

Aging, Appearance Politics and Cosmetics: Unbounding the Social Limit

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Abstract

Old age is desirable, but youthfulness has mostly been equated with beauty and status hence, is pursued in response to ageist and sexist perceptions that marginalize aging bodies. This article critically examines the intersections of aging, appearance politics, and cosmetic practices, with a focus on how women contest socially constructed boundaries of age and beauty. The paper attempts to interrogate and deconstruct these boundaries those invisible yet pervasive social rules that define what is considered desirable, acceptable, and respectable in relation to aging and appearance. These have received little Sociological attention in comparison to the extensively studied perceptions of the aging body, normative beauty ideals and cosmetics. The paper aims to highlight how older women use makeup and skincare to challenge invisibility, resist age-based limits and stereotypes, identity, and blur the boundaries of ageist appearance norms. The study employs the Dramaturgical and Intersectionality frameworks to describe how normative ideals that stigmatize aging, and cosmetic practices are deeply shaped by intersecting social realities that predispose older women to manage their appearance and perform youthfulness. The paper argues that the use of cosmetics by aging individuals represents a complex negotiation between self-expression, social acceptance, and the pursuit of agency in an appearance-obsessed society. The paper highlights the ambivalence of cosmetic culture: while it can reinscribe oppressive norms, it also holds the potential for subversion and the reimagining of aging beyond decline. By unpacking these tensions, the study contributes to broader conversations on embodiment, identity, and the politics of visibility in late modernity.

Keywords: *Aging Bodies; Youthful Beauty; Neoliberal forces; Cosmetics; Cultural Valuation*

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Background to the Study

The visual turn in contemporary capitalist societies places aging and appearance as two indexes of cultural valuation of beauty and youthfulness. Aging is a normal, universal, gradual and an inevitable biological process that affects all individuals, yet its social and cultural meanings differ across contexts and genders. Aging signifies a continuous decrease in “age-specific” appearance characteristics of the human body as a result of anatomical wear and tear (Rose, 1991) marked by reduced functionality of the systems. The remarkable variability in aging leaves the human body with wrinkles, grey hair, age spots, sagged skin and some other health-related issues. As a social phenomenon, it is bargained through cultural narratives, gendered expectations, and visual economies that regulate how bodies ought to look, perform, and show value. Beauty, on the other hand, is typically constructed through youthfulness, smooth skin, and bodily firmness, which positions aging as a deviation from the dominant aesthetic norm (Twigg, 2013).

Beauty myths on age are social narratives that drive appearance politics and shape women's perception of their aging bodies. Allen, Moise, Solway & Cheney, (2024) identified appearance as an indicator of aging that is closely linked to stereotypes and prejudice. These myths equate youth with beauty and aging as a decline in attractiveness. In many societies, aging especially for women symbolizes “a less valued personhood” (Ojala & Pietila, 2022), often associated with loss: loss of youth, attractiveness, vitality, and social value (Calasanti, 2007). The decrease in social valuation of women's aging bodies is a function of appearance politics that gives rise to low self-esteem and social invisibility with an attendant feeling of dissatisfaction (Reboussin et al, 2000; Tiggeman, 2004) or tension over their appearances (Winterich, 2007).

Aging is largely gendered. While men may be socially rewarded for signs of aging such as gray hair or wrinkles symbolizing wisdom or success women are often penalized for the same (Calasanti & Slevin, 2001). The asymmetrical valuation of aging men and women perpetuates a “double standard of aging,” wherein women's social and sexual worth declines as they age, while men may increase (Sontag, 1972; Cruikshank, 2003; Halliwell & Dittmar 2003). This double standard nature of aging supports the acceptance of men's aging as a natural phenomenon whereas women are devalued (Shlomit & Liat, 2024). McPherson (1990) argued that aging is beneficial to men and disastrous for women. An empirical study carried out by Berman, O'Nan and Floyd (1981) highlighted social norms that denigrate aging women's appearance as evidence of the double-standard nature of aging. Men were more likely to find aging women less attractive (Clarke & Korotchenko, 2011).

The beauty industry has long capitalized on women's insecurities about aging. Ageist narratives drive women's engagement with cosmetics as a mechanism of gaining endorsement. This “anti-aging ideology” fuels an ageist beauty culture that encourages women to conceal visible signs of aging to remain visible and attractive (Hurd Clarke, 2011). Appearance politics are shaped by neoliberal and patriarchal forces that perceive cosmetics not just for aesthetics, but as instruments to transcend the limits imposed by dominant ageist narratives. Consequently, cosmetics function as a crucial tool for women to maintain cultural capital in

gendered social hierarchies. Within this cultural logic, cosmetics have become one of the most pervasive tools through which individuals, particularly women, confer the visibility of aging. The global beauty industry promotes cosmetics as agents of transformation and rejuvenation, promising to conceal wrinkles, restore firmness, and maintain a youthful glow (Hurd Clarke & Griffin, 2008). Although, much gerontological and sociological research have focused on ageing and appearance yet, the negotiation between tradition and modernity that commodifies women's insecurity has been poorly understood. This article gives insight into the connection between aging and cosmetics, examining how beauty discourses, social pressures, and gendered expectations shape women's use of cosmetics as both a means of conformity and resistance. The paper aims to highlight how older women use makeup and skincare to challenge invisibility, resist age-based limits and stereotypes, identity, and blur the boundaries of ageist appearance norms. This article is organized into four parts. Three overlapping debate's structure current scholarship revealing alternative imaginaries of aging and beauty. The central discourse in this article explains how appearance norms and ageism structure older people's social experiences, motivate beauty work; cosmetics and anti-ageing industries commercialise aging; and the responses to age norms that are unevenly shaped by gender, class, race, and location producing both compliance and creative resistance. The first part considers aging and cosmetics, globalization of beauty and cultural variations, Intersectionality and dramaturgy and unbounding the social limit.

Aging and Cosmetics

Aging has been variously constructed in diverse cultures and times. In traditional societies of Nigeria, aging was often associated with wisdom, seniority, and authority, where elders were custodians of knowledge and tradition. However, with modernization, urbanization, and the rise of capitalist economies, the emphasis on productivity, speed, and visual consumption redefined the value of the body. The cultural valuation of aging has placed it in disadvantage state as a loss instead of a natural stage of human development. In media representations, advertising, and social discourse, the youthful body is idealized as a symbol of vitality, productivity, and social desirability, while the aging body is often marginalized, feminized, or stigmatized as decaying and obsolete. This dichotomy reveals how modern capitalist societies equate beauty with value and youth with power. The visual turn in modern culture propelled by photography, film, and later social media has made appearance central to identity performance.

The aging body, is a contested site where individual identity, social norms, and capitalist consumption intersect. According to Featherstone and Hepworth (1991), the body in late modernity has become a project to be managed, and aging bodies especially, women are subject to intense scrutiny and modification through consumption. Within this context, cosmetics ranging from make-up and skincare to more invasive aesthetic practices serve as tools of negotiation, resistance, and conformity. The cosmetics industry exploits this opportunity by promoting products and procedures that promise to reverse or remove the signs of aging. The politics of appearance thus transcends personal vanity; it operates as a mechanism through which societies construct, discipline, and sometimes liberate bodies from the boundaries of normative beauty and youth. This neoliberal logic of self-enhancement

reconfigures aging as a problem to be managed rather than a phase to be embraced. The burgeoning global beauty and anti-aging industry, valued in billions of dollars, reflects this ideological shift where cosmetics promise not only beauty but also belonging, confidence, and social validation. Thus, cosmetics emerge as both an instrument of compliance with beauty norms and a site of agency where individuals reassert control over how they are seen.

The relationship between aging and cosmetics is both aesthetic and political. Cosmetics mediate the tension between visibility and invisibility, empowerment and conformity. Its use, particularly among women, provides a sense of self-expression, confidence, and resistance against societal erasure that accompanies aging. On the other hand, the same practices can also reproduce oppressive norms by reinforcing the ideal that aging must be hidden or reversed. This paradox situates cosmetics as “postfeminist sensibilities,” (Toffoletti, 2014) where empowerment is expressed through consumer choice and bodily maintenance, but often within the margins of patriarchal definitions of beauty. Aging women traverse an opposing landscape in the bid to look natural and ageless as a moral and social imperative. A significant body of literature demonstrates that ageism combined with gendered beauty norms makes appearance a central site for negotiating social value in later life. Cosmetics, in this sense, serve as technologies of self-presentation and self-discipline. They mediate the boundary between appearance and identity, allowing individuals to manage impressions and resist stigmatization (Jones, 2010). However, these practices also reproduce the cultural norms that equate beauty with youth, positioning cosmetic use as a double-edged strategy: a source of empowerment through self-expression and a mechanism of conformity to oppressive beauty standards (Hurd Clarke & Griffin, 2008).

There has been a growing search among women in contemporary societies for products, procedures and practices that enhance healthy aging. This insatiable search aims to turn back the hands of time (Ramos E-Silva, Celem and Ramos E-Silva; 2013). Advertisements for “anti-aging” products use language and imagery that medicalize aging and present it as a problem to be treated (Coupland, 2007). Terms such as “repair,” “rejuvenate,” or “restore” evoke clinical procedures rather than natural life processes. This medicalization of appearance situates cosmetics within a broader discourse of control of the body, the self, and time itself (Gilleard & Higgs, 2013). Many women consciously use cosmetics to enhance confidence, maintain social legitimacy, or assert agency over their appearance. Twigg (2013) argues that older women's cosmetic practices can be read as acts of resistance against cultural invisibility. In a society that marginalizes older femininity, wearing makeup can become a means of asserting presence and dignity. Similarly, Hurd Clarke and Korotchenko (2011) highlight how older women negotiate beauty ideals selectively embracing grooming as self-care while rejecting unrealistic standards imposed by media representations.

Globalization of Beauty and Cultural Variations

The globalization of beauty culture has extended Western notions of youth and femininity across diverse societies, but local meanings of aging and beauty vary. Local discourse on aging indicates that some cultures place social value to old age. In many non-Western contexts, older women command respect and social authority, and beauty is associated with wisdom and

experience (Tulle, 2008). Reverence for old age had been a distinctive feature of traditional African and Asian cultures. Sagna (2001), Ajala (2006), Echeta & Ezech (2017), Eboiyehi (2015), & Iyare, Imafidon & Abudu (2021) observed that most African cultures particularly in Nigeria celebrate old age. Old age is desirable but the process of ageing is dreaded. However, with the transnational flow of media and consumer goods, anti-aging discourses have increasingly infiltrated these spaces, transforming local perceptions of aging and attractiveness. In African contexts, the adoption of cosmetics by older women can signify modernity and social mobility as much as beauty enhancement (Lemish, 2018). Nigerian women, use makeup not only to conceal age-related changes but also to participate in contemporary aesthetics of respectability and empowerment (Okeke, 2021). Thus, cosmetic use among aging women reflects a complex negotiation between tradition, modernity, and globalized beauty ideals.

Despite the pervasive pressure to conform to youth-centered beauty ideals, the use of cosmetics can also embody self-determination and identity reconstruction in aging. Some scholars argue that older women's use of makeup represents not submission to beauty norms but a reassertion of self and agency (Lewis, Medvedev, & Seponski, 2011). Through strategic engagement with beauty practices, older women challenge stereotypes of decline and reclaim visibility in public life.

Cosmetics enable the performance of identity that transcends chronological age. Makeup, is a medium through which older women perform not only femininity but also vitality, creativity, and individuality. This re-signification of cosmetics as tools of expression destabilizes ageist narratives that confine older women to invisibility or passivity. In this global beauty culture, cosmetics are instruments of both globalization and localization involving a shift from homogenization to diversification (Jones, 2011). The transnational circulation of anti-aging products, cosmetic surgery technologies, and beauty influencers gives rise to a “global aesthetic economy”. Everyday beauty routines and lifestyles of women aimed at maintaining ageless bodies seek to reinforce their exploitation and dependence on the industry. Cosmetics challenges the rigid binaries of age (ageless bodies) as well as commodify women's insecurities as a platform for capital accumulation and emotional labour. The contradictory role of cosmetics in women's lives is identified as both liberating and enslaving. Capitalism relates with women as commodities and not persons (Daniels, 2023 cited in Foysal, 2024). This resultant consumer culture facilitated by the neoliberal markets promote gender inequality and patriarchy across diverse cultures.

The politics of cosmetics intersects with economic inequalities as access to beauty products and procedures is mediated by class. This commodification of aging transforms bodily maintenance into a privilege of the wealthy, reinforcing social stratification. The beauty industry exploits anxieties around aging to sustain consumption cycles, turning natural processes into marketable defects. Consequently, cosmetics function as a crucial tool for women to maintain cultural capital in gendered social hierarchies. Media representations amplify these differences by portraying youthful women as ideal beauty models and rarely featuring older women except in contexts that highlight rejuvenation or transformation

(Coupland, 2007). This reinforces a visual economy in which women are compelled to invest in cosmetic products and procedures to remain visible and desirable. The intersection of gender and capitalism thus fuels a cycle where the commodification of youth becomes both a social expectation and an economic imperative. Localized reinterpretations of beauty practices reveal the agency of individuals who adapt, resist, or hybridize global ideals with indigenous meanings. With hybridization, aging bodies reclaim visibility through culturally resonant forms of self-presentation that celebrate, rather than conceal, maturity and experience.

Intersectionality and Dramaturgy Frameworks

Feminist and intersectional analyses show that gendered expectations make older women disproportionately targeted by appearance politics, while class and race mediate access to cosmetic technologies and shape ideals of beauty themselves. Empirical work demonstrates divergent experiences: working-class and economically marginalized older adults face different pressures and different possibilities for cosmetic consumption than wealthier peers; racialized communities negotiate globalized beauty standards alongside local aesthetic norms. Intersectionality framework succinctly explains the link between (ideology) ageist norms, expectations and narratives and power (patriarchy and capitalist forces) that create politics of appearance as a tool for justifying oppression of aging female bodies. These are shaped by gender, race, sexuality, capitalist markets, media, and neoliberal forces.

Dramaturgy is a variant of symbolic interactionism whose proponent is Erving Goffman. The theory likens everyday actions and interactions (acts) of individuals to theatrical or stage performances. Dramaturgical analysis infers that women perform youthfulness by actively engaging in cosmetics in a bid to remain socially visible and culturally valued. The function of appearance management takes place at the front stage leveraged on cosmetics, and other adornment practices for social validation. The backstage symbolizes the preparations that embody personal beauty routines with cosmetics as costumes and props that curate young and vibrant look. Dramaturgical and Intersectionality frameworks aptly describe how normative ideals that stigmatize aging, and cosmetic practices are deeply shaped by intersecting social realities that predispose older women to manage their appearance and perform youthfulness.

Unbounding the Social Limit

Comparative and non-Western perspectives remain under-represented in dominant literatures, however a gap that has implications for how we theorize unbounding social limits in varied contexts. The concept of unbounding the social limit captures the attempt to interrogate and deconstruct these boundaries those invisible yet pervasive social rules that define what is considered desirable, acceptable, and respectable in relation to aging and appearance. The idea of unbounding the social limit calls for a paradigm shift in how societies conceptualize beauty, age, and the body. The paper challenges the ageist ideologies rooted in visual culture and consumerism while advocating for inclusive representations that celebrate aging as a position of creativity, resilience, and social contribution. It calls for an inclusive beauty politics that embraces naturality and self-acceptance over ageist narratives while resisting the capitalist logic that profits from age-related insecurities.

This study challenges the hegemonic constructions of the aging body. To unbound the social limit is to deconstruct the aesthetic boundaries that define who is allowed to be beautiful, visible, and valuable. The perspective aligns with intersectional and critical dramaturgical frameworks that emphasize diversity in aging experiences and resist homogenizing narratives. Aging is not a universal experience; it is shaped by cultural, racial, economic, and historical contexts. The study brings to bear the fact aging is not a failure of personal-care but a natural, diverse and inevitable human process.

Conclusion

While cosmetics may offer psychological benefits such as improved self-esteem and social confidence, the pressure to maintain youthful appearances can also generate anxiety, financial strain, and dissatisfaction. The constant pursuit of youth risks pathologizing natural aging and fostering self-alienation. Feminist scholars therefore urge a critical interrogation of the moral economy of beauty questioning who benefits from women's cosmetic investments and at what emotional cost. Finally, the rise of cosmetic interventions from anti-aging creams to surgical procedures blurs the boundary between voluntary self-care and coerced conformity. The ethical challenge lies in promoting self-expression and body autonomy while resisting the commodification of insecurity.

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