We often hear the adage that one should not judge a book by its cover. In making assumptions about people that are based solely on their appearances, we inevitably miss the depth and complexities of their personalities and accumulated life experiences. However, research has long established that appearances do matter in the ways that people are regarded, evaluated and treated, particularly those individuals who deviate from conventional norms or ideals of physical attractiveness. In this chapter, we will explore the nature of idealized appearances for men and women, the social consequences of looking older and how older men and women feel about and respond to the ageing process. We consider the socio-cultural research and theorizing pertaining to appearance, work motivations, gendered ageism, the double standard of ageing, consumer culture and the concept of the mask of ageing. We explore how older adults’ perceptions of their ageing appearances are shaped by dominant cultural norms and ideals. We investigate how attitudes towards and investments in appearance vary by sexual orientation, ethnicity/culture and social class. We conclude by suggesting future avenues of research and theorizing.

Why do appearances in later life matter?

The idealized appearances of men and women privilege youthfulness, healthiness and physical fitness (Grogan 2008). Women are expected to be thin yet voluptuous (Bordo 2003); while men must strive to be lean, muscular and physically imposing (Lorber and Moore 2007). As such, the physical realities of ageing, including the onset of wrinkles, the sagging of flesh and weight gain, among other bodily changes, pose serious challenges to older adults’ sense of self and social currency (Hurd Clarke 2010).

There is a wealth of literature that has explored the impact of ageism on older men’s and women’s experiences in the workplace (Wilks and Neto 2012), during medical encounters (Gott, Hinchliff and Galena 2004) and in the context of interactions with younger individuals (Minichiello, Browne and Kendig 2000). This research reveals the perils of being, as well as looking, older, including discrimination, negative stereotyping, loss of opportunities, social invisibility and decreased well-being and self-esteem. The research further suggests that ageism is particularly injurious to older women, who are more likely than men to experience discrimination linked to their appearance and sexuality (Walker et al. 2007).
Sontag (1997) has argued that there is a ‘double standard’ whereby the physical signs of ageing are more accepted among men, particularly those who are wealthy and powerful and thus may retain their social currency and be regarded as distinguished and sexy in later life. Sontag’s assertion has been critiqued for failing to capture the diversity and complexity of experience (Krekula 2007). Her argument that men’s and women’s appearances are perceived and valued differently reflects gender socialization. Men are taught to see their bodies as vehicles of action and to focus on accomplishments in the economic realm (Connell 1995). In contrast, female bodies are prized insofar as they are aesthetically pleasing, and women are, therefore, socialized to be concerned with their appearances and the achievement of the young, slim, toned beauty ideal (Franzoi 1995).

At the same time, theorists are divided as to whether or not attention to appearance is solely the result of gender socialization, or the product of calculated decision-making. Some feminists contend that for women in particular, investments in appearance (including diet and exercise, and the use of hair dye, makeup, and non-surgical and surgical cosmetic procedures) are driven by feminine beauty ideals and norms arising from patriarchal oppression and ageism (Bordo 2003). In contrast, others suggest that attending to one’s appearance is a means by which women may enhance their erotic or cultural currency deriving from their physical, sexual and social attractiveness (Hakim 2011). Davis (2003) argues that women are not ‘cultural dopes [. . .] [but rather] competent actors with an intimate and subtle knowledge of society’ (p. 13) who make conscious and informed choices within and because of dominant discourses associated with female beauty and idealized femininity.

Theorizing about men’s engagement in appearance work is more limited, in part because the pursuit of physical attractiveness has not been traditionally associated with idealized masculinity (Bordo 1999). Indeed, men are taught that concern for one’s appearance is a feminine, if not emasculating, endeavour that should be avoided, downplayed or framed in terms of health promotion. However, both men and women face growing pressure to engage with consumer culture in order to discipline their bodies, as society becomes ever more appearance obsessed, and bodies are used as barometers of individuals’ health and morality (Gilleard and Higgs 2000). Within this climate, looking ‘good’ and appearing ‘healthy’ are increasingly about being youthful, while ageing and seeming to be ‘old’ are ever more risky for both men and women who may, as a result, be found sexually undesirable, socially irresponsible and culturally invisible.

Finally, there is also some scholarly debate about the relationship between appearance and identity in later life. On the one hand, several theorists have argued that the ageing body masks ‘the essential identity of the person beneath’ (Featherstone and Hepworth 1991: 379) and that individuals have an ‘ageless self’ or ‘an identity that maintains continuity despite the physical and social changes that come with old age’ (Kaufman 1986: 7). Certainly, numerous studies have found that older adults often perceive that their chronological ages and resultant appearances do not reflect their subjective identities or felt ages (Kleinspehn-Ammerlahn, Kotter-Gruhn and Smith 2008). However, Andrews (1999) contends that the concept of ‘agelessness’ is itself a form of ageism, depriving the old of one of their most hard-earned resources: their age” (p. 301). Pointing to the growing cultural pressure to remain youthful in later life in terms of appearance, behaviour and functional ability, Andrews (1999) asserts that the bifurcation of the perceived young self from the ageing body as it is expressed in the concept of a masked or ageless self is reflective of the societal devaluation of oldness and a means by which older adults strive to distance themselves from those who have capitulated to the perils of growing older (Hurd 1999).
Older men’s perceptions and experiences of their ageing bodies

Arising from the differing norms and ideals of masculinity and femininity, older men and women perceive and experience their bodies in diverse ways. The relatively little research that has explored older men’s body image suggests that they place less importance on appearance and have higher self-esteem than their female counterparts in later life (Ferraro et al. 2008). However, other literature indicates that older men experience a decrease in feelings of attractiveness and self-esteem as they age, as a result of the equating of sexual desirability with youthfulness (Baker and Gringart 2009). Decreases in functionality (such as loss of strength, independence and able-bodiedness), as well as physically disfiguring chronic conditions have also been found to influence older men’s perceptions of and feelings about their bodies. In particular, changes to men’s functional abilities and, to a lesser degree, their appearances pose a threat to their sense of having achieved and maintained idealized masculinity (Hurd Clarke, Griffin and the PACC Research Team 2008).

To date, there has been little investigation of older men’s perceptions and experiences of appearance work. The existing research reveals that younger men are increasingly dissatisfied with their bodies and engage in weight training, vigorous exercise and dieting (Ridgeway and Tylka 2005) and, to a lesser extent, cosmetic surgery (Atkinson 2008). Men often associate being overweight with a lack of control and weakness, which contravenes norms of idealized or hegemonic masculinity (Grogan and Richards 2002). However, men perceive dieting to be a feminine practice, thus discounting restrictive eating as an appropriate means by which to acquire an ideal, muscular, masculine body (Gough 2007). Consequently, men who diet typically suggest that they restrict their food intake for health rather than appearance reasons (Sloan, Gough and Conner 2010).

Older women’s perceptions and experiences of their ageing bodies

The research that has explored older women’s perceptions and feelings about their ageing bodies reveals that, like their younger counterparts, they are largely displeased with their appearances (McLaren and Kuh 2004). In particular, older women frequently indicate that their weight is central to their perceptions of body dissatisfaction (Hurd 2000, Slevin 2010). That said, research also suggests that older women tend to be less dissatisfied than younger women with their weight, in part because weight gain in later life is considered to be normal, if not inevitable, resulting in a lowered motivation to diet or engage in other weight-reduction efforts (Tunaley, Walsh and Nicolson 1999). Moreover, older women may resist the thin ideals promoted in the contemporary media and express a preference for more curvaceous bodies as they point to icons of their youth as exemplars of beauty (Hurd Clarke 2002).

There is some debate about the importance of appearance for women in later life irrespective of their negative perceptions and feelings about their bodies. Some of the existing research indicates that older women place more emphasis on their functional abilities than their appearances (Liechty and Yarnal 2010) and that the onset of health issues precipitates a reorganization of priorities as the women’s physical exteriors become less salient to their sense of identity and well-being (Hurd 2000). Tiggemann (2004) summarizes this research by noting: ‘In simple terms, with age women’s bodies deteriorate, they remain equally dissatisfied, but it matters less to them’ (p. 35).

Even as appearances may lose their salience to older women, the rise of the anti-ageing beauty market has further complicated women’s relationships with their bodies. Indeed, women
often indicate that in addition to their weight, their feelings of displeasure with their ageing appearances are related to the onset of wrinkles (Hurd Clarke 2010), grey hair (Ward and Holland 2011) and bodily sagging (Slevin 2010). Faced with a growing means of hiding the signs of ageing and maintaining youthful appearances through engagement with consumer culture, older women frequently express openness, if not a sense of obligation, to employ cosmetic surgery and the use of non-surgical cosmetic procedures (Hurd Clarke 2010).

**Sexual orientation and appearance satisfaction**

Attitudes towards and investments in appearance have been found to vary according to sexual orientation, ethnicity and social class. In this and the ensuing two sections, we consider these factors and their influence on older men’s and women’s conceptualizations of and responses to idealized norms of masculinity and femininity. To begin, although there is a dearth of literature on older gay men, the research on younger gay men reveals that they have greater body dissatisfaction than their heterosexual counterparts (Peplau et al. 2009). Younger gay men are also more likely than heterosexual men to use restrictive or disordered eating as well as exercise to achieve the ideal male body (Tiggemann, Martins and Kirkbride 2007). Theorists have suggested that these appearance-related differences may be due to the privileging of body awareness within gay culture (Drummond 2006), as well as the perception that muscularity signifies health within a community coping with the effects of HIV/AIDS (Levesque and Vichesky 2006).

Additionally, the idealization of youthfulness in gay culture results in ‘accelerated ageing’ (Wahler and Gabbay 1997: 14) whereby ‘homosexual men are considered middle-aged and elderly by other homosexual men at an earlier age than heterosexual men in the general community’ (Bennett and Thompson 1991: 66). Thus, aged bodies are less accepted and gay men report greater dissatisfaction with their appearances in later life than heterosexual men (Tiggemann et al. 2007). Moreover, gay men experience stronger pressure than heterosexual men to engage in appearance work, including but not limited to cosmetic surgery, in order to achieve and retain youthful physical exteriors (Jones and Pugh 2005).

Like the research on older gay men, there are relatively few studies that have explored older lesbian women’s perceptions and feelings about their bodies. Research focused on younger lesbian women has found that they are less dissatisfied with their appearances than younger heterosexual women (Bergeron and Senn 1998). Some scholars maintain that differing beauty ideals within the lesbian community mediate the negative influences of western feminine norms of physical attractiveness (Bergeron and Senn 1998). That said, some studies have found that lesbian women are as dissatisfied as heterosexual women with their appearances and that gender socialization influences body image perceptions to a greater extent than sexual orientation (Peplau et al. 2009). Thus, lesbian women convey the ‘normative discontent’ (Rodin, Silverstein and Striegel-Moore 1984: 267) with their physical appearances that is also expressed by their heterosexual counterparts (Slevin 2006). The literature focused on older lesbian women echoes these findings and reveals that they often express dissatisfaction with their weight and consider ageing to be detrimental to their appearances (Huxley 2013). Nevertheless, Slevin (2006) asserts that lesbian women’s experiences with homophobic discrimination enable them ‘to resist and to be more positive about some aspects of being old women’ (p. 265).

**Ethnicity and appearances in later life**

Researchers are increasingly turning their attention to the influence of culture on the body attitudes and expectations of individuals across the life course. Although studies investigating the
intersection of gender, ethnicity and age remain limited, there are indications that non-European men tend to be more satisfied with their appearances and to adhere to differing masculine body ideals. For example, older African-American men report greater body satisfaction than men of European descent as well as a greater acceptance of heavier body weight (Aruguete, Nickleberry and Yates 2004). Although we are unaware of any research focused on older Asian men, Watt and Ricciardelli (2012) found that younger men of Chinese ancestry living in Australia were largely satisfied with their appearances and tended to assess their physical exteriors from multiple angles, including muscularity, height and self-presentation, rather than simply emphasizing body size and shape as markers of masculine desirability, as has been found to be the case for men of European descent.

Similarly, the few studies that have explored how older women of non-European cultural backgrounds perceive their bodies reveal greater satisfaction and less concern than women of European descent with body weight (Schuler et al. 2008). Research with younger African-American women reveals that they tend to engage in less dieting and often reject thinness as a standard of beauty (Overstreet, Quinn and Agocha 2010). Acculturation has also been found to influence women’s appearance-related attitudes. The older Muslim women in Dunkel, Davidson and Qurashi’s (2010) study were less likely than their younger Muslim female counterparts to attempt to achieve a thin body. Similarly, Kishinevsky (2004) studied Russian-American mother–daughter–grandmother relationships, finding that middle-aged mothers were more likely than their ageing mothers to be dissatisfied with their bodies, with the latter feeling that they did not need to engage in beauty work practices in old age.

**Social class and appearances**

There is a growing body of theory and research investigating the relationships between social class and body attitudes and practices. In particular, scholars have drawn on Bourdieu’s (1984) concept of habitus or ‘the socially acquired, embodied systems of schemes of disposition, perceptions and evaluations that orient and give meaning to practices’ (p. 17). Bourdieu (1984) contends that body practices vary by social class and gender as men and women acquire distinct tastes and habits related to their social positions, which in turn generate differing forms of economic and cultural capital. Bourdieu (1984) has argued that physical capital declines with age as men lose their functional abilities (for example, to engage in sport) and women’s appearances deviate from youthful norms.

There is currently no research investigating the links between social class and appearance for older men, but for women in later life it is relatively extensive. The latter research reveals that older women of higher social class backgrounds tend to be less satisfied than older women from working-class backgrounds with their appearances (McLaren and Kuh 2004). That said, Dumas, Laberge and Straka (2005) reported that both the affluent and working-class older women in their study invested less in their appearances as they aged due to the increased focus on taking care of others. Additionally, the older African-American women of middle and upper middle-class backgrounds in Slevin and Wingrove’s (1998) study were more positive than their European counterparts about being old, but also expressed weight and appearance-related worries, suggesting that social class may influence body image to a greater extent than ethnicity.

**Conclusion**

In the preceding sections, we have outlined the major findings and avenues of scholarship in the research concerning appearance in later life. This literature reveals that appearances matter
to older adults and to the ways that they are perceived and valued (or not) by others. For both older men and women, the loss of culturally idealized appearances leads to threats to their sense of identity and social worth. The negative consequences of having an aged looking body are heightened by the increasing societal emphasis on appearances as markers of health and the equating of youthfulness with physical attractiveness. Body changes are more deleterious for women, whose social value continues to be strongly linked to their physical appearances. That said, given the increasing body dissatisfaction among younger men, there is evidence that appearances are becoming ever more important for older men. At the same time, the existing literature suggests that older adults’ attitudes to and investments in their appearances are influenced by their social positions, including their sexual orientation, ethnicity and social class.

In the future, it will be imperative for scholars to more fully outline the nuances of older men’s attitudes towards and investments in their bodily exteriors, particularly given the changing social context in which how one looks is increasingly important, and the growing entanglement of health and appearance. Similarly, theorists will need to continue to develop a better understanding of how age relations shape older women’s attitudes to their bodies and their engagement with anti-ageing health and beauty practices. The field also needs much more investigation into and theorizing about how sexual orientation, culture and ethnicity and social class influence older men’s and women’s perceptions of and experiences related to their bodies’ ageing and aged appearances. Additionally, research and theorizing about the interrelationships between disability, appearance and masculinity and femininity ideals warrant further analysis given the ableism and ageism that underlie current successful ageing discourses and neo-liberal ideologies. Finally, additional scholarship and theorizing concerning the connections between ageism, appearance, identity and well-being across the cohorts of individuals in later life will promote better understanding of men’s and women’s embodied experiences of ageing and the life course.

References

Gender, ageing and appearance


