

Women over sixty want to look good, not young or younger

Dr Carolyn Mair, Prof Danka Tamburic, Dr Glenis Wade

London College of Fashion, University of the Arts London, UK

ABSTRACT

Objective: The objective of this paper was to assess the impact of media on attitude to management of skin ageing in women aged 60 or over.

Design: Transcripts from each one hour, semi-structured, audio-recorded interview with each participant ($n=21$) were thematically analysed.

Method: Ethical approval was obtained from the University of the Arts London prior to conducting the study. The participants were an opportunity sample of 21 women aged over 60 (mean age: 65 years) recruited in response to a University call for participants. Of these, eleven participants had used medical interventions to manage their skin ageing. All participants took part in a one-hour interview which was thematically analysed independently by two of the authors.

Results: Four themes emerged from the data: (i) the use of anti-ageing skin care and sun screen products and regimes; (ii) sources of advice for these, (iii) attitudes towards cosmetic surgery and (iv) the influence of the media.

Conclusions: The participants used a range of anti-ageing skin care products and regimes in a variety of ways, sought advice from different sources and were generally not interested in undergoing cosmetic surgery. Despite ubiquitous media images of unattainable, airbrushed 'beauty' and messages equating youth with beauty, they generally reported satisfaction with the way they managed their skin ageing. When asked if they wanted to look good, look good for their age, look young or look younger, the majority of participants reported that they wanted to look good. The small sample presents limitations for deriving generalisations from the findings.

BACKGROUND

The media promotes unattainable standards of beauty and youthfulness. Physiological signs of ageing have been perceived as being symptomatic of the loss of femininity, sexual identity, social power, and social visibility (Featherstone 1995). These factors serve to enhance dissatisfaction with 'looking old and increase a desire to try to look younger' (Honigman & Castle, 2006). In response, women in particular, are increasingly seeking cosmetic surgery as a solution to the 'perils' of ageing.

Natural ageing processes include reduction in skin elasticity and a loss of collagen and subcutaneous fat which are more obvious in the face. Concerns about appearance as we age tend to focus on facial wrinkles and drooping skin (Goodman, 1994). These changes can be perceived as threats to 'self-continuity' (Poole & Feldman, 1999) and can result in reaction to ageing as if it were a disease.

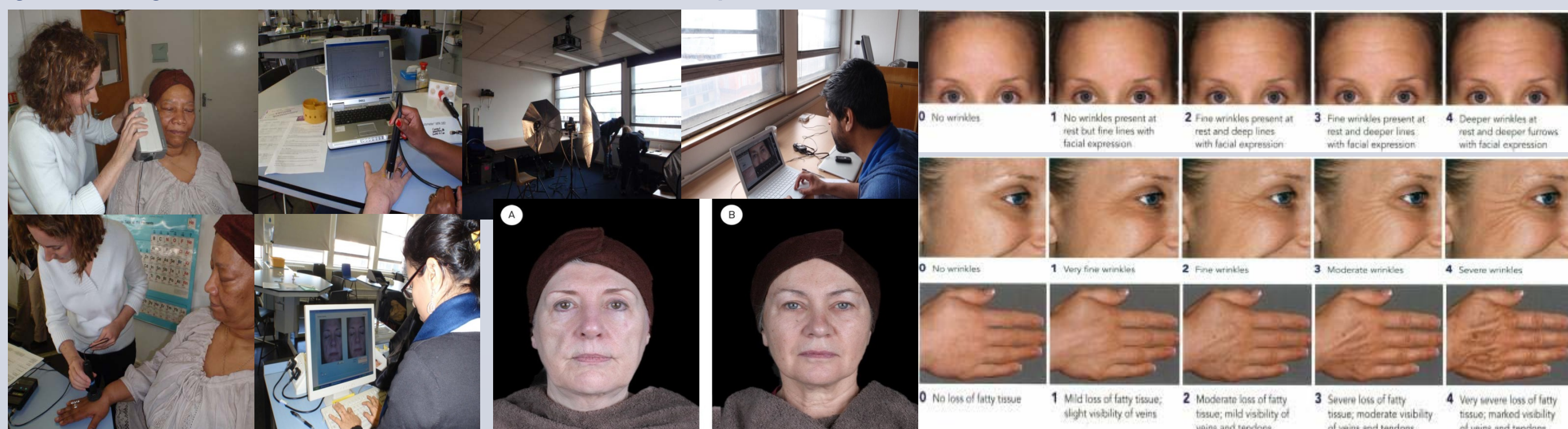
Despite legislation, older females continue to be underrepresented and negatively portrayed in the media (e.g., Baumann & de Laa, 2012; Vasil and Wass, 2006). In their review of 28 studies, Vasil and Wass found that older people, especially women, were typically cast as 'dependent, frail, vulnerable, poor, worthless, asexual, isolated, grumpy, behind the times, miserable, pathetic, senile and a drain on society'.

Coupland (2009) described how in contemporary consumer culture in the UK, the body is 'the crucial indicator of the self' and bodily ageing is problematic. She argues that media aimed at females 'pathologizes the look of ageing, offers highly technologized solutions, and naturalizes this surgical intervention' (p.37). In an analysis of 140 British magazine advertisements depicting older adults, Ylanne, Williams and Wadleigh (2009) found that the most prominent underlying discourse was the possibility, necessity and desirability to take positive action to maintain health and well-being in older age by slowing down ageing, looking and feeling younger than one's age and managing age-related risks.

Similarly, in the USA, Smirnova (2012) analysed 124 advertisements and concluded that 'the cosmeceutical industry constructs the older woman as a victim of old age, part of an "at-risk" population who must monitor, treat and prevent any markers of old age' (p. 1236). She claims that advertisements for cosmeceuticals promise and normalize expectations of eternal youth of the ageing woman and that as a result, ageing women feel obliged to promote a youthful appearance at any cost.

Women often feel judged on the basis of their appearance, which can lead to chronic insecurity and lifelong consumption of beauty-enhancing products, diet programs and surgery. In both the USA and UK, cosmetic surgical and nonsurgical procedures are increasing year on year.

Anti-ageing is therefore big business. Both men and women are targeted with anti-ageing cosmetics, food supplements, dermatological beauty treatments, topical and oral use of medicines and cosmetic surgery to influence them that they need to look younger. However, evidence suggests that advertising affects consumers' perception of and their ability to objectively assess the effects of skin care products.



For example, Mootoo, Gohil, Stroever, and Oresajo, (2013) compared self-assessment with expert judgment of the age of women before and after the use of an anti-ageing product. After 4 weeks of product use, subjects perceived themselves as appearing 4.3 years younger, while expert graders saw no difference. Tamburic, Grant-Ross, Labeledzka and Daniels (2012) found that self-assessments by those who had used medical approaches to managing ageing skin were more positive than a non-medical group. However, in the same study, Tamburic et al. showed that using a medical approach in the management of skin ageing does not necessarily lead to a perception of youthfulness from others.

METHOD

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of the Arts London prior to conducting the study. See Tamburic et al. (2012) for full method. The opportunity sample of 21 female participants (mean age, 65 years) were recruited in response to a University call for participants. Twenty-one transcripts from each one hour, semi-structured, audio-recorded interview in the aforementioned study (Tamburic et al., 2012) were thematically-analysed. Because the interviews were originally conducted for different analysis, the questions were not uniform across all participants and as a result, the analysis for this paper is mainly thematic.

RESULTS

The participants started using a range of skin care products and regimes at different ages. All participants, apart from one, used anti-ageing skin care products including sun screen.

"I don't think there was quite the awareness of the damage that sun or ageing can do. There may have been amongst the professional classes but not for the everyday general person" P 12 (age 62)

"I remember some things my grandmother said were good for you ... natural things" (P1)

"I am against medical intervention for cosmetic reasons because I believe it is the result of age and gender discrimination. I mean the fact is, it has gone too far. I think. I think there is pressure now for woman" P5 (age 68)

"The media makes everybody think that they have to look younger. And I get really excited when I see older models in the Sunday magazines" P7 (age 72)

"I'm quite happy with how I look... I think good for my age ... I am sort of happy of how I look in terms of my ageing" P7 (age 72)

CONCLUSIONS

This small-scale study reports on an analysis of 21 semi-structured interviews with women (mean age 65 years) grouped according to whether they had previously undergone a medical intervention for their skin or not. The interviews were conducted for reasons other than the current analysis and therefore a more focused set of interview questions might provide richer and more relevant responses. In addition, the sample was recruited from a small population of older women at a university in response to an advertisement. A larger, randomly drawn sample from a wider population would present a more representative sample. Despite these limitations, the authors consider the analysis has elucidated many insights and further work is planned.

In sum, we found variations across all participants in terms of their beliefs, attitudes and behavior towards their own ageing skin appearance and regimes as well as to the media's influence on them. For example, participants reported an awareness of, but were not overly influenced by, the lack of older females in the media. Generally, the women in this study were content with their appearance and simply wanted to look good, rather than look young or younger.

REFERENCES

- Baumann, S. & de Laa, K. (2012). "Socially Defunct: A Comparative Analysis of the Underrepresentation of Older Women in Advertising", *Poetics*, 40(6), 514-541.
- Coupland, J. (2007). "Gendered Discourses on the 'Problem' of Aging: Consumerized Solutions". *Discourse & Communication*, 1(1), 37-61.
- Featherstone M. (1982). "The Body in Consumer Culture". *Theory Cult Society*, 1:18-33.
- Goodman M. (1994). "Social, Psychological and Developmental Factors in Womens' Receptivity to Cosmetic Surgery". *Journal of Aging Studies*, 8:375-96.
- Honigman, R. & Castle, D. J. (2006). "Aging and Cosmetic Enhancement." *Clinical Interventions in Aging* 1(2), 115-9.
- Mootoo, R., Gohil, N., Stroever, C. & Oresajo, C. (2013). "Comparison of Age Determination by Three Evaluation Methods: Self-Assessment, Expert Grader and Naive Grader", *Cosmetics & Toiletries Magazine*, 128(6), 408-413.
- Poole, M. & Feldman, S. (1999). "A Certain Age". Sydney, Australia: Allen & Unwin.
- Tamburic, S., Grant-Ross, P., Labeledzka, M. & Daniels, G. (2012). "Exploring the Effects of Non-Medical vs. Medical Approaches to the Management of Skin Aging in Women Over Sixty", *International Journal of Cosmetic Science*, 34, 481-488.
- Smirnova M.H. (2012) A will to youth: the woman's anti-ageing elixir. *Soc Sci Med*, .
- Vasil, I. & Wass, H. (2006). "Portrayal of the Elderly in the Media: a Literature Review and Implications for Educational Gerontologists Educational Gerontology", *Educational Gerontology*, 19(1), 71-85.
- Wasylikiw LThomsen, S. R. (2002). "Health and Beauty Magazine Reading and Body Shape Concerns Among a Group of College Women." *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 79(4), 988-1007.
- Ylanne, V., Williams, A. & Wadleigh, P. M. (2009). "Aging well? Older people's Health and Well-being as Portrayed in UK Magazine Advertisements", *International Journal of ageing and Later Life*, 4(2), 33-62.

N.B This work was partly presented at the 3rd Aging and Society Conference, Chicago, USA, Nov 2013