

# Adjusting the cut: fashion, the body and age on the UK high street

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## **ABSTRACT**

The article explores the interplay between bodily and cultural ageing in the provision of clothing for older women, examining how design directors of UK clothing retailers act as cultural mediators, shaping the ways in which later years are imagined, experienced and performed at an embodied level. Based on interviews with clothing retailers with a significant involvement with the older market: Marks & Spencer, George at Asda, Jaeger, Viyella and Edinburgh Woollen Mill, it analyses the contexts in which they design, discussing: the potential of the grey market; the association of fashion and youthfulness; and the tensions between lifestyle and age in the formation of the market. It explores the ways in which they adjust the cut, colour and style of clothes to meet the requirements of older bodies and the changing cultural interpretations of these, addressing debates around the interplay of bodily and cultural ageing, and the role of consumption in the constitution of age. Reflecting both the cultural and material turns, it argues for the need to expand the social gerontology imaginary to encompass wider sources shaping the meanings of later years.

**KEY WORDS**—fashion, clothing, body, consumption, design, marketing, grey market.

## **Introduction**

We have become accustomed in gerontology to the worlds of the hospital, the nursing home, the policy maker's forum, the actuary's office, the pensioner's club; and the ways meanings forged in such settings shape the ways later years are experienced and understood. Much of what is written in the discipline social gerontology addresses – rightly – questions of welfare systems, income support, health and social care, patterns of family relationships. This article takes us into a different world: that of the design studios of high street clothing retailers; and it addresses a different set of questions from those usually posed, focusing on the role of the cultural

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economy, rather than social policy, in shaping the embodied meanings and experiences of later years. The article, thus, contributes to the project of expanding the social gerontological imaginary, extending its remit into new socio-cultural arenas in which later years are negotiated and defined.

### **The interplay between physiological and cultural ageing**

Popular discourse conflates ageing with the appearance of age, rooting the former in physiological decline. Social gerontology has struggled to decouple this association, asserting, particularly under the influence of the political economy school, the complex ways in which ageing is a social and cultural process, showing how its features arise from social processes, are embedded in cultural practices and discursive constructions (Arber and Ginn 1991; Estes 1979; Estes and Binney 1989; Phillipson 1998; Phillipson and Walker 1986). In the past, this emphasis led to a neglect of the body in social gerontology. More recently, however, with the emergence of cultural gerontology, interest has grown in the role of embodiment in age, with ageing increasingly understood as the product of a complex interplay between bodily and cultural factors (Andersson 2002; Calasanti and Slevin 2001; Cole 1992; Gullette 1997; Hurd Clarke and Griffin 2007, 2008; Katz 1996; Oberg 1996; Tulle-Winton 1999, 2000; Twigg 2006; K. Woodward 1999, 2006).

From the perspective of the sociology of the body, the issues have been somewhat different. Here discounting the role of physiology arose from work rooted in post-structuralism and queer theory that aimed to disturb naturalistic accounts that rested on biological essentialism, particularly in relation to gender and sexuality (Butler 1990, 1993; Shilling 1993; Williams and Bendelow 1998). The resulting emphasis on discourse produced an account of the body that was notably disembodied, a cobweb of signs rather than a material reality, with little sense of real bodies living concrete lives. Since then, there has been a return to 'real bodies' and to theoretical approaches such as critical realism that re-emphasise the corporal nature of embodiment (Evans and Lee 2002; Nettleton and Watson 1998; Williams 1999). Under the influence of material feminism, we increasingly understand the body as, in Grosz's (1994) terms, an 'open materiality', neither wholly inscribed by culture, nor simply a product of nature, but lying on the borders between.

These intellectual shifts have set the scene for a new emphasis within ageing studies on the interplay between bodily and cultural ageing. The field where these debates have been most active is that of 'appearance',

particularly as it pertains to women; and there has been a range of work, reviewed by Hurd Clarke (2011), that has explored ageing in relation to cosmetics, hair and hair dyes, wrinkles and cosmetic surgery. One area that has received relatively little attention, however, is clothing. And this is despite the way in which it is the vestimentary envelope that contains and presents the body, acting as a key mediator between the body and its social expression. The links between identity and dress have long been the focus of sociological interest, particularly in relation to social categories such as gender and class, both of which have formed the mainstay of classic sociological accounts of dress from Veblen (1899/1953) and Simmel (1904/1971) to Bourdieu (1984) and Butler (1990, 1993). Age has, by contrast, received relatively little attention, reflecting its general neglect in sociological theorising (Laws 1995; Laz 2003). But age is surely one of the key or 'master' identities, along with gender, class, 'race' and other contenders. We should not, therefore, be surprised to find it reflected in ideas about clothing.

Clothes are part of the long-established phenomenon of age ordering: the systematic patterning of cultural expression according to age. Certain forms of dress are deemed suitable – or more significantly unsuitable – for people as they age. Clothes are implicated, as Kathleen Woodward (2006) argues, in the performativity of age, as they are of gender. Clothes are also central to the social order, part of a Foucauldian process of disciplining the body, constraining and enabling its expression, making it subject to discourses of morality (Entwistle 2000). In relation to older people, particularly women, this often turns around questions of sexuality and its expression. Dress is intimately connected with the erotic; indeed for many fashion theorists, this is what fashion is all about. Part of the reason for the traditional exclusion of older women from fashion studies and fashion culture relates to the sense that they are outside the sphere of sexuality, or at least of acceptable sexuality. As we shall see, such ideas, whether accepted or challenged, inform the sorts of clothes that women seek to wear and the ways in which clothes are designed for them.

The focus on clothing, and its material production and design, also reflects the influence of the material turn in social anthropology and sociology, with the renewal of interest in the material realm of objects and their capacity to encode social meanings. Work by Miller (1987, 1998) and others has explored the role of domestic objects, their purchase and arrangement, in meaning making, in particular their capacity to act as forms of distributed personhood. Clothes are part of this (Crane and Bovone 2006; Kuchler and Miller 2005; Weber and Mitchell 2004; S. Woodward 2007). Indeed they represent a particularly significant element by virtue of their intimate relationship with the body. They are objects of transition that link embodied personhood with its material expression. It is the physical

products – clothes – that retailers design for this interface that are the subject of this article.

### **Consumption, ageing and dress**

Clothes are also significant for debates around the changing social location of older people and the role of consumption culture (Gilleard and Higgs 2000). The reconstitution of age thesis argues that later years have undergone a cultural shift under the impact of a series of interconnected changes in relation to: the economy and labour market; the position of women; and changes in the family and personal relationships. These, together with developments in the cultural sphere, have created new fluidity and reflexivity in relation to social categorisations such as age. The rise of consumption culture, and with it the emergence of the new social space of the Third Age, are central to this, with identity increasingly negotiated through concepts of lifestyle and their expression in material consumption. Such changes are often associated, particularly in media discourse, with the ‘baby boomers’, and the idea that a distinctive cohort of elders is renegotiating the experience of age (Gilleard and Higgs 2002, 2007; I.R. Jones *et al.* 2008, 2009). ‘Baby boomers’ are often presented as the generation that pioneered youth – later consumption – culture, and with the idea that that they are carrying these assumptions over into their own ageing, with an unwillingness to abandon youthful identities and a greater propensity to remain part of the cultural mainstream. I have argued elsewhere that the cohort effect has been exaggerated and is, largely, a product of media preoccupations: the significant changes in relation to clothing choices relate more to period than cohort effects (Twigg 2012*b* (personal observation); Twigg and Majima 2011). There is, however, some evidence from the arena of clothing to support the idea that the discourses and indeed experiences of age have changed over the last 20 years; and this, as we shall see, is certainly a perception that shapes how retailers regard this market.

### **Researching the high street**

Fashion is a complex system of cultural production that links highly fragmented forms of production with equally diverse, and often volatile, patterns of demand (Fine and Leopold 1993). A hybrid subject encompassing both material and cultural elements (Braham 1997), it forms part of what du Gay (1997) terms the ‘cultural economy’ in which cultural meanings are produced at economic sites, such as factories and shops, and circulated through economic processes and practices such as adverts,

marketing and design. In such processes, cultural intermediaries such as journalists, buyers and designers play an important role, shaping and interpreting changing meanings. In other work I have explored the role of magazine journalists in mediating between the fashion industry and older consumers (Twigg 2010, 2012a, 2012b (personal observation)). In this article I focus on a different set of cultural actors, the high street retailers, and their role in shaping and creating a market for older women.

The paper is based on interviews in clothing retail companies that have a significant interest in the older market. British clothing retailing is relatively concentrated, with 70 per cent of garments coming from 17 retail chains (Easey 2002). Among the largest are Marks & Spencer and George at Asda, and these were chosen in the study to represent mass retailers that include older women within their wider offer. Mintel (2006) identifies both as successful examples of mainstreaming retailing for older people. Viyella, Jaeger and Edinburgh Woollen Mill were chosen as companies that target different parts of the market, though each, in differing degree, with a focus on older women.

In the complex of material and cultural production that is the Fashion System, many individuals are involved in shaping the supply chain (du Gay 1997; Entwistle 2000; Fine and Leopold 1993; McRobbie 1998). In all the companies featured here, the processes of designing, buying and retailing were integrated. Respondents varied in their job titles, though each could broadly be characterised as a design director, with overall responsibility for the range. All had extensive experience of the fashion industry, mostly with major United Kingdom (UK) retailers, though also in centres such as Italy. These design directors act as cultural mediators, responding to the market but also creating and shaping it, showing older women how they might present themselves, and providing them with the material goods to do so.

Marks & Spencer (M&S) is the biggest clothing retailer in Britain (Mintel 2006). It has a particularly loyal customer base, with the highest share in the high street of those who only shop at one shop (Mintel 2006). M&S aims to cater for the whole market: their slogan in relation to womenswear is 'every women, every time'. Women in their fifties plus, however, represent a core element of their market; indeed they have a 45% market penetration among the over forty-fives buying for themselves (Mintel 2006). The interview was conducted with the Head of Womenswear.

M&S's offer is segmented, partly through the use of collections or brands, which enable customers to identify products relevant to them. Though the respondent emphasised the importance of lifestyle segmentation, a number of the collections have been developed with middle-aged and older women in mind. The largest is Per Una. This was one of the first brands launched by M&S in 2000, developed for them by George Davies. Originally aimed at

younger women, it is heavily bought by those over 40. It is described by the respondent as: 'theatrical, feminine, embellishment'. In 2008 M&S introduced a brand, Portfolio, specifically targeted on middle-aged and older women, responding to the sense that there was a:

huge gap in the middle. Of this woman who had nowhere to shop, with a lot of disposable income. But more importantly that loves M&S, but was disappointed that there wasn't something that was for her. . . . She was frustrated.

The range received mixed reviews in the fashion press; and in 2010 M&S announced that it would be phased out. Older women also shop in brands not specifically aimed at them. Limited, which is M&S's main fashion collection, is shopped by some older women: 'that brand isn't targeted for them, but they actually like it, because [some of them are] very confident about fashion'. They might also shop in Autograph, M&S's premier brand. There is a fairly consistent tendency, noted by all the respondents, for older women to trade up in terms of quality.

The brand with the strongest age focus is Classic, targeted on those over 65; and this is clearly reflected in the style and cut. The respondent described it as 'conservative' and 'feminine', with a certain 'pristine' look, with non-crease fabrics. The price points are kept relatively low. She describes the cut as 'body conscious', but not in the sense normally used in the fashion trade, meaning cut close to the body, but conscious of the body and desiring to hide the changes associated with age. Tunics, for example, are popular, and length is 'very, very important'. Dresses need zips as: 'she doesn't want to pull something over her head'. Cut is important: 'because the body has changed significantly by this time'. For this age group M&S is the dominant provider in the high street. Indeed for those in their seventies and eighties, there are few other outlets catering for their requirements.

George at Asda is the most successful of the supermarket-based, value clothing retailers. Verdict (2004) notes the growth of the value sector in clothing, doubling its market share since 1998. One pound in every five is now spent in this sector. Though owned by Wal Mart, George at Asda is designed in the UK. The respondents were Design Manager for George Brands and the Buying Manager for Ladies Brands. In 2007 they introduced a specific range, Moda, aimed at middle-aged and older customers. Though, like M&S, they emphasised that lifestyle was as important as age, their offer is clearly structured in age terms. The Buying Manager described how they have:

three very clear segments to our offer from a ladieswear point of view. We've got G21, so that's up to 25. We've got Core which is 25 to 45. And then Moda, that's 45 plus. And they are bought by separate teams. (Asda)

Moda is very successful, representing 15–20 per cent of their sales. They deliberately targeted this group, feeling it was 'a missing gap in our market,

and to be honest has been hugely successful since we've launched it'. Their aim was to provide a range that addressed the older customer but with a:

contemporary younger feel to it . . . It's not what probably traditionally people would have seen as an older customer range. It's not the Classic M&S sort of range. It has got a more contemporary feel. (Asda)

Jaeger is a long-established retailer operating at the top end of the UK high street. After some financial difficulties in the 1990s, it has been successfully revamped as a designer brand with international reach under the Jaeger London label. The bulk of the collections, however, are pitched lower in terms of price and fashionability. Jaeger is commonly found in better quality shopping destinations, or in department stores. The interview was with the Design Director for womenswear. Mainstream Jaeger has a loyal following among older women. With the characteristic age slippage of the fashion industry, the respondent describes the core customers as: 'in our opinion, 35 upwards. But the reality was that, actually, she was probably 50 or 55 and upwards'.

Viyella is similar to Jaeger, but cheaper and more clearly aimed at older women. The company experienced financial difficulties in 2008, but was bought by Austin Reed to form part of a suite of high street clothing stores aimed at different segments of the market. They are confident about the viability of the market focused on older customers:

We are very happy with her age. I mean she's definitely 50+, 60+, 70+. But we had no issues with that at all. And we see it as a big business that's going to get even bigger.

The interview was with the Head of Womenswear Design for the Austin Reed Group.

Edinburgh Woollen Mill specialises in the older market. It has moved away from its origins as a factory outlet store and is now a mainstream clothing retailer with 192 high street stores and 28 destination sites. Like Jaeger and Viyella, it does well in prosperous market towns. It is also found in tourist destinations, where it is particularly successful with coach parties. Shopping for clothes for this group is often linked to leisure, pointing to ease of access, but perhaps also to the way in which mainstream shopping has become less rewarding for this group. The interview was with the Head Designer and the Marketing Manager.

### **The context in which they design: the potential of the grey market**

Since the mid-1990s, a mass of publications, both popular and academic, have identified the potential of the grey market (Gunter 1998; Key Note 2006; Lavery 1999; Mintel 2006; Moschis 1996; Sawchuck 1995; Verdict 2008). Long (1998) describes the over forty-fives as having nearly

80 per cent of all financial wealth and being responsible for about 30 per cent of consumer spending. Moody and Sood (2010) in their account of age branding describe the over fifty-fives in the United States of America (USA) as having twice the discretionary income of younger groups (18–49). Market research reports (Key Note 2006) point to the relative affluence of those in their fifties and sixties where, though income may decline on retirement, so too do other financial demands, resulting in relatively high discretionary income. This emphasis needs, however, to be set in the wider context of the significant numbers of older people, particularly women, living on low incomes. As Metz and Underwood (2005) and others emphasise, older people are if anything more diverse in income and lifestyle than younger ones.

The repeated burden of this marketing-oriented literature is, however, that retailers have failed to address the market effectively. Older women were repeatedly identified in the late 1990s and early 2000s as ‘frustrated shoppers’, unable to find attractive clothes aimed at them. As a result, Mintel (2000) identifies a danger among older shoppers of slipping into what they term the ‘anti-shopping abyss’. Such anti-shopping attitudes are held by 25 per cent of the male population and 10 per cent of the female. The task of retailers, in their view, is to prevent this; and older shoppers are a prime target for such action.

There are, however, additional reasons why the group has become increasingly significant in fashion marketing terms. Over last two decades there has been a massive growth of productive capacity in the Fashion System consequent on the development of production in the Far East. As a result clothes have become significantly cheaper (reducing in real terms by 70 per cent over the period 1961–2006), and the fashion cycle has speeded up (Majima 2008). As the mass youth market has become saturated, there has been a search for new markets, among the most prominent of which have been children and older people, both of which are increasingly drawn into the sphere of fashionability. Older people have been identified as a particularly profitable market, one deserving cultivation.

The late 1990s and early 2000s can also be understood in terms of the extension of the democratisation of fashion whereby mass cheap fashion became available to the population as a whole as a vehicle of self-presentation and identity formation. Older people have been drawn into these trends; and older women are now shopping for clothes more frequently than their equivalents did in the 1960s (though they are not spending a larger proportion of their income). In this, however, they are not acting as a cohort, as the ‘baby boomer’ thesis suggests, so much as following trends general in the population, responding to the wider retailing climate of the period (Twigg and Majima 2011).



### **The context in which they design: fashion and youthfulness**

The sense of the potential of this market needs to be understood, however, against the wider context of ageism. There is a tension between the desire of the industry to respond to this new market and the core values of fashion itself. Fashion is profoundly – and perhaps inherently – youth oriented. It valorises young, beautiful bodies: these are the ones that are constantly featured, and these are the ones that designers aspire to create for. At its High Fashion core, the system is centred on youthfulness. Today the youth market provides the primary engine of change (R.M. Jones 2006), with styles diffusing from the young to the old, as Simmel in the past described them diffusing from the elite to lower classes (Crane 2000). These values of youthfulness are to a significant degree shared by the customers who have internalised ageist standards, seeking youthful fashions in the attempt to look more youthful themselves. Clothing is thus drawn into the wider anti-ageing enterprise, in which ageing well is equated with ageing without appearing to do so (Katz 2006). Dressing young can be part of this; and certainly dressing old is something to be avoided. This however presents a dilemma. Many women want styles that are associated with youthfulness, and with this, attractiveness, success, fashionability, but in forms that are adjusted to their bodies and to the social and cultural interpretation of these. We shall return to this below when we discuss adjusting the cut.

The focus on youth in the industry is reinforced by the predominant age of designers. Like advertising, the fashion industry is primarily populated by young people, and their values affect attitudes to designing for the older market, which is regarded as a marginal and low-status field (Long 1998). As Aspers notes, in the status ordering of branded garment retailers, ‘the elderly’ are placed at the bottom among those who ‘are seldom seen as trend setters’ (2010: 5). Some of these ambivalences emerged in the interviews. While all the clothing company respondents were clear in their minds about the age profile of their market, and spoke positively of it, they sometimes acknowledged the tensions designing for this group entailed. In fashion terms, it imposes something of a ‘spoiled identity’, as the Marketing Director of Edinburgh Woollen Mill recognised. Speaking with heavy irony, he commented:

It’s lovely isn’t it! Being in a really sexy business which is very, very high fashion! But the reality is that isn’t necessarily what our business is about and we have to, we’re very proud of what we’ve got. You know we accept that it isn’t a really, really sexy brand. And if it was a really, really sexy brand then perhaps people, the volume of people who come and shop with us would stop. Because clearly what we’re doing is, we’re delivering something to the public that they want. (Edinburgh Woollen Mill)

The fashion industry is a schizophrenic trade: at one end imbued with the values of High Fashion, and with the glamour and froth of an industry based on the fast-moving styles of cultural elites; at the other pursuing the day-to-day task of providing clothing for the population as a whole. This means catering for groups, such as older people, who are far from high fashion. Here Aspers (2010) identifies designer/buyers as the key cultural mediators, internalising how customers think and act so they can use their own preferences as proxies. This can be more challenging when there is an age gulf between the designer and the customer, as is the case in most fashion for the older market. One of the ways they do this is by 'apostrophising' the customer, constantly referring to her as 'she', developing an all-enveloping discourse of her views and desires that allows them to internalise her worldview.

So we're always talking about this woman, this woman over 40, who's now going into her fifties. And how can we cater for her. Cos she's the woman that we really believe in. (Jaeger)

In this process of imagining, some of the design directors drew on their own experience. The Head of Womenswear at M&S comments

The majority of my buyers out there are all under 35. . . . And I feel in a very lucky position actually to do the job that I do, because I'm 47, I've had two children and I'm size 14, but quite confident about body shape and what's happened and everything else. And I can talk to my buyers, . . . I will wear product that goes right across the brands to talk to the guys about what works and what doesn't work, and try to get them understanding that. (M&S)

She notes, in particular, the ways in which clothing needs to be adjusted to reflect the ways in which the body changes.

As we shall see, however, such processes of imaging or apostrophising the customer tend to bleach out significant differences between women in relation to, for example, class, race, income, sexuality, producing a somewhat homogenous – and aspirational – norm. In marketing discourse these more structural differences are negotiated through a concept of lifestyle.

### **The context in which they design: age or lifestyle?**

Literature on marketing to older customers frequently raises the question of whether age is an appropriate category for market segmentation, or whether lifestyle is not more significant. Certainly, as Metz and Underwood (2005) and others note, 'older' people are diverse in their circumstances, values and lives; and some market segmentation

schemes have attempted to reflect this. Market segmentation is, however, an uncertain field; though it aspires to scientific rigour, its judgements are fairly rule of thumb. As Easey (2002) comments, it suffers from lack of theoretical or empirical underpinnings. Typically it presents characterisations of sectors of the market, often in the form of vignettes, with the aim of enabling product designers to focus on their customers. (The process is akin to the ‘apostrophising’ or imagining that the clothing design teams engage in, though it is usually less detailed or empathetic.) Examples of age-related segmentation are found in Moschis (1996), Gunter (1998), Easey (2002), Lavery (1999), Mintel (2000) and Hines and Quinn (2007). All attempt to incorporate some element of lifestyle.

Such attempts to divide up the older market are often informed by a sense that there is among the group a new type of older person. Sherman, Schiffman and Mathur (2001), for example, assert the existence of ‘New Age elderly’; and other schemes similarly identify ‘younger’, more ‘forward-thinking’ segments. These attempts partly reflect a desire to counteract the pervasive negativity that marks product developers’ views of this demographic, typically presenting them as reluctant to try new products, indifferent to advertising, and with declining capacity to process new information – ‘failed consumers’ in the language of marketing. (Droulet, Schwartz and Yoon 2010 contains much in this vein.) But it also comes from a genuine sense that the lives of older people are changing, that these are cohorts whose attitudes to consumption are similar to those of younger people. As we shall see, this is a view shared by the clothing respondents.

In relation to fashion, it is clear that the mass market that characterised the post-war era has fragmented. Since the later 20th century, there has been an overall trend in the UK, pioneered by George Davies and Next in the 1980s, towards market segmentation, based on lifestyle. M&S now structures its ranges along lifestyle; and all the respondents in the study emphasised its importance. A central element in the process of designing, thus, involves imagining the lifestyle of customers. As the Design Director at Viyella explained:

This is a brand that aims clearly at older women. It’s very definitely aimed at, we call her either a working professional woman, or a non-working, more to the point, professional woman, because she’s often involved in charities, gardening clubs, professionally looking after her grandchildren, so she is a busy lady. (Viyella)

Age was, however, clearly part of this process of ‘imagining’ – as indeed was class as this quotation with its references to ‘professional’ makes clear.

The Head of Womenswear at M&S similarly emphasised the importance of lifestyle: ‘we don’t structure our ranges by age. Much more by lifestyle’. But shortly after, she moved into an account that clearly drew on age:

So we will build our brand boards and we’ll talk about the target customer. So we will have brands that will be referencing, let’s say an under 30 customer, a brand that will be referencing 35+, another one for 45+, 55+ and then 65+. And we’ll try and keep each of those quite separate. (M&S)

Lifestyle is clearly important in their thinking and in the wider culture, but it cannot be separated wholly from issues of age. This is because lifestyles themselves reflect age: what people do, how they live their lives, their values and attitudes, in part derive from their age and their position within an age-ordered social structure. In relation to dress, choices also reflect the influence of bodily change and the complex interplay between physiological and cultural ageing, as we shall see in the next section.

### **The body and age: adjusting the cut**

The female body, as it ages, changes: waists thicken, busts lower, stomachs expand, shoulders move forward (Goldsberry, Shim and Reich 1996). Part of the skill of a designer is accommodating these changes so that the garment fits, but in ways that do not detract from its fashionability and that – ideally – subtly alter the presentation of the body. M&S emphasised the importance of getting the fit right:

we fit everything that we buy four times before we agree it and it goes into production. So we order a sample. We then fit it on a model, who’s a real woman, who is 50, who’s had children, so she has the right body shape. And we will make all the necessary tweaks. So we have minimum measurements on areas like the upper bicep, the upper thigh, the mid-thigh, the hips, the waist, the bust, the upper bust, so that all the areas of a woman as she matures. We’re very mindful that she wants clothes that flatter. (M&S)

Certain trends pose problems. Both M&S and Jaeger cited the difficulties presented by the fashion for low-cut trousers:

we were going through a period of fashion where the rise was becoming lower and lower and lower. And we just couldn’t follow that fashion because we knew our customer just wouldn’t be able to wear it. So obviously we take them lower, but we take them to a level that’s right for our customer. Waists have gone high again, which has been fantastic, because our customers always like that. (Jaeger)

Part of adjusting the cut is about producing garments that assist the wearer to appear nearer the fashionable norm; in the case of women, nearer the body of a slim, young women. Designers can sometimes add details that adjust or

'help' with presentation of the body. As the design director from Viyella explained: 'older ladies can lose their shoulders [so a] lot of our blouses still have a shoulder pad'. This restores the body nearer the norm and allows the garment to hang better. Clothes have always performed this function, enabling individual bodies with their idiosyncrasies to be presented publically in a form nearer the current norm; and such adjustments reflect systematic ideals about the body. The history of English tailoring for men, as it developed from the end of the 18th century in the context of elite, wool-based clothing, is a testimony to these processes whereby an idealised masculine figure is produced through judicious use of tailoring, cut and padding. Men's clothes have traditionally offered greater opportunity for this.

Adjusting the cut to make it fit better can, however, have the effect of ageing the garment, writing into its very structure information about the sort of body that is meant to inhabit it. This is clearest in the ranges that are aimed at distinctly older women. As the respondent from M&S noted, their Classic range is aimed fair square at this group. The bust seams, for example, are adjusted 'because the body has changed significantly by this time'. As a result, 'You'd never get a Classic cut customer shopping in Limited, for example. So we know that the fit dimensions that we're working to in Classics are absolutely right'. This means, however, that the range is more clearly age labelled in terms of fit. Edinburgh Woollen Mill similarly differentiates its ranges to reflect changing bodily requirements with age.

Certain features in clothing come to be associated with age. In designing, Asda aim to avoid these, because they send messages that age the look, trying to find different ways to respond to a problem.

**Buying Manager:** You do naturally get thicker round your waist. . . . We do take all of those factors into consideration [but] . . . we try and do them in a gentle way, rather than sort of in a way that historically it might have been tackled. You know, for example, as we say like, classic trousers were always with the elasticated back. So now how we tackle them, we look at drawstrings, and we look at more easier ways, or more fashionable ways, of doing them.

**Design Manager:** Easy fit, without it looking classic and frumpy. Because of the dreaded elasticated waistband!

Adjusting the cut can also be about preventing the exposure of the body in ways that are deemed unattractive, and that may violate norms about the visibility of older bodies, in particular where this is linked to expressed sexuality. All the retailers were conscious of these issues, and the significance of avoiding low necks, exposed upper arms, excessive flesh in general.

The Design Director at Vivella noted how if necklines are too low, husbands often commented. 'But I've actually seen a lot of husbands say, 'That's too low'. Because I think this area can get a little bit – I think it can get a bit too thin can't it, so you don't want to show it?' Avoiding such exposure could present difficulties for designers, particularly when fashion dictated, for example, sleeveless dresses, so that adding sleeves detracted from fashionability and aged the garment and, by implication, the wearer.

Here, of course, although the features of the body they are designing to are rooted in physiological ageing, the meanings accorded to them are not. There is no inherent reason why low necks, or loose arms, should not be displayed, except as part of a desire to hide something that is deemed culturally shameful. A range of work has explored the ways in which older, particularly female, bodies are rarely on view within modern visual culture. Such images, particularly if they involve nakedness, can be strongly transgressive, as Tulle-Winton (2000) showed in her analysis of the photo essay 'Pretty Ribbons', in which a model in her eighties was depicted in conscious glamour shots photographed in hard, clear light. Dress can, thus, be part of a set of processes whereby the bodies of older women are disciplined, made subject to cultural assumptions about what may or may not be on view, and that are internalised by the women themselves and by those designing for them. Particularly sensitive in this are aspects of the body that express sexuality. Here women's bodies are judged against a cultural norm that equates sexuality with youthfulness, and presents older bodies as inadequate, flawed or failed, and better kept covered up.

The third way in which designers adjust the cut concerns sizing. As women get older they tend to put on weight. One of the marked features of ranges aimed at older customers is that they have 'generous' cut. Indeed one of the ways one can recognise such ranges is through sizing: shops aimed at the teen or young market cut to a smaller size, though all use the standard UK terminology of 10, 12, *etc.* Size 12 is the standard size that UK manufacturers design to, grading up and down on either side. M&S, however, which has traditionally had a generous cut, now design to a size 14. As the Design Director from Vivella commented:

we're generous, we're a size up basically . . . Because I think nobody likes going in and suddenly finding they're a 16, if they think they're a 12. I mean, it's just basic isn't it? (Viyella)

### **The body and age: the meaning of colour**

In choosing colours, designers were also responding to the interplay of physiological and cultural ageing. In general, they emphasised the need to

move away from strong, hard, high-saturation colours which were deemed unflattering for white complexions as they age. As the design team at Asda explained:

**Design Manager:** People's skin tone and hair colour, they do naturally get lighter as you age, you know it's a natural process, so we always take that into consideration. But what we do do is still try and give her the colour pallet or elements of the colour pallet of the season.

**Buying Manager:** We can soften it, it's more like what we would call mid tones rather than full tones, because full tones are very harsh. So it would be like what we call a mid-tone which actually is more flattering, but also is more sophisticated. But the ranges are colourful.

What they aimed to do was provide clothes in positive colours, that were flattering for this group, while still reflecting the dominant fashion mood and thus integrating them with the mainstream.

Fashion in colour changes with the fashion cycle. Trends are set up to two years in advance, led by the yarn and fabric manufacturers, and defined by the cycle of trade fairs (Diane and Cassidy 2004). Some trends are long term; others involve accent colours for just one season. In designing for the older market, retailers aimed to pick up these trends, thus integrating older people with the mainstream, but in ways that were adjusted to be flattering. The team at Asda explained how they did this:

**Buying Manager:** For example on G21 [the younger range] if red is the colour of the season, we might have red with cobalt blue, with bright green. You know, really poppy colours and lots of poppy colours. Whereas with Moda [aimed at women over 45] we will take the red . . .

**Design Manager:** And go more spicy with it, you know, because she likes the spice. So we put it with like a burnt orange. The red might not have so much orange in it, you know, it might be slightly kind of softer, although she would wear black, white and red. But it's about the tone of the red. It's quite a difficult thing to explain without a colour wheel, but it's just like a softened pallet, less brash . . .

**Buying Manager:** Not dowdy, because that's the whole thing, she does like colour. But just softer tones with it as well.

The key words in this passage are: 'softer', 'less brash' and 'not dowdy'.

All the respondents emphasised that these were customers who embraced colour: 'This is a customer who likes colour' (Asda, Buying Manager); 'We

can sell bright colours really well' (Edinburgh Woollen Mill); 'She likes colour' (M&S referring to Classic range). This liking of colour was presented as part of the positive up-beat discourse of the retailers in relation to this group, a repudiation of drab, self-effacing colours that seemed to embody depression and cultural exclusion.

Such comments need to read against some of the traditional meanings of colour in dress in relation to older people. There is a long history that associates age with the adoption of darker, drabber colours. We can see this historically in Matthaues Schwatz's history of his life in images of dress in which there is a clear trend towards dark clothing in old age that contrasts with the vivid colours of his youth (Braunstein 1992). Lurie (1992), in her account of the meanings of colour in dress, similarly associates age with darker colours and with tones of grey and beige. It is important here to avoid essentialising colour in dress. Its meanings are always socially and historically contingent, complex and multivocal. 'Drab', low-emphasis colours like beige and grey can also be smart neutrals, the core of an elegant urban wardrobe. This is a palette indeed that has increasingly spread to women from menswear as part of the growing involvement of women in white-collar professional work, where they have adopted the same sombre, dark hues that men assumed as part of what dress historians, drawing on Flugel (1930), refer to as the Great Renunciation in the 19th century when elite men abandoned brightly coloured dress.

However, the avoidance of strong colour is still a significant part of people's ideas about age. These associations can be interpreted as part of a wider process of 'toning down' in dress, the adoption of self-effacing, don't-look-at-me clothes, that reflect the imposed cultural invisibility of older people, particularly women. These are colours that make no bid to be noticed, that have retreated from public view. Pressure to adopt such colours were felt even in Holland's (2004) study of women who had consciously adopted dramatic, alternative forms of dress.

Black is an exception here. In the historical past black was associated with age, particularly through its connection with mourning; and many women in the past adopted black as standard wear from their middle years onwards. The meaning of black in dress, however, was never confined to this; and black also has connotations of drama, romanticism, eroticism and elegance (Harvey 1995; Lurie 1992). Today the connection with mourning has faded; and for the generation discussed here is no longer significant. Ranges aimed at older women, however, tend not to feature black greatly, unless they occupy a middle ground that caters for women who are still working or are involved in formal activities for which black is a standard, smart colour. Edinburgh Woollen Mill, for example, does little in black; and it



is not a colour featured in M&S's Classic range; though it is a staple for Jaeger; and is used to some degree in Asda, though mainly interspersed with colour.

The neutral colours traditionally associated with age draw their meaning in part from what they are consciously *not*: bright, attention-grabbing colours. Indeed such colours, particularly red, are often presented as 'unflattering' or unsuitable for older women, suggesting as they do an overt sexuality, a brazen, vivid quality that is well conveyed by the word scarlet, with its multiple moral and social referents. We can observe something of this colour system in reverse in the actions of the Red Hat Society, a US-based group of women over 60 who meet in public places wearing eye-catching clothes in red and purple (Hutchinson *et al.* 2008). Though the group represents a distinctly American form of sociality, it does express in *reverse* the pressure felt by many women to become invisible. The use of red here is highly significant, with its brashness, its association with the assertion of sexuality and its repudiation of grey toned-down, don't-notice-me dress. This is all about being noticed, being present in public space; and it represents a classic example of resistance. Purple is also significant. As Lurie (1992) notes, it is an ambivalent colour, associated with royalty and gorgeousness, but also vulgarity and coarseness. These meanings are echoed in Jenny Joseph's well-known poem, *Warning*, better known as 'When I am old I shall wear purple', which recounts everyday acts of defiance and resistance in age. The poem achieved wide currency, and was voted one of the UK's favourites in a BBC poll in 1996. Much of its appeal lies in the meaning of purple, and the transgression and excess it conveys.

The liking for colour reported in the interviews can be seen in similar terms. Not as consciously assertive as the actions of the Red Hat Society, but drawing on some of the same feeling—a repudiation of the self-effacing view of old age, and a marker of greater confidence in presenting the self in public view. To this degree the dominance of colour in these ranges does provide evidence for a shift in attitude to old age in the early 20th century that is consonant with the reconstitution of age thesis: old women are brighter and more visible than in the past, and enjoying the fact.

The emphasis on colour is, however, open to an additional interpretation, one that sees it in terms of a retreat from cut. As the body changes, particularly in later old age, it becomes less amenable to the imposition of the normative feminine figure that much cut in dress is designed to display. As a result the emphasis moves towards colour which assumes a new significance as a means of positive presentation of self.

## **Moving younger**

The interplay between cultural and bodily ageing is also reflected in the process of ‘moving younger’ – a phenomenon noted by all the respondents. Across the sector there was a sense that older women were changing and wanting different things – among which were younger styles. As the Design Manager for George noted:

when I first started working 30 years ago, there was a point in time when people, the majority of people, would switch into that way of dressing, into classic dressing, because they felt that was appropriate to their age. But that is gone. . . . This is a massive change, I mean it’s a huge change in my lifetime. (Asda)

Even Edinburgh Woollen Mill, the most strongly age-related of the companies, was actively moving younger in its styling and presentation. As the Marketing Manager explained:

we’re sort of, over the years, discovering that the 55-year-old lady is now demanding more than ever before, in terms of the type of fashion that’s she’s looking for. . . . I don’t think people who are in their fifties see themselves as being 50. They actually see themselves as being a lot younger. . . . Our customer was telling us, you know, we might be 55, we might be 65 but we actually don’t wanna look like grannies, you know, we don’t feel like grannies in our head. We’re looking for something younger, slightly more fashionable. (Edinburgh Woollen Mill)

Certain styles come to be age labelled. As we noted above, this can reflect changes in the body (elastic waists), but not always. The meanings of styles are culturally contingent, and can themselves be subject to change. Styles can mature. For example, pleated skirts were young and fresh in the 1950s; now they are strongly age related, to the extent indeed that Jaeger no longer feature them, despite the fact they sell well, because they age the range. (Though in the constantly shifting nature of fashion, these are re-appearing at the younger end.) The issue is complicated by the general shift in the clothing lexicon towards casual dress, which is now the predominant form of dress across all classes and ages – at least outside white-collar work environments. Part of moving younger can mean adopting more casual, informal, youthful styles that are consonant with this shift to leisure wear and that reflect a younger, easier bodily stance.

This sense that older people are wanting younger clothes, and are seeking dress from the same sources as younger people, lends support to the reconstitution of ageing thesis: the idea that old age as a discrete stage of life has been replaced by a long, relatively undifferentiated, period of middle years extending until interrupted by serious ill health. It is often linked to ideas of age slippage whereby older people are deemed to be in some sense ‘younger’ than in the past – an idea expressed at the popular level in phrases

like '60 is the new 50', and reflected in the comment of the Marketing Manager at Edinburgh Woollen Mill that 'they actually see themselves as being a lot younger'. Some observers link these changes to a sense that the 'baby boomers' are a pioneering generation who are in the process of remaking the meaning of age. In general, the respondents in the study endorsed the idea that the character of this market was changing and that older people were seeking younger, more mainstream styles: they 'don't wanna look like grannies' (Marketing Manager at Edinburgh Woollen Mill). Evidence from a parallel study of fashion journalists in magazines aimed at older women suggests that these views are endorsed by others in the Fashion System (Twigg 2012a, 2012b (personal observation)). An analysis of the treatment of age in *Vogue*, over the period 1950s to now, shows how the magazine has shifted from presenting older years as a distinct period of life (exemplified in their character Mrs Exeter) to one that asserts the ideal or possibility of 'ageless style' in which older women are capable of being fully integrated into fashion (Twigg 2010).

There are, however, interpretative problems that suggest caution in accepting this perception uncritically. Those who assert that age is now 'different' tend to have limited historical knowledge. Their vision of older people 'in the past' is largely shaped by their own experience when younger – their memories of how their grandmothers dressed or acted. These, however, are memories framed from the viewpoint of youth, and this inevitably colours their judgement.

The second issue concerns the degree to which what we are observing in relation to dress is not so much cultural change as the processes of fashion itself. We noted earlier how the youth market is the engine of the Fashion System. There is a process whereby styles diffuse from the young to the old, in a similar way as they diffuse – or did in the past – from the elite groups down the social hierarchy, as classically analysed by Simmel (1904/1971). Young people abandon styles as they are taken up by the mainstream and by older customers (Crane 2000). Older customers embrace younger styles as part of the attempt to present themselves according to the new fashionable norm. It is not that older people are moving younger, but that styles are moving older. The process of 'moving younger' may, thus, be the process of style diffusion itself.

### **Consuming, imagining, responding**

There is always a danger in arguing for the relevance of consumption in the constitution of later years of presenting an unduly celebrationist account – particularly so in an article that foregrounds the views and values of large

commercial retailers. They, after all, are in the business of selling goods; and this inevitably means presenting a vision of later years that is up-beat, optimistic, forward facing, in which the purchase of things is regarded as empowering. As a result they present a particular vision of how later years might be lived. There is an implicit normativity underlying their offer. We noted earlier how the process of imagining the customer contains biases, bleaching out significant differences between older women, underplaying their diversity. We can see this in the implicitly middle-class vision they present: something that is reflected more generally in accounts of the Third Age, particularly those that emphasise the role of consumption. In part this reflects the dynamics of capitalist production focused as it is on the most profitable sectors of the market. Both Jaeger and Viyella are targeting the better off; and though Asda and M&S trade across a wider range that includes the 'value' sector, discretionary income is still required to enter into their vision of later years.

There is, however, a second reason for the implicitly classed nature of these accounts, and this relates to the aspirational character of consumption. Consumption goods typically contain a promise that reaches beyond their use value. This is particularly so of clothing where what is on offer, as well as clothing for day-to-day use, is the promise – to some degree at least – of a transformed self: a version that is younger, slimmer, smarter, richer, more attractive, of higher social class than the reality. This aspirational dynamic is at the heart of consumption, and is reflected in the accounts presented here. Part of this entails, as we noted earlier, 'moving younger', presenting a body image from which age is to some degree effaced so that the customer is potentially integrated into the younger mainstream. Clothing retailers are thus not simply responding to market signals, but also shaping and guiding them, presenting new visions of what it might mean to be older.

## **Conclusion**

Fashion is part of the cultural economy, in which meanings circulate in and through material production. In this, design directors, like journalists and advertisers, operate as cultural mediators, shaping the aspirations of customers, proposing new ways of being, and providing the material means of achieving these at a directly bodily level. Increasingly such activities encompass older people. Clothing retail companies, therefore, need to be understood as part of the wider set of cultural influences shaping the ways in which ageing is imagined, performed and experienced in contemporary culture. In foregrounding these sources, the article argues for a wider understanding of the cultural forces shaping later years than normally

presented in social gerontology, though one that does not support a celebrationist account of consumption.

Design directors, of course, respond to the market. Their task is to provide goods that people want to buy; and a central part of their skill lies in sensing what these will be. As we saw, they do this through imagining the lives, wishes, aspirations – and to some degree anxieties – of their customers. But they are not simply responding to demand, but also shaping and creating it, stimulating the market for new goods. This is especially so in relation to fashion, whose nature is that it evolves and develops beyond the reach of customers, constantly presenting to them new ways of dressing, new ways of being. Older people are increasingly integrated into this aspirational culture.

As we have seen, clothing retailers are interested in the older market. The massive growth in productivity, the reduction in cost of clothes and the speeding up of the fashion cycle have produced a situation where the youth market is, to some degree, saturated. As a result, retailers have sought to develop new markets, including those for older people. This has meant extending the idea of fashionability beyond its traditional reach, to older people. This has entailed re-writing some of the traditional scripts that have informed old age in the past, presenting later years within a new set of cultural meanings.

These meanings, however, cannot be entirely detached from bodily change. Though clothes are wholly cultural artefacts, their design intersects with the materiality of the body. Clothing, as Entwistle (2000) suggests, is a form of ‘situated body practice’. There is an inevitable interplay between elements of cultural and bodily ageing, and this is carried through into the design – and wearing – of clothes. We have seen how the designers adjust the cut of clothes so that they fit and flatter; how they select colours that enhance the skin as it ages; how they avoid forms of bodily exposure that are deemed culturally shameful or expose the body as failing to meet the cultural norms of youthfulness. Though we noted also how they increasingly use positive colour for this group, who are no longer confined to the low, drab tones of the past; and how they have moved designs towards a younger, more relaxed body style that reflects the norm pertaining in the mainstream market. All the respondents in the study recognised the pervasive cultural aspiration of looking younger. Clothes have become part of the wider culture of anti-ageing. ‘Moving younger’ is a central part of what design directors, particularly for ranges aimed at women in later middle age, are doing. But, as we saw, they have to balance this against the realities of bodily ageing. Extremely youthful styles do not necessarily make the wearer look younger; they can point up the mismatch in expectations, the discrepancy between the ageing body and the youthful style. Designers thus

find themselves treading a careful path between proposing new, more youthful ways of being and offering styles that expose the customer to cultural failure.

Evidence from the study does support the idea that the lives and experiences of older people are changing, and that spheres like consumption and the wider cultural economy are playing a part in this. Respondents clearly believed, on the basis of their commercial experience, that current generations of older people are ‘different’, and have aspirations that mark them apart from earlier ones; though we also noted reasons to be cautious in accepting these views uncritically, registering in particular the danger of confusing the processes of ‘moving younger’ with processes of style diffusion itself. Respondents presented these developments in positive terms; and the interviews were imbued with an up-beat, celebratory tone that lauded the new cultural opportunities opening out for older women. This is unsurprising. Like other actors in the sphere of consumption, they are in the business of selling goods and this means selling attractive lifestyles. But these cultural developments, like many others in relation to older people, are Janus faced. The spread of fashion opportunities to older women also entails the colonisation of their bodies by new expectations, new requirements – ones that demand that they be fashionable or well dressed, and present the body in such a way that age is – as far as possible – effaced. Clothes thus take their place as part of a wider process of governmentality, whereby the bodies of older people are disciplined, ordered, made subject to cultural norms.

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