, 2008).

Consumerism, commercialized medicine, and beauty technologies have reshaped the view of cosmetic surgery and facial procedures, portraying them as customary methods of maintaining women's appearance (Brooks, 2017). These efforts can be seen in the rise in the use of costly products and procedures, including expensive creams, Botox injections, and plastic surgeries (Lemperle et al., 2001). The common trade term in the beauty industry, "anti-aging," is an example of this phenomenon, both linguistically and practically, with the perception that women's aging should be avoided and battled against as much as possible (Calasanti, 2005; Gendron, 2022).

The media normalizes the connection between attractiveness and young, slim figures, producing an ageist ideal through the over-representation of young women (Winterich, 2007), even when older people are supposedly depicted (Gewirtz-Meydan & Ayalon, 2018). Social media and visual technologies also contribute to the growth of lookism and discrimination based on gender and age (Chae, 2019; Roy & Ayalon, 2020). The prevalence of images that portray the equation between youth and beauty means the loss of aesthetic capital as well as actual opportunities for those who are perceived as unattractive (Tietje & Cresap, 2005).

Under the media's influence, women spend increasingly more time managing and regulating their bodies. The pursuit of ideal femininity turns the female body into an obedient one, whose powers and energies operate in accordance with the regulations outside it, which dictate it to be submissive and try to change and improve itself through the discipline of diets, physical exercise, make-up, and clothing (Bordo, 2004). Messages regarding successful aging, as a product of individual choice and behavior, and the expectation to hide signs of aging often result in an intersection of ageism and sexism leading to a situation where women experience greater pressure to adhere to youthful beauty standards (Brooks, 2017; Holstein, 2015).

The prevailing social norms as part of women's lives in commercialized, media-driven, neo-liberal societies, including Israel (Liran-Alper & Kama, 2007), enhance the question of women's agency (Chen, 2013). While researchers agree on the double standards of beauty between men and women, especially in old age, their interpretations vary in relation to the aspect of agency in acts of beauty work.

Some scholars find that engaging in beauty work is an obligation stemming from the pervasive gender norms that prevail in an unavoidably patriarchal and age-biased society, a society often seen as oppressive (Negrin, 2002). Accordingly, the adoption of beauty work emerges from a constrictive concept of femininity, reflecting women's subordinate position within society (Bartky, 2015; Bordo, 2004; Wolf, 2013). Thus, women who show resistance to the cosmetic industry are congratulated; as in the case of Brooks (2017), who notes that women who age naturally "can bring a welcome, and liberating, shift away from the women-as-sexual-object identity and the companion anxieties about physical attractiveness and sexual desirability in the eyes of others" (p. 95).

However, there are scholars like Davis (1991, 2003) who argue that women who seek cosmetic surgery display agency as they proactively reassert control over their lives, experience a sense of normalcy, or even correct the ongoing distress they may be facing. Additionally, scholars assert that self-esteem plays a pivotal role in women's exercise of agency and as cosmetic procedures enhance a sense of self-esteem it can be viewed as an act of agency (Gagné & McGaughey, 2002; Gimlin, 2000).

In light of these diverse views, this study explores women's positionality regarding their appearance in the second half of life, drawing on the personal comments of 19 Israeli participants in five focus groups, aiming to answer two research questions: How do women over 50 perceive and describe the changes in their appearance? And how do they cope with these transformations?

Method

The current study is based on five small focus group meetings conducted over Zoom that took place between October and November of 2020. We chose to use focus groups as they enable data collection through open-ended questions in an environment perceived as more natural than that of an individual interview since the participants are influencing and are being influenced by others, like real life (Krueger & Casey, 2014). Each session lasted 75 min and was fully transcribed. The discussion was based on viewing short excerpts from three films, that were chosen to elicit participants' responses to old age and aging in social and personal contexts. This method was used based on the view that cinematic representations provide reference content that evokes dialogue (Ratcliff, 2003).

The interview guide

Prior to the meetings, we reviewed a list of approximately 25 films featuring older protagonists and selected three films that we believe challenge common stereotypes of aging and allow a discussion on various aspects related to aging (see [Appendix 1](#) for the film's description). This process of discovering films related to age has been facilitated by the expanding collection of films that center around old age (Aharoni Lir & Ayalon, 2021). Each session was accompanied by an identical presentation, including questions and pictures of each film. It began with introductions, general discussions, and specific issues related to each clip, both before and after its screening, that was followed by group discussion (see [Appendix 2](#) for the Interview Guide). In the meetings, we found that participants were open to sharing their thoughts, despite the prevalent gendered social silencing mechanisms (Aharoni Lir, 2023).

The transcription process for all focus group meetings resulted in 75 pages containing a total of 26,612 words, encompassing a wide range of topics related to the aging processes among women. Discussions about gender and appearance were present throughout each session. However, they were predominantly common in the discussions after the viewing of the third film clip, during which participants were asked questions pertaining to beauty, femininity, and age.

The process of analyzing the findings

This study is based on a latent thematic analysis to identify the hidden ideologies and beliefs that have shaped the patterns in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006); the data's complexity and depth were examined by using an open coding approach (Blair, 2015). During the first stage, the transcriptions of the focus group participants were read several times by each of the authors to allow us to become acquainted with the data. In the second stage, we found interesting data related to several topics. Hence descriptive codes were assigned to each of the thematic passages that arose in the discourse. The third stage relied on constant comparisons between sections of the same focus group interview and across interviews to reach a generalization of the concepts and their relationships (Boeije, 2002).

Because several key topics were identified in all five focus groups, this is the second study based on the data. Whereas the first study focused on women's perceptions of age-related gains and losses (Ayalon & Aharoni Lir, 2022), this study is focused on women's perceptions of appearance in the second half of life. Other topics discussed in the focus group meetings, such as

retirement and power dynamics in the workplace, were left out of this study because they do not form a coherent plot line.

Study participants

The call for participation was made on social media, and interested parties were asked to fill out a short form with their demographic information. The criteria for participation were based on gender—women over the age of 50, which represents the second half of life; the ability to converse in Hebrew; and the ability to use Zoom. The study included 19 women, ranging in age from 54 to 76. The average age of participants was 68. Four of the women had a bachelor's degree, eight had a master's degree, and five had a Ph.D. Three of the participants were divorced, three were widowed, and the rest were married. To maintain anonymity, participants' identities were disguised using pseudonyms, (see Table 1 for the complete descriptive characteristics of the participants).

Ethics

The study was approved by the PI's University Ethics Committee (# 082003). All participants gave their informed consent before participating in the study.

Reflections

Both authors attended all the sessions, where they introduced themselves and presented their respective research. The first author, who had prior connections with some of the participants as a feminist activist, found it intriguing that awareness of social double standards towards women did not necessarily negate the internalization of lookism. The second author has been familiar with the topic both as a researcher and as a woman in her middle age.

Findings

The data analysis yielded five main categories, which overlapped at times, and addressed various attitudes toward the issue of appearance in old age.

1. "Slowly, slowly, your appearance is ruined"—the perception of old age as a loss accompanied by grief.
2. "It is perhaps a bit different for women"—dealing with the gendered aspects of the appearance culture.
3. "When I leave the house, I put on lipstick"—beauty care as a choice that contributes to positive self-esteem.
4. "Transparent old women"—the need to produce visibility in a society in which older women become invisible.
5. "I have decided to stop coloring"—age as a release from social disciplining.

"Slowly, slowly, your appearance is ruined"

One of the most common reactions to the changes in appearance among focus group members was that of sorrow and a sense of parting from youthful appearance.

I also think that [in terms of] body image, there remains a great desire to preserve it, and it is difficult to part from it. I mean, in old age, in my experience and from what I hear, it's hard to say goodbye to... sometimes we also perceive ourselves in a certain way, looking in the mirror and asking: Who is the woman looking at me there? As if one feels one thing and sometimes sees another... But the desire to look good ... remains very strong. The whole beauty culture is built on that today. (Nena, 54)

Table 1. Research's participants.

Pseudonym	Age	Education	Marital status
Johana	74	PhD	Married
Nena	54	MA	Married
Ellena	74	PhD	Married
Ira	64	MA	Married
Liora	68	BA	Married
Denia	69	BA	Married
Sima	63	MA	Married
Molly	66	BA	Divorce
Sarah	61	Academic	Married
Olga	74	MA	Married
Keren	67	PhD	Married
Ruth	75	PhD	Widow in a relationship
Heidi	76	MA	Widow
Kassi	67	MA	Married
Bina	72	MA	Widow
Irena	71	BA	Divorce
Noam	63	BA	Married
Rivka	72	PhD	Married
Radia	67	MA	Divorce

Nena refers to a schism, shared by the other women in the focus groups, between her aging appearance and her established self-image. Her description emphasizes on the one hand, the strong desire to look good that is maintained as part of the beauty culture, and on the other hand, the frustration caused by the inability to fully realize this desire; this description resonates with the dissonance between one's inner feelings and the outer appearance reflected in the mirror and reflected by society.

As Nena's comments show, recognizing that the feelings that accompany aging are a product of appearance culture does not necessarily result in a sense of liberation. This can also be learned from the words of Ellena, a well-known researcher, and activist in the feminist field in Israel:

I do not like to look in the mirror. It's hard for me now to see myself in Zoom. I'm usually off. I do not like my appearance, even though it's not that catastrophic. I criticize myself ad hoc. I like to dress and wear my own personal style, not for others but for myself.... And yes, my heart aches at times to see attractive women in their seventies doing sports and Botox. I will not do anything! Yes, there are old women who age relatively nicely and look more beautiful than I do. (Ellena, 74)

Ellena, like some other women in the focus groups, observes that her reflection in the mirror or Zoom produces a sense of difficulty and self-dislike. Her use of the term "non-catastrophic" emphasizes the looming sense of tragic loss. Whereas her sense of agency and control can be seen in her reference to having her own style of clothing, her sense of pain at the perception that she is unable to maintain her attractiveness is reflected in her comparison to women her age who remain "attractive."

Along with the descriptions of a sense of loss, some women also described strategies for dealing with it, including the attempt to ignore the change that is taking place:

I'm trying to ignore it and not think about it. I still feel young.... but it's not easy - this thought that slowly, slowly your appearance is ruined. Only the soul remains; the soul always remains young. (Rona, 72)

I remember my husband's grandmother, who passed away at the age of 107, who at the age of 99 told me: "I look in the mirror, and I ask who is this woman"! She said to me: "I always feel young; I feel 19". And when I look in the mirror, I also say: I have become older! I don't put on glasses in the morning. Why put on glasses to see wrinkles, if you can have a little more time to see life more beautifully? (Liora, 68)

Rona and Liora describe an internal conflict between their feelings and their appearance. They feel that their appearance does not represent their younger inner self, which leads to a sense of

detachment from their physical self as if all that is left and matters is the inner self. These descriptions portray a sense of self-estrangement—as in the case of Liora which clings to her inner image of youth rather than the outer one, reflected in the mirror. Not only do these descriptions call to mind the internalization of self-agism, which is documented in qualitative research also among men (Aharoni Lir & Ayalon, 2022a) but also demonstrate how the cultural invisibility of older women (Clarke & Griffin, 2008) can be internalized as an aspect of self-agism.

“It is perhaps a bit different for women”

The connection between the desire to look good and the gender aspect of it has emerged multiple times in various forms during the focus groups, including references to representations of women in comparison to men in the Israeli clip that was shown.

I think that perhaps in women it's more pronounced, and in this movie [Love in Suspenders] ... you see that Nitza Shaul [actress] looks ... young, well-groomed, and the [male] actors ... with their white hair and with much more noticeable signs of old age. I mean, looking old, I think, is a little bit different for men than for women. (Olga, 74)

Relating to the lead actress's young appearance, Olga compares the female representation in the film to that of the men. She highlights the gap between the actress's dyed hair and the actors' white hair, referring to it as an age marker, indicating a gender-dependent difference in onscreen social expectations in a manner that echoes the double standard of aging Sontag (2018) talked about. This is also evident in studies on the increasing pressure on women to conceal their chronological age by dyeing their hair to approach the ideal of a young beauty symbol while preserving their symbolic fortune (Clarke & Korotchenko, 2010; Symonds & Holland, 2008).

The topic of gender disparities in on-screen representation also came up in Johana and Ellena's remarks, in relation to a popular Israeli TV show:

The current episodes of “Zehu Ze”[an Israeli TV show] serve as an amazing model; it's just men ... who accept their appearance and their age. Their willingness to show how they were and how they are now is ... amazing. This is such a beautiful way to come to terms with aging ... And you can see the wrinkles and everything. It's beautiful! It's an amazing model of people who know what is expected of them because they were stars when they were in their thirties, and they say: that's it. This is who we are. (Johana, 74)

In the episode, they brought ... [names of well-known Israeli actresses] ... the three of them heartbreakingly worked on their faces. They all had terrible plastic surgeries in my view! And they all look as though their faces are without wrinkles. That is, the difference here between the old actresses and the old actors is abysmal! ... The relationship between gender and age is mind-blowing. (Ellena, 74)

Johana and Ellena refer to a successful TV show that was broadcast on Israeli television between the years 1978 and 1998 and was composed of an all-male cast of well-known actors.¹ Following the coronavirus, it returned in 2020 with the same cast members, who are now in their sixties and seventies. Johana finds the men who have grown old as a model of empowerment, whereas Ellena emphasizes the difference between them and the guest actresses who appeared in one episode, and who underwent plastic surgeries to maintain their youthful look, noting the intersection between gender and age. Ellena's thoughts are particularly interesting because they demonstrate that she is well aware of the double standard regarding women's appearance. However, this awareness does not exempt her from feeling bad about her aging appearance, as was discussed earlier.

The intersection between gender and age also emerges from Nena's remarks, which indicate how the cultural conditioning of appearance accompanies women throughout their life course:

¹This show was mentioned in two of the meetings. In the first focus group, including Ellena and Johana, it was mentioned, because before the clip it showed for a second on YouTube. In the fifth focus group, it was brought up spontaneously as an example of success in old age.

If I grew up with a body image that I am fat or too thin, attractive, or less attractive, it is really something that may serve me or may hurt me later on. And the question is, at what age do you understand it and stop being part of the story? If I can create for myself an alternative story with some kind of confidence, that this is who I am. And it persists in older women, who act out the complexes they were assigned at a young age because they still exist and still serve them poorly, and they continue with it. (Nena, 54)

Nena emphasizes the importance of understanding that the socialization processes that girls and adolescent women go through limit them and narrow their self-perception. She presents two options. The first is to construct a different narrative that inspires self-confidence; the other is to keep carrying throughout one's life the weight of restricting social norms. This description reinforces the question of what it means to resist aged socialization processes related to aging women. In current research to resist means to avoid beauty work (Clarke & Griffin, 2008), but Nena's words can enhance the understanding that it is mainly one's standpoint and relation to life, rather than one's choices regarding appearance.

"When I leave the house, I put on lipstick"

One strategy for coping with age-related changes in appearance was to accept them while treating beauty work as a lifelong personal choice.

You have to first come to terms with the fact that at the age of 60 or 70, you do not look like you were at the age of 20 or 30 First of all, it takes time to internalize this matter - but even when you internalize it, you still want to look the best you can, and still, there are comparisons to women your age - if they look better, worse. This comparison never stops, in my opinion. (Sarah, 61)

Sarah's perspective is very similar to that of women who see the issue of beauty as an ongoing life condition, including the constant comparison to other women. The distinction is that her description embodies a possibility for agency. Firstly, in accepting the change, and secondly in emphasizing that the desire to look good is a personal, inner matter. Nonetheless, it is negotiated via comparisons with the external world, in a manner that was repeated in other narratives, demonstrating the sense of competitiveness between women based on a youthful appearance.

According to Clarke and Griffin (2008), beauty work ultimately reinforces ageist conceptions of physicality and beauty. But it is important to note that for some of the participants it carried a great value that is not necessarily related to age but to their socialization as women:

I think it depends on the character of the person - if she also wants to groom herself until she reaches old age ... My daughters say: "Mom, you did not put on lipstick". I know I'm leaving the house, so I put on lipstick. If I do not wear it, then something is not normal. Someone who grooms herself, someone who always wants to look good, so I think it does not pass unless she has a disability, some kind of illness, something that prevents her But my mother, until the age of 98, it was important for her that she fixed her hair and that she'd be groomed ... It's a matter of a person's character. And there are those who, even at a young age, do not self-groom, it is not the main focus in their eyes. (Irena, 71)

Irena describes three generations; her mother, who maintained an orderly appearance even as she approached the age of 100, herself, who does not leave the house without wearing lipstick, and her daughters, who remind her to put on lipstick before leaving the house. This description is particularly interesting as it enhances two points. First, self-grooming is not necessarily age-related, and second, it can be viewed rather than work (Clarke & Griffin, 2008) as a personal empowering choice, which has a long feminine tradition, that has been enhanced via the culture of consumerism.

While grooming is described as giving a good feeling, the meaning of it varies from woman to woman. For example, Rivka describes:

It's important to me that I look in the mirror, and that I am happy with myself - not by someone else's definition, but it's important for me to look good. I do not dye my hair and I would not have plastic surgery. I am almost without make-up. But neat and healthy. And it's more important to me than some

ideal of beauty. And it's interesting that now in the corona, even when we're not going to work so much ... that we're a lot at home I feel better about myself if I am combed, tidy, and look fine. This is it. Not a Barbie, not a star ... but to look fine. (Rivka, 72)

In Rivka's definition, the grooming routine does not include hair dyeing or even a heavy make-up routine, but rather the ability to look well-groomed and tidy; this light body work routine is connected to her sense of well-being. Liora and Heidi also share a similar perspective:

I think that the way you behaved as a young person, you will behave as an older one. If you were classy, it was important for you to nurture yourself and dress nicely. (Liora, 68)

To me, it [*care for one's appearance*] goes on forever. Each one with her own personal variation ... and in fact, it is good that way, because ... then we can maintain some aesthetics and some formality, and not be neglected. This seems very important to me. (Heidi, 76)

Social pressures on women to conceal or alter the physical signs of aging through beauty treatments, such as hair dye, makeup, and cosmetic procedures, are well-documented in the research literature (Clarke & Griffin, 2008). However, the question remains whether resisting these pressures can always be viewed as a liberating act. It can be argued that in a consumer culture that promotes convenience and minimal effort (Cousin, 2004), beauty work is an endeavor that challenges the comfort culture and asserts one's agency. On the other hand, it is possible to argue that beauty work is a direct product of the consumer culture as it represents high financial and time investments in ongoing efforts to maintain an ideal feminine image.

"Transparent old woman"

An important aspect that emerged in the context of the current culture was the need for women to maintain visibility in old age. Heidi speaks of the demand to remain sexy:

No matter what age you are. Be seventy, but be young and sexy. How? that's already her problem. And since it is usually not possible, you are not in the front row. Older women, in order to be seen, have to make a lot of effort And if not, they are transparent old women. (Heidi, 76)

Heidi, who responded to the clip from the movie *Tatie Danielle*, describes the social expectation from women to maintain their youthful and sexy appearance, even at an advanced age. The difficulty of most women in meeting this criterion of external appearance presents older women with two options. Older women either have to work hard and try to stay visible, including the use of unrestrained behaviors, which are not controlled by mainstream cultural norms, as depicted in the film *Tatie Danielle*, or agree to become invisible.

Liora and Noam also talked about the meaning of visibility, this time through clothing:

At my age, colors such as black and brown are horrible, and gray is awful. Once I reached the age of 50, after I was in India, I started dressing in colorful clothes I really want to have colors. I think you should be at this age - you should be happy with colors. We have beautiful natural colors. (Liora, 68)

I think the trend now is to be very colorful, also for older women. I see it among my girlfriends I see it in nursing homes or similar centers, where it is really very important to be seen - and I see this as a huge advantage - the desire to be seen. And I'm very much in favor of this. (Noam, 63)

Liora divides her life into two periods: before and after the age of fifty. She notes that she used to wear dark clothes before her trip to India, but now she wears colorful clothes. In response, Noam points out that this is a common occurrence in nursing homes. She acknowledges color as a marker of visibility in a manner that emphasizes old age among women as carrying a hazard of becoming invisible and strengthens the importance of gaining visibility, also as a means of seeing oneself.

“I decided I would stop dyeing”

The topic of hair coloring appeared in all the groups, among other things concerning the decision not to dye one's hair during the coronavirus period.

I have made a big change: when the coronavirus started, I stopped dyeing my hair. I feel very comfortable with white hair. I generally feel comfortable with my appearance ... so, I'm less critical of myself compared with how I was at 16 ... I also think there is a terribly big difference in how I see myself and how others see me. I think others see me as old, and I can talk about my old age, but when I look in the mirror, I do not look old to myself ... I look fine. This is it. And I'm glad I don't have to go to the hair salon to dye my hair. It's a wonderful sense of release. (Heidi, 76)

Heidi provides two contrasting benchmarks. The first is how she is now in comparison to the past, and the second is how she sees herself in comparison to how others see her. Heidi gained confidence over time and is more confident in her looks today than in her teenage days. She centers on her inner world and her ability to feel good about herself, including what she describes as the liberating act of not dyeing her hair.

Given that white hair is linked to ugliness, dependence, poor health, social disengagement, and cultural invisibility (Clarke, 2010) not dyeing one's hair is a step that can be considered brave:

I only decided three years ago that I would stop dyeing, because what is this pretense? And I was amazed at the reactions of people: "How brave you are"! Being brave means doing something that is not normatively expected of me; something that I would like to hide. So yeah, sure, it's a lot of socialization ... if we are shown an advertisement for retirement housing and the women are always very well-groomed with dyed hair and always with manicured nails, then this means that until the end, this is the model, because will I go to retirement housing as the only one who neglects her appearance? (Johana, 74)

Johana refers to the positive reactions she received when she stopped dyeing her hair. She analyzes the word “courage” that she hears repeatedly in response to her decision concerning media representations showing well-groomed older women in advertisements. This demonstrates how ads can set a standard that is hard to challenge.

Another aspect that has surfaced is the reduction in self-criticism in old age in relation to young age.

Women aged 16-18 are very bothered by their appearance as well. It seems to us that it is also a phenomenon that is ... sometimes it is much more serious at a young age, which really seems like the end of the world. There is less preoccupation with physical appearance in old age. (Denia, 69)

According to Denia, compared to teenage girls who are bothered by their appearance as part of a social-cultural phenomenon (Clark & Tiggemann, 2006), age can bring with it a sense of self-acceptance and a more relaxed attitude to one's appearance. Another example of self-approval can be found in Molly's words.

I think I'm among the women who would not go for injections and surgical improvements, I will not do that. I mean, I maintain myself in terms of visibility - physically - that I will look good and feel good about my body. Again, I accept, not with great joy, but not with terrible frustration, the spots on my face ... That's what it is! I earned it with dignity ... I just refuse to live in frustration with these things. But I definitely know friends who complain about things that are hard for me to understand, but yes, everyone is very individual. (Molly, 66)

Molly notes that she is not happy about the physical changes in her appearance but is also not frustrated by them. Her agency is manifested in her ability to decide not to be frustrated when some of her friends complain about things she accepts.

Discussion

The overall goal of this study was to find out how women over fifty relate to changes in their exterior appearance. This is an especially important topic in a social environment where the

media has a large influence on conceptualizing the notion that women's worth is related to their youthful appearance (Berger, 2008; Winterich, 2007).

One of the interesting aspects that emerged from the analysis was that, while some of the women in the discussion groups demonstrated a high level of awareness of gender aspects related to appearance, this awareness did not necessarily free them from judgmental social norms and from their own concerns about how they appear in the eyes of others. Overall, focus group participants expressed a sense of loss when facing changes in their appearance due to aging. They found it challenging to let go of societal ideals of youthful beauty and accept signs of aging, leading to a disconnect between their inner selves and their reflection in the mirror. Even several of the participants, who are well-known feminist activists, expressed sorrow and pain about what was perceived as the loss of attractiveness that accompanies old age.

The fact that the focus group meetings took place during the coronavirus outbreak exacerbated the salience of physical appearance. Some women reduced their beauty work, including dyeing their hair, due to the inaccessibility of hairdressers. For others, the constant reflection on Zoom meetings has worsened the issue of visibility and the uneasy feelings they have about their appearance.

Coping with changes in physical appearance in old age

Many of the participants related to the changes in their physical appearance in terms of loss and described the adoption of various practices of coping with this issue; as part of being subjected to messages requiring them to eliminate signs of aging and to age without changes in their physical appearance (Kenalemang, 2022). Based on the findings, we identified five non-linear, at times overlapping, coping styles that encompass a variety of perspectives and range from grief to acceptance.

Grief—A sense of uncontrollable loss and departure from youthful appearance, which can be seen in the first theme. The transition to an older look was often accompanied by a sense of grief, which necessitated processing. While many women felt that they were still young, their appearance in the mirror and their surroundings told them otherwise. These emotions reflect the disparity between chronological, subjective, and physical age (Montepare, 2006). This attitude portrays women who felt weakened by social norms and dealt with their sense of inadequacy daily.

Resentment—A sense of resentment was at times present among some of the participants in the context of social attitudes toward women's old age and the disparities in social expectations between men and women, as was evident in the second theme, which emphasized the gendered aspect of physical appearance throughout the life course. This sentiment was influenced by the media's ongoing portrayal of men, including men with belly fat, baldness, wrinkles, and other age-related characteristics. The basis for this feeling is consistent with research indicating more forgiving attitudes toward aging male appearance (Gewirtz-Meydan & Ayalon, 2018).

Avoidance—ignoring the physical changes, as can be observed in participants' choices, such as avoiding mirrors, not putting on glasses, or keeping oneself busy and focusing on other interests. These tactics of relegating the issue of appearance to the background might require daily efforts to prevent it from rising to full awareness. The deliberate decision to avoid looking at oneself can be interpreted in two ways: as an act of agency aimed at avoiding emotional discomfort and maintaining equilibrium, or as an expression of self-alienation, representing the internalization of women's invisibility, as part of the influence of youth culture and the lack of older role models in the media (Van Bauwel, 2018).

Care—grooming and self-nurturing. This approach, which was described in the third theme by some of the participants, has changed the locus of control from an external one—how others see me, to an internal one—how I see myself and how I feel about myself. Under these lenses, the participants connected their past identities as young women who have nurtured themselves

through beauty work to older women who continue to nurture themselves similarly. This finding is consistent with findings indicating that, as part of the fight against invisibility, older women continue the grooming routine they have maintained over the years (Clarke & Griffin, 2008).

Acceptance—embracing the changes as well as themselves; this was described in terms of coming to terms with the changes that occur with age. Some participants stopped dyeing their hair and felt relief and a sense of freedom. These women spoke of embracing change and avoiding self-criticism. Similar to previous research, the decision to stop dyeing their hair often stemmed from a desire for authenticity in their self-definition (Cecil et al., 2022). Other participants continued their grooming routine because it made them feel good.

Women's appearance between exterior and interior locus of control

While the issue of equality is central to the feminist discourse (Pertiwi et al., 2019), it is important to note how closely related it is to the issue of freedom; whereas the first concept promises women solidarity through the realization of social politics of gender, the second deals with the ability to manifest autonomy and choice, not only in gender relations or within the family unit (Aharoni Lir & Ayalon, 2022b) but in one's self-definition.

The findings enhance previous research showing how social norms, mass media, and the beauty industry continue to influence women's lives and self-perception in the second half of life (Lemperle et al., 2001; Winterich, 2007). This is true even when it comes to educated, feminist, activist, and gender-conscious women whose ability to see themselves as a whole person appears incomplete due to the internalizing negative views regarding older women. However, it also allows for the distinction between an approach of loss and that of continuity and/or acceptance, which can help reconcile the dilemma posed by Clarke and Korotchenko (2012) and further addressed by scholars (Clarke & Griffin, 2007), between those who believe beauty work is a submission to patriarchal culture and those who see it as an expression of agency.

The finding allowed us to identify two different approaches that develop from a common initial feeling of grief associated with parting from one's youthful appearance and the symbolic capital it carries. Some participants, who revealed mostly feelings of loss, frustration, and helplessness, exhibited mainly an external locus of control. It seems that in these cases the judgmental gaze was internalized and was regarded as unavoidable. Other participants seemed to portray a more successfully activated internal locus of control, which was directed inwardly. This generated self-acceptance and a viewpoint that does not center on exterior appearance. This approach allowed them a sense of continuity while focusing on self-grooming, rather than answering to an imagined ideal and an imagined judging audience. In this way, a sense of control persists as the perception is not centered on beauty but on the ability to uphold a well-groomed appearance that enhances one's sense of capability and control.

The findings indicate that the issue is not the beauty work per se, but rather the locus of control or the drive behind the beauty work. What kept women under patriarchal subordination related to their physical appearance was not their behaviors, manifested in the time and effort spent on beauty work, but rather the meaning they assigned to their physical appearance. The finding indicates that when the sense of an outward judgmental gaze was assimilated, the locus of control was external and carried a sense of loss; when the locus of control was internal, women were able to attain a sense of agency, independence, and freedom even in the face of physical changes.

Research limitations

This research was conducted with a relatively small sample size using Zoom focus group meetings, which took place during the Coronavirus pandemic. The participants were predominantly

highly educated women, with some actively involved in the feminist community in Israel. Consequently, their responses offer insight into the permeation of consumerist culture and patriarchal values related to appearance and femininity even among women who might be expected to resist such influences. Future research could further explore the intersection of age and appearance among feminists, offering insights into issues related to free choice and agency. Additionally, future studies can use additional films as a means of encouraging discourse on age. They can also encompass various ethnic aspects and strategies for enhancing women's internal locus of control regarding their appearance.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Data availability statement

Interview data will be available to other researchers upon ethical approval and request from the first author.

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Appendix 1. The films' excerpts

Three short film clips shown during each focus group meeting:

Tatie Danielle (1990): A French black comedy featuring Tati Danielle, an older widow who becomes an annoying presence after her husband's passing. Her unconventional behavior and indifference to pleasing others change when her family leaves her with a new caregiver. Directed by Étienne Chatiliez, with Tsilla Chelton stars as Auntie Danielle Billard.

The Intern (2015): An American comedy-drama following a 70-year-old widower who applies for a senior internship at an online fashion company. The man forms an unexpected friendship with the initially skeptical company CEO. Directed by Nancy Meyers, with Robert De Niro in the lead role.

Love in Suspenders (2019)²: An Israeli comedy, depicting a 64-year-old widow who accidentally runs over an older man, leading to an unlikely romantic relationship. Directed by Jorge (Johanan) Weller, with Nitsa Shaul and Yehuda Barkan star as the protagonists.

²Hebrew: *Ahava Beshleikes*.

Appendix 2. Session guide

Welcome words, self-introductions Followed by a presentation:

Slide One—General Information

The meeting is intended to examine the topic of age and gender, opportunities, and barriers, as they are reflected in film works. The meeting is recorded and transcribed, but your names will not be used.

The goal is to hear a variety of perspectives and perceptions that arise in the cultural discourse on this topic. The duration of the meeting is expected to be between one and one and a half hours.

We will watch three short film clips in order to hear your opinions, thoughts, and reactions to the cinematic works. We would appreciate short and concise references of a few minutes.

Slide 2—Thoughts on gender and cinema:

- What is the place of cinema in your lives?
- Has your attitude towards cinema changed over the years?
- A film or scene that has influenced your perception of masculinity or femininity?

Slide 3—Opening question

- We would be happy if you could tell us about your image of old age and whether there is a difference between women and men.

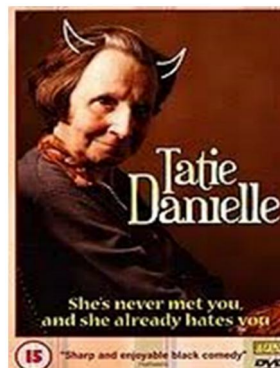
Slide 4—*Tatie Danielle*

Introduction: A black comedy film that challenges the typical Hollywoodian image of the elderly, as it introduces an unconventional 82-year-old woman.

Link: <https://shorturl.at/awCUW>

Questions:

- What is your response to the clip?
- How does the film challenge the image of the sweet old lady?
- Based on the clip, can you say that the film empowers older women?



Slide 5—*The Apprentice*

Questions:

- This is a film by director Nancy Meyers. Before we watch the trailer, what do you think of the image? What associations come to mind?
- Is retirement a positive thing that opens up new possibilities?

Link: <https://shorturl.at/fjH13>

- Can older people integrate into the digital world of work today and acquire new knowledge?
- What is the added value of employing older people?



Love In Suspenders

Questions:

- Does love have an age? If so, what is it and why does it have an age? If not, why not?
- Are there any unique barriers to love in old age?
- In what ways are the challenges of women and men similar and in what ways are they different?

Link: <https://shorturl.at/bsDGJ>

After watching:

- Does the issue of whether I am beautiful enough exist in old age for women and men?
- Do older women gain more power?

